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The Science of the Brain

Let's start with a sad story. There is a little creature, a 'sea-squirt': when it's a larva it moves around. At this stage, it has a brain, - of course, nothing like we humans have, - something far more primitive. But the important part of our story occurs when the sea-squirt matures. It is at this stage that it fastens to a rock: it no longer needs to move, because it lives by filtering sea water. And it is at this stage that it eats its own brain! The moral here is that you only need a brain if you are on the move. If you are animal, you are animated, - moving around, - and it is then that you have 'animus' (Latin for everyday consciousness). All animals have brains and, unlike plants, they move from one place to another, they need to process a rapidly changing environment, and to respond with appropriate types of movements. Our brains are there to process information, and respond accordingly.

However, the really exciting questions about brain research are asked, not just of the senses, or of the mechanics of movement, - although in themselves they are very interesting areas of study, - but what happens in the middle? Especially with us humans, what makes us so special? What happens with the thinking that occurs between our senses informing us about environment and our movements responding? For many nowadays, the answer lies in genes.

Genes, of course are an important part in that they cause the manufacture of proteins, which are vital for brain function. Yet genes are analogous to sparking plugs to the engine of a car: highly necessary and, if they go wrong, then the car, or brain will go seriously wrong, but not sufficient: no-one would think of motoring along just with a sparking plug. The most important issue is the context in which the genes work, and here is where the wonder of being a human being comes in. We are brilliant at adaptation, which is why we occupy more ecological niches than any other species on this planet. It is this plasticity of the human brain, which means that even if we are a clone, - that is to say an identical twin, - we will be unique, because we have a unique brain. Although we are born with pretty much all the brain cells we will ever have, it is the growth of connections between the brain cells, that account for the growth of the brain after birth; and it is after birth, as we are having individual experiences, that we become individuals. It is this personalisation of the brain that I call the 'mind'.

This so-called personalisation, 'brain plasticity', is happening in all of us all of the time. A now very famous example is of London taxi-drivers: they need to know all the streets of London and how to navigate them. Amazingly, when their brains were scanned, and compared with people of a similar age, it was found that a certain part of an area of the brain (hippocampus), - related to memory, - was significantly larger than others. It wasn't simply that anyone with a bigger hippocampus was predisposed to become a London taxi driver, since it was found that the difference was more marked the longer the drivers had been practising their profession.

Although we are not all London taxi-drivers, many of us play the piano and, amazingly, one can see a difference in brain territory, related to the digits, even after five days of practising. Even more surprising still is that mere mental practice - imagining you are playing the piano - has a similar effect in terms of brain territory! What is happening is that the connections between the brain cells are expanding, as appropriate, to accommodate the increased exercise of a particular activity.

Another example can be seen in adult rats, exposed to an enriched environment, where they interact with wheels and, indeed, each other: there are more connections between the 'enriched' rats' brain cells than in their counterparts kept in simple cages. Your brain,

therefore, is like the rest of your body: the more it is exercised, the better it becomes, - you use it or you lose it. Sadly, when people suffer from dementia, one can see the reverse taking place. If we see childhood as the time when a world that is full of abstract noises and colours acquires a meaning, through the association of previous experiences, so in dementia, one could say that one was retracing these steps and dismantling those connections. But is this the fate of us all? Are we all destined, as we experience an increasing ageing society, to suffer from this reversal?

No, the news is actually good. Work by Kim Jobst and David Smith at Oxford has shown that the dementia that occurs in Alzheimer's Disease, for example, is not a natural consequence of ageing. Kim and David, again, used brain scans. It is important to realise that this new way of having a window into the human brain in a conscious subject, doesn't reveal the brain area 'for' a certain activity, - we don't have brains within brains, - but, on the other hand, it tells you what parts of the brain are active, rather like what instruments in an orchestra are all playing together at any one time. So, Kim and David were able to scan the brains of people with Alzheimer's Disease every six months or so, and compare it with similar scans taken from people of the same age. They found that, although in the non-Alzheimer brain there is a gradual loss of some brain cells, the rate of loss is much, much greater in Alzheimer's Disease. They concluded therefore, that this loss in the key brain areas was due to some specific event, or trigger, rather than being an inevitable consequence of ageing.

If we see the brain, as science is suggesting, in terms of brain connections, then we can start to understand the concept of mind. More importantly, we can understand how the brain, unlike the rest of our body, can, with stimulation, carry on getting better and better: we become increasingly individual. Hence there could be a scientific rationale for when only older people are usually regarded as wise. Although adolescents may learn very quickly, and have more agile brains, they are not

necessarily fully understanding, because they have yet to have the experiences, - i.e. the connections in which to see the world in an ever wider context. I put the case therefore that your brain is the most precious organ you have; not only is it the seat of 'you', but, so long as you are not a victim of a brain disorder, there is no reason why it should not stay in unique, yet ever-changing, shape.

