



EDUCATING RITA, SUE AND BOB TOO

There's no excuse to vegetate in retirement, as hundreds of thousands of devotees of the University of the Third Age have discovered. It's learning... but not as we know it



KEEPING YOUR BRAIN, AND YOUR BODY, ACTIVE is undoubtedly the key to a good retirement. It's also a huge amount of fun, as any of the 273,141 members of the University of the Third Age up and down the country will tell you.

The lively groups do not, together, constitute education as you once knew – and perhaps hated – it. Courses on offer range from Balkan folk dancing to dowsing and lacemaking – and they run alongside more conventional subjects such as Latin, languages and art groups. There are no exams, no set curricula: none of the things that turn learning from a joy to a chore. U3A members learn what they want, when they want to learn it.

So, although some members may have degrees and even doctorates, many others disliked school and left as soon as possible. They've returned to learning in their third age – and find they love it.

In case you're wondering, the 'first age' of learning is studying at school, college or university; the 'second' is gaining skills at work.

Mostly, the U3A even does without teachers. Instead, group leaders, who may not know any more than other members about the subject, co-ordinate the group's efforts. Members decide how they want to learn – and often find that they can do things they previously thought were beyond them.

'Older age should be a time of vital self-enhancing activity and citizenship, **not of decay, deference and dependence**'

Meetings are informal, often in a member's home. So it's a very social arrangement – joining a group can be a great way of making new friends.

The only qualification to join is that you're no longer working full time or looking after small children – there are no specific age limits.

It works like this: each group is supported by its local U3A. There are 826 of these, covering most parts of the country and, like the groups, they're self-governing. Local U3As set up study groups in response to members' suggestions.

The national organisation (which celebrates its 30th anniversary next month), is simply there to help and advise, drawing on the experience of other groups.

The idea had French roots, but the British version radically changed it to more of a self-help organisation. When the U3A was founded in the UK 1982, it quickly became apparent that this was a timely idea. Eric Midwinter, then director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, talked about it on BBC

Radio 4's *You and Yours* in 1981. That short interview was the first anyone outside a small circle of educationalists had heard about the U3A – and it brought an avalanche of letters.

It has expanded every year since then and in January 2011 welcomed its 250,000th member. There are U3As in other countries too such as the US and Australia, and an online version too – vu3a.org.

Last September, Eric Midwinter, then in his eighties, reminded the 2011 national conference of a key part of the U3A philosophy: 'Older age should be a time of vital self-enhancing activity and citizenship, not of decay, deference and dependence.' ▶

Find your local branch via u3a.org.uk, or call 020 8466 6139

Acting their age **Stalwarts of the U3A Drama Group, based in Caldicot, South Wales (from left): Pam Caines, Audrey Bright, Tony Hirst, Terry Meredith and Cindy McOwen**





◀ U3A DRAMA GROUP



For their recent Christmas revue, Pam and Tony sang *Baby, It's Cold Outside*, and Tony dressed in his best drag as one of the *Andrex Sisters*.

'Andrex because we're on a roll.' Cue groans. Caldicot U3A Drama Group, otherwise known as the Phoenix Players, lean heavily towards farce. They love wigs, outrageous costumes – and extracting as much fun as possible from their plays. One recent favourite was Alan Richardson's play *The Worst Day of My Life*. 'Charlie's day in hospital begins very well, but when three female visitors arrive unexpectedly at the same time, his hitherto secret life is hilariously revealed,' went the plot.

Do they do it because it's educational and they can explore texts in a deep, meaningful way? Pam Calnes looks at me. 'We do it because it's fun.'

U3A QUILTING GROUP

'It lets injured soldiers know someone is thinking of them,' says Anne Liddle, leader of the 22-strong Buckingham U3A Quilting Group. Their group stitches not only to be creative – the quilts they make go to the Army's special rehabilitation centre at Headley Court, near Epsom, Surrey. The group started with a single project that they all worked on, but now they make individual quilts.

So far their efforts, combined with those of other groups have resulted in 600 beautiful hand-made quilts winging their way to Headley Court, to literally warm appreciation.

