CHAPTER 1

The story of ALP

Origins and aims
The Adult Learning Project in Gorgie Dalry was started in 1977 by a small group of women supported by a neighbourhood community worker and a community education worker. A street-based survey was carried out, asking people what classes they would like. The demand was for classes such as English ‘O’ grade and yoga. They were to be free, put on at times and places convenient to residents, and managed by local people. Tutors were to be responsive in their approach, prepared to negotiate the content of programmes with students. Initially, tutors were paid, but the idea was that some students would themselves become volunteer tutors.

The community education worker hoped that, as an atmosphere of learning developed in the area, people would begin to explore personal, local and national issues in a more systematic way.

This early ALP, then, was based on ideas of self-reliance, popular demand, local access and local control. It was quickly successful, with nearly 200 people taking part in the first year. Already demand was outstripping resources in the form of the time the women and the community education worker were able to give to the project, and the money available to pay part-time tutors.

Lothian Region’s Community Education Department, with the agreement of the women, made an application for urban aid funding to the Scottish Office. They asked for three community education workers, a secretary/receptionist, a shop on the main road, and a budget for books, publicity, tutors’ fees, and equipment. The stated aims were to provide cheap learning opportunities locally, in re-
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response to requests; to create a network of local tutors; to develop issue-based education; and to publicize the project effectively.

During the following year, while the urban aid application was being processed, changes took place as a result of which these aims were modified. Community education staff were deepening their interest in the work of Paulo Freire, and joined an in-service training course on his ideas and methods organized by the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). The influence of Freire led to a shift away from the idea of classes provided in response to popular demand, towards programmes aimed at exploring themes and concerns identified by residents. In practice, this meant moving away from vocational and leisure-and-recreation classes towards issue-based education. Classes would still be provided in the area, but by other community education workers, outside the framework of ALP.

The proposed role of the full-time workers was also changed in emphasis, from responding to demand, organizing classes and supporting volunteer tutors, to playing a key part in every stage of what later came to be called the ALP process: investigation, building learning programmes, and supporting action outcomes.*

Gorgie Dalry: The place and the people

Gorgie Dalry is a densely populated inner area of Edinburgh, sandwiched between the west end of the city centre and the suburbs. Built between 1880 and 1900 for the families of workers employed on the railways and in local factories, it was for years solidly working class. People lived close to where they worked. The area was the centre of their social life. Hearts Football Club had its home here – and still does.

In the 1960s this picture was disturbed when many families moved out to Wester Hailes and other peripheral council housing schemes. Local works closed down – the rubber mill, the biscuit factory, a glue works, laundries, engineering works, the railway sheds. Breweries like Scottish and Newcastle became automated and needed fewer workers. Other employers like Ferrantis required a highly skilled workforce and recruited from all over Lothian, not just locally.

* The first mention of terms by Freire or ALP are in italics in the text and defined in the Glossary (see pp 139–45).