Susan Greenfield
Professor of Pharmacology, Oxford University
Director, The Royal Institution of Great Britain

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Science Groups

Science and Society - Perth

We started this group some five years ago. In the first year we studied 'Energy', a subject with many societal connections in a world so dependent on fossil fuels with all their related problems. We met once a month, six sessions in all, and being a retired professional physicist I gave talks illustrated with slides and overheads. The group was about 15 strong and discussion was very much encouraged. We have tried to alternate between physical, biological or social science and we were fortunate in our second year to find a professional molecular biologist who gave us a fine introduction to his subject. Again the topic had lots of topical social links.

In our third year I gave a session on 'Exploring the Cosmos', less socially relevant and essentially an introduction to astronomy and cosmology. Last year, our fourth, we returned to the social side and changed the format to study the book *The Origins of Virtue* by Matt Ridley. He examines the extent to which behaviour is determined by the genes. At each session a member of the group gave a short introduction followed by general debate. In the current session I am giving a set of talks on 'Near Squeaks', examining situations in the history of the universe and the origins of life where, if things had been just a little different, we would not be here to discuss them. This will finish with a discussion of whether the Anthropic Principle is adequate to account for our existence or whether we need to have a Grand Designer.

Our group has remained around 15-20 people, some regulars every year, some attending one or other of the courses. The lecture format is the only appropriate way to address some of the topics but, even with questions and discussion, it does not, of course, achieve such a high degree of involvement of participants. Our venture into behavioural science was very successful in getting more people actively involved. We may be able to address some other areas this way but only if there is a suitable text to work from.

Ian Hughes

Weather Study – Lytham St. Annes U3A

Don't breathe the dreaded word meteorology. You'll frighten off artists, classicists and humanitarians. Instead, talk about weather and climate, as everybody does, often with poor understanding.

Describe how heat from sunlight warms the ground, passes it to the air, which moves it on and stirs up the atmosphere to generate weather and rain (thank God, even when the supply is irregular). Move on to climatic warming and ice ages, which happen when the balance between incoming and outgoing radiation is altered. Prospects for weather modification are seen to be poor, while the difficulties of forecasting can be appreciated.

In Lytham St. Annes U3A we study atmospheric processes in a short course of seven talks, taken at a fairly steady pace, to satisfy each member. The level is of general interest, the technicalities explained simply, with very little mathematics. These lecture notes are available from the Resource Centre. A refresher course could be taken at a faster rate, leading on to an open-ended discussion group, for which some basic understanding is desirable, otherwise the queries and comments become unhelpful.

Recent news items or magazine articles can start a discussion, say a balloon flight, ocean currents, forest fires, volcanic eruptions or tornados. Past stories can be useful; how the Armada came to grief or why D-Day was postponed 24 hours, Daniel Defoe's description of the gale in 1703, the flash flood at Lynmouth in 1952 and sea floods in Essex the next year.

Geography teachers will have taught at a suitable level, but they are either rare or they hide. Academics and forecasters will find it difficult, though rewarding, to come down to our level. However, often in U3A, we will be able to prevail upon enthusiasts, who have achieved a good appreciation of the subject taking part in adventurous outdoor pursuits, mountaineering, caving, sailing or flying. The best will be glider pilots, who cannot stay up, or stay out of danger, without developing a good weather eye. They depend on rising air and know where to find it. Also they write good text books.

Keith Emslie

Evolution – U3A in London

The group started in 1991 under the title "From Genesis to Genocide", and was prompted by the growing threat to the environment, and ultimately to human survival, from what can be seen as our inadequate cultural development. The course now runs in two groups for the autumn and spring terms, a total of about 21 weeks, using *The Twilight of the Gene* by John Pugsley, the group leader.

The morning group takes the evidence of evolution of the species by natural selection from Earth birth to the emergence of Homo sapiens, taking account of the geological events which led to bipedalism and stimulated natural selection of bigger brains.

The afternoon group takes the study of the evolution of culture on from the origin of stone culture by Australopithecus/Homo habilis through its development as a contribution to the inclusive fitness of Homo as a hunter/forager to its now more demanding and crucial role as a moderator of our hunter/forager behavioural tendencies. Contemporary social problems are discussed in the context of continuing genetic influence on behaviour. Some ray of hope is derived from the examples, in history and currently, of individuals who have cultivated sufficient self discipline to resist the natural urges to greed, destructive violence, deceit etc. which were so necessary for our ancestors' survival as hunter/foragers.

The course continues with consideration of the work of the neurologists like Gerald Edelman's team in California who are establishing the effect of environmental influences on the brain in the formation of mind and character. The course concludes at Easter with discussion of the implications for education, as distinct from skills training, as the only means of strengthening cultural moderation of behaviour.

John Pugsley

Science - Leighton-Linslade U3A

The Science Group was one of the first to be formed in our U3A soon after its formation in 1992. We have around fifteen members, both men and women. Some of us have been scientists or engineers in former lives and some are very enthusiastic laymen.

Meeting weekly, the group discusses a wide range of subjects in the fields of science and technology. Normally a meeting is devoted to a particular topic presented by one of the members, though there is usually time for general discussion of topical scientific events. Sometimes a whole session is devoted to 'science in the news' when we all bring along cuttings from newspapers or journals which have caught our eye.