The drama group loves dressing up in wigs and outrageous costumes for their plays. **Why? Because it's fun**

It's a stitch-up Quilters

(back row, from left): Anne Liddle, Sheila Mead, Elizabeth Rees, Julie Brook, Maureen Young and Lyn Garton and (seated) Sybil Barclay and Sue Boyce



U3A FRENCH GROUP

'We just want to be able to talk and understand what people are saying when we go to France,' says Elaine Plumb, who leads the South West Herts U3A French Group where they 'leesen carefully' and try French conversation.

'While practising in the lessons we think we haven't done much, but we find out afterwards that we've learnt a lot.'

Many members start virtually from scratch. Even more have forgotten everything they ever learned at school. Margaret left school at 15, having not learnt any foreign languages. And Britta especially has good motivation: her daughter now lives in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

Let's parler Français Learning to talk proper in French (from left): Pat Harris, Elaine Plumb, Britta Dunton and Margaret Harman and (seated) Veronica Hannaford



U3A MODEL BOATS

Every Thursday morning, rain or shine, a group of men (and sometimes a woman) arrive on the shores of Horcott Lake in Gloucestershire, carrying big parcels and boxes, which they open with infinite care. Inside are intricate model boats, many of them designed and built by their owners, which they launch on the water and then control remotely from the shore.

'There's nothing competitive about it,' says group leader Jim Sullivan. 'We take chairs with us and we sit and put the world to rights.' The group, from Fairford U3A, is strictly speaking, a modelling club, building aeroplanes and trains too, but the boats have rather taken over.

Sailing by
Ardent model boat fans (from left): Denbigh Hamilton-Harding, John Sims, Colin Moulden, Geoffrey Lappington and Jim Sullivan

'There's nothing competitive about it. We take chairs and we sit and put the world to rights'



U3A UKULELE FANS

A year ago, some members of Keyworth U3A heard about the successful ukulele group at nearby West Bridgford U3A, and asked teacher Neil Marriott if he would come and start one for them. There are now 12 members and they have come on so well they performed a Christmas concert last year. Their repertoire includes blues, folk and – of course – some George Formby.

Ukeleles are one of the easiest stringed instruments to start on; nevertheless Neil is the only experienced musician. His pupils include a retired professor of metallurgy and a former BBC executive. 'Some have never expressed themselves musically before,' says Neil. 'The fun is in playing together.'

Strum together: Musicians (above, from left): Barry Hull, Jacqueline Flude, Neil Marriott, Cynthia Hillyard and Doug Brown

YOU CAN DO WHAT?! There are lots of walking groups, plenty of people learning languages or music, a fair sprinkling of playreading and creative writing groups – but there are many unusual and bizarre groups, too. Here are 30 of the most surprising U3A groups in action:

Allotment group (Christchurch)

A sideways look at revolutions (N London)

Balkan folk dancing (Barnet)

Beading (West Wiltshire)

Belly dancing (Sheffield)

Bob Dylan (with wine!) (Spilsby)

Carriage drivers – horse-drawn

carriages (The Deepings)

Celtic knotting (SW Hertfordshire)

Chakra – African drums (Edinburgh)

Church mice – church visiting group

(The Deepings)

Curio club (Norwich)

Dancercise zumba gold (West Wiltshire)

Dolls' house miniatures (West Wiltshire)

Doric culture and language (Aberdeen)

Dowsing (Worthing)

Dramatising short stories (London)

Dry-stane dyking (West Galloway)

Encaustic art (Enderby)

Epynt clearances – studying the lost Welsh community of Epynt (Brecon)

Grumpy old men group

(Heart of England)

Lacemaking (Boston)

Laughter yoga (Huntingdon)

Meditation and intuitiveness awareness

(Christchurch)

Mindfulness-based stress reduction

(London)

Outings by public transport (Bromley)

Polyhedra (Brighton and Hove)

Qigong and a hint of t'ai chi (London)

Quilling (Bromley)

Sophocles, Shakespeare and Chekhov

(Norwich)

Upwords – like Scrabble, but building

upwards in 3D (Brighton and Hove) ◆