You will see from this that the group is very interactive and depends entirely on members' contributions. No one member acts as a tutor. My role as coordinator is to organise the meeting place, usually my dining room, the programme, and persuading members to contribute. Though no one is compelled to contribute, shyness is soon overcome, with the result that we have had our minds stretched by presentations ranging over the full spectrum of science and technology. Whatever the passion of a member, natural history, physics, astronomy, geology, chemistry, mathematics, the oil industry, the environment and so on, we have enjoyed their contribution. From the lifestyle of solitary bees to the deep mysteries of the Big Bang, we've been there and still keep on looking. Where appropriate, full use is made of visual aids, projection or video.

Topics covered over the years have included, in no particular order, fuzzy logic, weather and what causes it, the development of the gramophone and the piano; evolution (Darwin and Dawkins - theories and conundrums), the natural history of whales, honey bees, solitary bees and the snow goose, genetics and GMOS, lasers, history of machine tools, volcanos, chaos theory and fractals, plastics, scientific history and biographies, development of cameras, scientific 'heretics', cold fusion, general and special relativity, telescopes, design and construction of the Hubble telescope and the James Clerk Maxwell IR telescope, consciousness, corrosion, meteorites, perception, black holes, the search for life elsewhere in the universe, codes and code breaking and more.

Brian Hayes

Digital Photography – Lytham St. Annes U3A

Twelve members showed interest in this subject and seven attended an inaugural meeting. They ranged from complete beginners to an ex-service Photographic Officer. The former had only just made a CD of recent snaps and the latter had developed an electronic darkroom for his exhibition work.

We filled two hours with discussion on still and movie digital photography with examples of members' work. This rapidly developing and fascinating subject will provide material for future meetings and the opportunity for an exchange of experiences.

Mike Wade

Oceanography – Chandlers Ford U3A

The multi-disciplinary nature of oceanography makes it an ideal subject for a U3A Science Group. The curiosity of members who have enjoyed a science-based career can be accommodated alongside the interests of those with less specialised backgrounds. An Oceanography Group was established some two and a half years ago on the formation of our U3A. The founder members still constitute the majority of the group of eleven. We meet once a month for presentations of topics by the convenor or other members, using slides, overheads and videos.

Topics so far have included the origin of the ocean basins, tides, tsunami waves, the chemistry of seawater, plankton and productivity, diving physiology, marine pollution, ocean currents etc. Outside speakers have talked to us about the history of oceanography and about whale watching. Supplementing the didactic coverage and discussions, we have had visits to the Southampton Oceanography Centre, the Royal Research Ship *Discovery*, the Oil Spill Response Base, the Fawley Aquatic Research Laboratory, DERA and the Eling Tide Mill. This varied study pattern seems to work well with this enthusiastic group.

Peter Lockwood

General Science – Oswestry U3A

What our group may lack in size, 10-12 members, is compensated by enthusiasm. In the past we have chosen a subject and worked through a programme for at least a term. At the end of the last session one member suggested that, as we have varied interests, perhaps we could

each give a presentation on the subject of our choice. In spite of the work involved researching material, everyone was willing to contribute something and organise the morning concerned.

So far we have had presentations on ecology, the human genome project, global warming and climate change, and 'in the beginning' (the origin of life on earth).

Sources of information are varied. Some use books and libraries; others, who have access to computers, may use Encarta or Britannica Encyclopaedia CDs or the Internet. Another useful source is BBC programmes, such as Horizon and the Learning Zone programmes transmitted in the early hours of the morning and recorded. These videos are a very useful way of explaining difficult concepts.

There is usually time for questions and discussions and we still try to fit in snippets on topical subjects in the form of cuttings from newspapers and periodicals and readings from a book.

Kate Marshall

SciTech – Lytham St. Annes U3A

Our group has had a profitable year which started with an exploration of our senses, touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight as we explored the subject of communication. On the other hand, clairvoyance, poltergeists, out-of-body experiences, ESP and telepathy did not fill us with much confidence. Next time we went on to mathematics, with a review based on subjective and objective aspects of measurement.

We had a visit to the Sixth Form College to see their music laboratory and to join in a biology class. We have studied the public utilities with the expertise of members on the water and gas industries. In May we attempted to gain an understanding of astronomy and the planets of our solar system. We visited the Pilkington World of Glass, a purpose-built exhibition, and have had a presentation of the shape of the UK covering geology.

In September we examined aspects of transport, water, road, rail, air and pipeline and in October the subject of medicine was slanted towards alternative therapies, acupuncture, chiropractic homeopathy and herbal medicines. Relaxation practice kept the group quiet for

once, but soon broke into discussion again.

Mike Wade

Science – Isle of Wight U3A

We contributed to the BBC Hands-On Science web page under the heading 'environment' which describes measuring the health of small rivers and streams. www.bbc.co.uk/education/hosc/home

Two of our members, Toni Goodley and Laurie Tiller, have won an Earthwatch millennium award for the over-50s to study Heavyside's dolphins near Cape Town for a fortnight in February.

www.earthwatch.org/europe/millennium

Rosemary West

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Inner city developments for U3As

I have been invited to contribute these words about some work I, with the help of some excellent colleagues, have done in one part of

Sheffield since the spring of 1999. It has some bearing on two issues affecting the development of the U3A.

During the last year or two these issues have risen to the top of the agenda of the National Executive Committee. One concerns the profile of the membership of the U3A. Apart from the self-evident truth that our members are thirdagers, we know little else about them.

Visually one thing is very clear; almost all our members are white. Another issue raises the question whether there are 'no-go' U3A territories. Are there parts of our larger towns and cities where U3As do not exist and are unlikely ever to come about? I would like to explore

these two issues by telling you a little about Sheffield.

Sheffield is the fourth largest city in England with a population of about 530,000 people. The western part of Sheffield, where I live, extends up into the beautiful Peak District, famous for underground caves in the limestone areas and rock climbing on its millstone grit edges. Rivers flowing from the Peak into the river Don run through parkland valleys. The east side of Sheffield is quite different. Like many cities in Britain the east side was where most of the industry was found. Sheffield was known as *the* steel town, famous for its production of high quality steel products and for its cutlery and magnificent silverware. A little further to the east there used to be the thriving South Yorkshire coal mines.

Until just a year ago Sheffield had only one U3A. True, it had a huge and rapidly growing membership. The vast majority of its members live in the more prosperous southwest section of the city, mainly in the parliamentary constituency, which, until 1997, was regarded as a safe Conservative seat. Since 1996 Sheffield U3A has made commendably successful efforts, as usual by the few, to take the U3A message beyond its southwest heartland, firstly to the southeastern area and then to some of the northwestern parts of the city. This was successful in recruiting more U3A members but not successful in establishing new autonomous and separate U3As.

Until last year the northeast of the city remained a U3A desert area. This is the part of Sheffield that stretches from 19th century terraces of Hillsborough in the west to the M1 motorway in the east, and from the once thriving steel factories along the Don valley and Attercliffe in the south to the villages of Chapeltown and Oughtibridge in the north. More than 110,000 of Sheffield's half million people live in this northeastern part of the city, about 33,000 are over 50 years of age and nearly 20,000 are over 65, all potential U3A members.

Many of the over-50s are retired, often long term, compulsorily retired since the middle 1980s when Sheffield's steel works and South Yorkshire's coalmines closed during what was called 'the economic miracle'. One would have thought that at least 1% of these 'third agers' - 330 over 50 of whom 200 are over 65 - would be members of a U3A, but they aren't. So why, in 1999, did Sheffield U3A have single figure membership in this huge area when there were so many potential members living there? Are there 'no-go' U3A territories in other towns and cities in Britain? How many towns and large villages do not have a U3A? What can be done to establish U3As in these areas?

What did we do about it? In 1999, with the help of a generous grant from Sheffield LEA

Education Section, I and a few members from Sheffield and Barnsley U3As decided to see what could be done in northeast Sheffield. We put a great deal of effort into a publicity campaign and held public meetings to let thirdagers know about the advantages of U3A membership. The first meeting was in Attercliffe in the south of the area. A goodly proportion of the third age population here is made up of different groups of Asian people. Few turned up to our well-publicised meeting.

The next two meetings were in the central section of the area. This is Parson Cross and Shire Green, often described as one of the largest council estates in the whole of Europe. Unemployment levels here are four times higher than in the prosperous southwest of the city. In 1997 some 30 to 40% were on income support benefit; a similar percentage of children were in households with no earner; infant mortality rates were much higher than either the national average or those in Sheffield's southwest areas. Adults die at a younger age and GCSE league table results for schools in the northeast are well below those in the southwest. In brief, like Attercliffe in the south, the huge central area of Parson Cross and Shire Green suffers from what is known as multiple deprivation. Despite this we did a bit better with our meetings in this central section.

Chapelton and Oughtibridge villages in the north are quite different. They are much more prosperous. In many ways they are similar to the southwest of the city. Meetings in Chapelton were well attended. People were interested in U3A, but most decided that Chapelton's vigorous 'Over 50s Organisation' provided all they wanted. Only a handful decided it was worth joining a U3A.

What did we achieve? Probably the most enheartening achievement was getting a new North Sheffield U3A started in September 1999. Since then North Sheffield U3A has organised brilliant and most interesting monthly meetings, but it needs more members if it is to flourish as an independent, autonomous U3A. It has few activity groups and one of the difficulties we face is how to get enough thirdagers with the energy and confidence needed to become group leaders. This has not been easy and we are still struggling. Despite all our initial publicity, visits to places such as Sikh temples, and meetings held in the areas where most of the ethnic population lives, all our members are white.

What have we learned? Probably the most important lesson we have learned is that it is much harder to create a vigorous and growing local U3A in areas suffering multiple deprivation than it is in prosperous areas where many thirdagers, ex-professional people who have the confidence and skills to contribute to a self-help organisation. We need more than

just first class publicity and a well-organised public meeting to encourage more ethnic third-agers to join our U3As.

The 'ethnic' thirdagers we talked to were family-centred and reluctant to go outside their own religious or community organisations. In fact it was those in their 30s who were more interested in what a U3A had to offer!

One other fact hit us quite hard. No matter how we tried to explain 'university', many people in our northeast area were put off by the name 'University of the Third Age' and immediately decided it was not for them. This was so even in the more prosperous northern part of our very large area. Most people there preferred the more relaxed leisure appeal of the flourishing Over-50s clubs to the idea of a U3A.

If other U3A members have any thoughts about these issues or have solutions to some of the difficulties we have encountered I would be pleased to hear from them.

Bob Smith, North Sheffield U3A

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Resource Centre News

Science

During the last two years there has been much emphasis on the learning and teaching of science subjects in U3A. The Resource Centre has collected material at the request of group leaders and ordinary members, covering many different aspects being studied under the broad heading of science. The current Science Resource List covers biology, chemistry, physics, meteorology, astronomy and related disciplines such as geology and ecology.

Many groups study in a multi-disciplinary way, which takes little account of traditional academic divisions and does not require group leaders to be science specialists. They are interested in topical subjects and how science affects their own lives. There is currently a great deal of interest in genetics and our BBC video series "Cracking the code" is very popular. We also have videos and slides on human biology which are entertaining as well as informative, and cover subjects as varied as tolerance to pain or hair loss!

Groups interested in meteorology are likely to study global warming and its effect on our weather and so touch on pollution and the destruction of habitats, leading them, perhaps, into studies of natural history or geology.

The interests of U3A science groups are wide-ranging and diverse, and the stock of the Resource Centre reflects this. We are very keen to increase our science holdings. If you know of suppliers of good quality science resources, slides, videos, tapes, cassettes or CDs, I would be grateful for their details. In the meantime, if you do not have a copy of our Science Resource List, and would like one, please contact the Resource Centre.

Philosophy and Religion

In the last issue of SOURCES many groups wrote about their study of these subjects. Several mentioned that they studied myths and, on the recommendation of an experienced leader who has used them extensively, I have bought the six video series "The power of myth" by Joseph Campbell. Psychology groups would also find them of interest and perhaps groups studying literature who would like to try something rather different. Ranging across time from the Old Testament to Star Wars and covering religion, folk stories and heroic sagas, all six of these videos are enjoyable, informative and stimulating.

History and Archaeology

English Heritage produce a wide range of material of interest to groups studying these subjects and their education catalogue is free (ring them on 020 7973 3442 to request a copy). We have purchased quite a number of their videos relating to church and cathedral architecture, building techniques, and even studying graveyards! We also have the videos on Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall which include 3D computer graphics and atmospheric reconstructions. For a full list of all our history stock, please request the History Resource List.

Art

Art is the most popular of all the subject areas in the Resource Centre and we can never have too much material for the needs of U3A art groups. We have just acquired a set of six videos from Cromwell Productions called "Landmarks of western art". Each video covers a specific period, such as the Baroque or the Renaissance, and focuses on the major artists of the period. We already have a set on the history of British art so this set on European painters complements it very well.

Art groups who paint rather than study might enjoy the videos on acrylics, watercolour, oils and other medium which we have in stock, as well as videos on portraiture, frescos and landscape painting. A full list of all we have will be supplied on request.

Salford Travel videos

Salford U3A have, for many years, had a set of travel videos which they would lend to other groups who wanted to use them. They have now donated the complete collection to the Resource Centre and these have been added to stock and appear on our Travel Resource List. If you are planning a trip abroad or are studying a particular country these would make a good introduction to the area.

Wine

Also appearing on the travel list are some new videos we have bought on vineyards and wine-making. We have Jancis Robinson's wine course Vols. 1 and 2, "The story of wine" and "The wines of Bordeaux." If you are wine tasters instead of travellers you might like to borrow these and back them up with some practical work on the varieties featured. Any suggestions of other good videos on this subject would be warmly welcomed.

Poetry

We were recently asked to obtain audiotapes of poets, reading their own work, for one of our U3A groups and followed up that purchase by buying the full collection of Penguin English Verse. This is a set of six volumes of double audiocassettes (with notes) in chronological order, starting with the sixteenth century, Wyatt to Shakespeare, and ending with the early twentieth century, Hardy to Owen. Well-known actors read the poems. They are very varied and give a good overview of each period. Although mainly suitable for literature groups, they could perhaps also be used by groups studying a specific period of history. For example, the modern poetry is very moving, as much of it came from the horror of the First World War.

All the new poetry cassettes mentioned appear on our Literature Resource List.

Elizabeth Gibson, Resource Centre Manager

26 Harrison Street, London WC1 8JG

0207 83A7 8838 (Tuesdays and Thursdays only for telephone enquiries)

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New Beginnings

Stratford-upon-Avon U3A

We made an amazing start in January 2000, when over 100 people turned up for the first meeting. Kate Wedd, Chairman of The Third Age Trust, and Mike Long, Development Officer, came along to explain the aims and objectives of the U3A. The Chairman and Committee of the Alcester U3A, the nearest to Stratford, were also invited to discuss the setting up of study groups. They explained that occasionally a group was launched with just two members, in order to get it off the ground, and that all you needed was enthusiasm.

Membership forms distributed at this first meeting included a questionnaire to ascertain individual interests. The numbers wishing to become members rapidly increased until, after a few months, membership had to be held at 200. The challenge now facing the new committee was how to persuade members to share their expertise and to become leaders. The Rambling group was the first to take off, with over 30 members joining their first walk in February. It is felt that the very social nature of these informal walks, when members initially got to know one another and discussed the role of the U3A, helped to break down any barriers.

In order to promote some of the special interest ideas gradually being put forward, it was decided that, in addition to the monthly newsletter, we would use at least two of the monthly meetings to promote and encourage enrolment to study groups. Labelled tables were set out so that members could meet with potential leaders and investigate new subjects. This proved to be very helpful, although sometimes too many members tried to queue for attention. New subjects are now taking off all the time, with brave new leaders coming forward as they realise that it is not quite such a daunting task as they first thought and that enthusiasm for their subject really is all that is needed.

Study groups generally seem to consist of around 6-8 members and so far most meetings have been conducted in someone's home. The next challenge seems to be to find suitable accommodation in the town for growing groups, but rent for rooms is high in Stratford as it is a tourist town. However, Stratford U3A are being encouraged by the District Council to apply for a grant, in the hope that this may help to resolve this problem.

Computer courses have proved to be extremely popular. Both the local college and high school have opened up their IT suites to us at a very reasonable charge. Qualified tutors are being employed at present, but it is hoped that in 2001 we will be able to form a small team of mentors to help members who have their own computers. It was decided also to employ a qualified tutor to offer craft workshops in silk and glass painting, etc. These proved to be very enjoyable and members now feel able to proceed with their own workshop ideas.

A wonderful variety of subjects is now emerging and they include local history, art, plays, the spoken word, Scrabble, French, cross stitch, bridge, family history, with the latest group studying dowsing. The possibility of new subjects is always being discussed and explored. We hope 2001 will bring many more as we now have quite a large membership - all with great expectations!

Jackie Checketts

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Experiments in Third Age Education

At the Norwich Conference 2000 the Standing Committee for Education (SCE) mounted a programme designed to focus on the U3A interest group, the resources that support it and the members who animate it. Following a tripartite presentation to the whole conference covering the Resource Centre, SOURCES and new developments in distance learning, ten colleagues led group sessions either replicating a first meeting in selected subject areas or exploring some approaches and methodologies current in U3A.

In October the participants met in London to evaluate the project, many contributing considered written papers to the meeting. A similar structure was the basis of a Study Day held by U3A Scotland in Perth on 21 October and this article is partly a report and partly a personal reflection on both events.

Norwich

The SOURCES and Resources Centre contributions were well received by the delegates with a great deal of positive response on the day and many significant outcomes. Those responsible for the evening programme were more guarded in their assessments. All regretted

the timetabling of the event in parallel with the Subject Network displays, and the majority agreed that the scheduling of demanding seminars on the evening of the first conference day (during which many had travelled long distances) was unfortunate.

Rooms had been booked for the delegates who had signalled beforehand that they wished to participate (about a third of those attending) and the organisers were totally unprepared for the large number of people who actually attended and overfilled the rooms far beyond their capacity. In spite of this all the meetings had been lively and group leaders were able to report much individual enthusiasm mingled with some expected controversy. Above all there seemed to be general approval of an attempt to move the conference programme from mainly constitutional to educational issues. Subject-based seminars which asked participants to role-play third agers attending a first session (in either mathematics, science, philosophy, writing or Russian) and, subsequently, to discuss the approaches taken in the light of their expectations were clearly constrained by time. Some felt unable to proceed to the second stage although, in at least one case, this had been the principal focus of discussion. Most accepted the working taxonomy of "Approaches and Methodologies" (appreciation, discussion, learning the language of a new subject, hands-on learning, and outdoor activities) as a valid starting point and colleagues reported a wide range of practice which was exchanged with vigour and much enjoyment.

SCE members - those who participated and those who attended the evaluation meeting out of interest - were generally heartened and, above all, felt that they had learned a great deal from the event itself and this subsequent review. The member who had contributed a background discussion paper (circulated before conference) had received valuable written responses as well as many informal comments mostly regretting the lack of an opportunity to discuss the matters raised. The meeting closed with agreement that such events needed much more time -perhaps a whole day or even a residential weekend - if they were to be really productive but that the many successes of a crowded Monday evening in Norwich should not go unrecorded or unappreciated.

Perth

The Study Day in Perth benefitted from a more leisurely timetable, with separation into morning and afternoon small groups to tackle the two strands. There was a smaller number of participants, around eighty from all parts of Scotland, and the superb facilities provided by the Isle of Skye Hotel. Above all, there was the really excellent organisation of the U3A

Scotland team led by the Chair of Perth U3A. No formal evaluation has taken place at the time of writing but the general enthusiasm, intellectual vigour and pure enjoyment was palpable. Approaches and Methodologies group leaders moved in the afternoon to subject based sessions (art and craft, local history, mother tongue, philosophy, science, creative writing) and contributed excellently succinct summaries of the main issues to the plenary session.

Although time was still short the afternoon groups proceeded to the more delicate matter of discussing the approaches taken by the various presenters of material as if this were an actual first meeting of a U3A group. As always those who attended gained greatly from informal exchanges but, on this occasion, the SCE member present felt that much had been learned from the Norwich experience in matters of structure and content of the formal programme. The most notable feature was, perhaps, the ease with which volunteer group leaders had been identified. The endeavour of the SCE in these matters is at its most successful when it merges with local commitment and certainty of purpose.

*Keith Richards, Vice Chairman,
Standing Committee for Education*

SOURCES Help Line

- Geology study groups are requested to link up with the Geology Network Co-ordinator, Isabel Markham on 0181 850 1337. It will help her to update her list of U3As covering this subject.
- Textile Craft encompasses anything to do with fabrics – embroidery, quilting, applique, beadwork etc. Joy Slayton is forming a Textile Craft Network and is ready to organise workshops, produce literature and help to set up new groups. Contact Joy Slayton on www.ravens.court@virgin.net or at "Ravenscourt", 3 Albert Road, Wellington, Telford TF1 3AR
- John Pugsley, U3A in London, is searching for a video of a TV programme on "The Great Debate on Darwin and Evolution". If you can trace it, phone him on 0208 541 1635.

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Other Study Groups

Arts and Crafts – Whitley Bay U3A

Of the numerous activities in the U3A, Whitley Bay, art comes high on the list of popularity with an active Crafts Group and an Art Appreciation Group that makes regular visits to galleries and artistic events across the north east of England.

A small group of members, up to eight, have for the last 18 months been meeting weekly in the basement of one of their number, painting and doing "their own thing" with some tuition from a group leader if they want it. This not only provides an introduction for the beginner but also allows somebody who has painted in the past to take up painting again. It does so in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The group recognizes that it has been lucky enough to find somebody willing to make their home available and put up with painting activities. Unlike most amateur art groups, where there is a strong interest in watercolours, this group has shown interest in other forms of painting, acrylics, oils, drawing and in branching out into printmaking with monoprinting and relief printing.

Like all painters, members like to display their work. The group has already had two annual exhibitions at a gallery in Rothbury, Northumberland, in conjunction with two other U3A Art Groups in the north east, Sunderland and Morpeth. Individual members have had paintings accepted at competitive art exhibitions in the north of England. As a group they have also been affiliated to the Federation of Northern Art Societies, a collection of 70 clubs from across the whole of northern England. This gives them the chance to submit, albeit on a competitive basis, to any Federation exhibition and to take advantage of the weekend courses and painting schools run by the Federation.

Last year the Art Group also produced a millennium calendar with colour illustrations of individual members' work. This sold well enough within the local U3A not only to recover costs but also to provide a surplus for funding materials for the art activities. This calendar also appears on the web site of the Whitley Bay U3A where it has attracted much interest. See www.u3a.totalserve.co.uk

Mrs. M. Appleton

Cathedrals of Britain – Bakewell Area U3A

Beginning at 1066 with an examination of the physical map of Britain, we found out why Norman cathedrals are built in their particular situations, most of them in defensive positions, near Roman roads and/or accessible waterways. We then researched life in that period, how the population lived, changed, worshipped and developed, and answered many questions about the cathedral buildings themselves.

We visited cathedrals, particularly in the wide area of the North Midlands, in order of the centuries of their foundation so that we could follow through the ages in an architectural sequence. We alternate between meetings at home and cathedral visits. Most members of the group contribute the results of their personal study into misericords, masons' marks, church music, architectural periods, tombs and stained glass.

In most cases we can visit a cathedral in a day but occasionally we have a night away. We make a study of the cathedral before the visit and arrange for a guided tour. Booking a refectory or coffee shop meal is made easy by telephone to the cathedral. With over 80 cathedrals, we can go on for a long time.

Meg Lairch

Book Printing - Woking U3A

The title of this group could as easily be The Art and Craft of Book Printing, A History of Printing or The Development of Communication.

Starting with the methods by which early man communicated we trace the development of writing until the invention of printing from moveable type. In following the spread of printing we see how the book came to be a means of educating, informing and entertaining and how the computer is already changing present-day publishing and printing methods.

The history of the printed book takes many twists and turns as the struggle for greater output conflicts with the need to produce a piece of craftsmanship. Along the way we come across many interesting names- from Emperor Trajanus to Robert Maxwell, William Morris to Bill Gates!

Books have become so intimate a part of our everyday life that few of us stop to realise what it would mean to be without them. Yet books, as we know them, only came into being something over 500 years ago! The first half of the 20th century saw books of the highest quality produced but the decline in later years was tragic.

Our sessions appeal to those who love the feel and look of books and are interested in learning how they were created, have evolved and how we may expect to see them develop in future. Publishing methods are likely to change radically and technology seems to be on the brink of creating a whole new beginning. Our story concentrates on the quality of craftsmanship that once was printing and worries about the future.

Alan Johnson

Aspects of Japan – Lea Valley U3A

The method and organisation I have used for a short course of six sessions could be adapted easily for the study of any country. Subjects covered in our sessions have included geography and history, politics and economics, family life, food, education, the role of women, employment, religion, arts and crafts such as architecture, gardens, literature, poetry, textiles and some basic language.

Knowledge of the country is desirable but there are many sources of information, books, travel guides, newspapers and periodicals. There is a BBC video on Japanese Language and People (10 short programmes), and the Japanese Embassy and Tourist Board, both in London, will provide material for a course. A local Japanese resident or an English language school with Japanese students, even a secondary school teaching Japanese, may bring life to the study.

There are collections of Japanese works at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. The internet now provides an opportunity to search for material to make an interesting course.

I am compiling a detailed resource list to help those who would like further information.

Judy Lorimer (01992 465459)

World War One – Hertford U3A

After more than eighty years since the Armistice, the First World War still commands considerable attention with a continual outpouring of books, newspaper articles, plays and documentaries on the subject. Some five years ago, having discovered that several other members shared my interest in the poetry and prose engendered by the 1914-18 conflict I formed a World War One poetry, literature and art group.

The group meets monthly and is ten in number, six of them lady members. We began by reading and discussing the works of the major war poets such as Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and Edward Thomas, then went on to the lesser known ones including a number of women. There is a wealth of literature, for instance, the memoirs of Sassoon, Graves and Blunden, the letters of Vera Brittain, as well as recently published fiction by Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks. We have also recorded readings of war poetry on the radio and television documentaries. We borrowed copies of *Journey's End* from our County Library resource centre in order to perform a play reading and we have visited exhibitions at the Imperial War Museum.

As time passed it became evident that our remit was extending to other aspects of the First World War like social and economic conditions. Lately discussion has focused on such issues as Courts Martial, summary executions and the recent proposal to reduce the pay and allowances of gardeners of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This widening of our interest has resulted in changing our title to the World War One Study Group.

Douglas Hague

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Meditation

Washington U3A has a thriving Meditation Group, running since the inception of our U3A in December 1999. As I have studied meditation myself and also taught it to others I began

teaching the group. However, as we have progressed we have become more of a group enterprise with other members leading sessions.

Meditation is basically learning the art of being relaxed and alert. It is a way of creating a source of inner peace and stillness in a busy and at times bizarre world. We learn, first of all, how to relax the body and the mind. Relaxing the mind isn't always an easy task. If we had as little control over our body as we do our mind we would never get down the stairs alive! Then we learn the art of one-pointed awareness - that is learning how to focus deeply on one thing and explore it. What you choose to focus on doesn't matter; it could be the breath, a candle flame or even, as our group have done, chocolate buttons. At this point we learn how to maintain this awareness and stop our 'chattering monkey' mind. The next stage is learning to empty the mind to allow inspiration to fill it.

The Buddhist Tradition says:

Only the empty bowl can receive wisdom.

When you master the small moments, the great moment is at hand.

However, please don't get the idea that we sit around being very serious all the time. We don't! We giggle, make jokes and generally have a whale of a time together.

The group has found that the benefits ripple through everything we do. Regular meditation has many beneficial effects; to have more energy, to be healthier, to think and work efficiently and enjoy life more. Being relaxed and aware is the mental equivalent of being physically fit and healthy. It can improve your physical health. Medical surveys support the contention that meditation is good for health.

These are the most common findings. Meditation lowers high blood pressure. It releases muscular tension, stimulates the immune system and the production of white blood cells. Meditation opens constricted air passages and so is good for asthmatics and increases blood circulation to the digestive tract, the skin and the brain. In fact meditation generally acts like naturopathic treatment: it brings the whole body and mind into harmony.

Some people can be put off meditation because they think it is something to do with religion. It is true that the practice of meditation is an aspect of many religious practices, including Christianity. By becoming more aware you also tend to become more aware of the spiritual

aspects of life as well. However, many people, especially in the west, practice meditation in a totally non-religious way and simply engage in it for the benefits they gain from it. This is very much the approach of our group.

I can highly recommend the following books:

Eric Harrison, *Teach Yourself to Meditate* (Piatkus)

Barry Long, *Meditation - A Foundation Course*, (Barry Long Foundation)

Sue Vaughan, *Finding the Stillness Within in a Busy World*, (C.W Daniel Company Ltd.)

Dr. David Fontana, *The Meditator's Handbook*, (Element)

Kamalashila, *Meditation - The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight*, (Windhorse Publications)

Patricia Carrington, *Learn to Meditate*, a set of six audio tapes and a handbook, (Element)

There will be many other books in your local library, especially by Debbie and Eddie Shapiro. You may also find that there are dedicated meditation teachers in your local area, most of whom will get you started for a small fee.

If you would like to know more about our group, please get in touch with me. I have some study material and would be prepared to visit U3As within a reasonable distance of Washington in the north-east.

Sandra Parsons (0191 417 0217)

Washington U3A

