

THREADS OF GRUNDTVIG IN THE FABRIC
OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

K. PATRICIA CROSS
HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Adult education is receiving a great deal of attention today in the United States, not for the somewhat idealistic reasons that Grundtvig thought were important, but for far more pragmatic reasons. The major forces driving the interest in adult education in the United States are two--demographics and technology. The demographic facts are these: the number of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 is the most rapidly declining age cohort in the United States. Their numbers will decrease by 25 percent by 1995, making it likely that most colleges will have to cut back their programs and faculty, and some of the smaller independent colleges will not survive unless they can find new markets for their services. Adults between the ages of 35 and 44, in contrast, are the fastest growing age cohort in the nation; their numbers will increase by 30 percent by the end of the decade. Hard pressed college administrators, looking for capable students to fill the seats left vacant by declining numbers of traditional college students, are therefore greatly interested in marketing their programs to adults. Thus the demographics of the birth rate alone have quite a bit to do with the new enthusiasm for adult

Prepared for the Bicentennial Celebration of N.F.S.
Grundtvig's Birth, Scandinavian Seminar College, Halte, Denmark
June 17, 1983.

learners on the part of colleges and universities.

The second pragmatic reason for the adult education boom in the United States is the rise of technology. A recent report from the Office of Technology Assessment of the United States Congress concludes that:

The so-called information revolution, driven by rapid advances in communication and computer technology, is profoundly affecting American education. It is changing the nature of what needs to be learned, who needs to learn it, who will provide it, and how it will be provided and paid for.

(O.T.A., 1982, piii)

Since education in the United States is not centralized, the restructuring of education will have to occur at state and institutional levels. And that is happening.

Within the past six months, a great surge of energy has gone into talk about improving the public educational system, especially in mathematics and science, to support and enhance the technological economy. While states are competing with one another to put new money into educational systems, employers are in hot competition with one another to educate and reeducate adult workers to keep up with the changing technology. Indeed many of the larger industries in the United states have established expensive training and educational programs for employees, and this segment of adult education is now growing so fast that employers are seeking to cut costs by establishing partnerships with colleges and universities, a collaboration that seems equally attractive to colleges. A recent report

issued by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1982) has called for partnerships with industry to provide lifelong education for engineers.

Thus, adult education in the United States has new status; it is important and growing more so. By Grundtvig's standards, however, the new interest in adult learners is pretty much for the wrong reasons. Colleges are coming up with attractive new adult programs to keep from going out of business, and employers are entering into adult education for the same reason.

Underneath these more mercenary reasons for supporting adult education, however, lie many interesting programs that are benefitting from adult education's new prestige. It is in these smaller movements that the threads of Grundtvig can be clearly seen in the fabric of American adult education.

Since time prohibits and comprehensive description of the infinite variety of populist educational programs that exist in the United States today, I have chosen to describe very briefly three adult learning activities, selecting those that are most obviously related to the contributions of Grundtvig.

1. The Rural Free University* is located in thirty-two small towns in the midwestern state of Kansas. Opportunities for education in these isolated rural communities are distinctly limited, and the purpose of the Rural Free University is to provide informal, nonthreatening opportunities for adult learning with low cost to the participants. Each community with a RFU

*All information presented herein about Rural Free University is from Killacky (1983).

establishes a local advisory board which sets the courses for the year under the motto that "anyone can teach, and anyone can learn." Initially, Rural Free University was modestly funded by grants from the Federal government, but when those ran out, Kansas passed "The Community Resource Act" which is unique in state funding legislation. It provides local communities with technical assistance and a few thousand dollars for administrative and support services.

Historically, the Rural Free University, like the Danish folk schools, arose out of protest against the rigidities of traditional education. Students at Kansas State University in the late 1960s were critical of, among other things, the traditional education offered at the University. To the founders of Rural Free University, their educational alternative had the Grundtvigian elements of a live populist education addressing real problems as opposed to the "dead" traditional education addressing abstract academic concepts.

It is hard to say at this point what the future of Rural Free University is. It is a small and quiet movement, virtually unknown outside the state, but it continues to grow modestly in Kansas. Moreover it is prospering at a time when observers are predicting that television will provide the necessary educational services for rural isolated areas. Research (Killacky, 1983), however, suggests that these homegrown educational programs are serving important social purposes as well as addressing needs for practical learning relevant to lifestyles in the region.

The problems of the Rural Free University are largely related to the lack of adequate support and funding. The program, from administration to teaching, is run by volunteers or persons who are paid token amounts. Volunteers do tire, lose their enthusiasm, and move on to other things, and replacements are hard to find. The other great weakness observed in the research is the lack of learning resources. Since these are folk efforts, without significant professional support and without a resource-sharing network, the development of materials is inefficient.

2. New York Study Circles. As one small piece of a long range plan to improve adult education in New York, the state has encouraged the development of study circles. Like the Rural Free University in Kansas, this is a small, low-budget effort, largely confined within the state. The New York study circles operate out of seven colleges and universities that provide logistical support, training for facilitators, etc. The circles are organized around topics such as middle management, parenting, retirement, and within the New York State Department of Education, there are circles on organizing community circles and a growing interest in circles designed for working parents among the employees of the Department of Education.

While it would not be accurate to say that study circles are about to take off in the United States, there is a commitment within the New York Department of Education to offer quiet

support and encouragement of the idea, and it seems clear that they do meet the needs of some people. Unfortunately, some of the study circles are beginning to offer college credit, and in my opinion, distorting the original and more appealing philosophy of the Scandinavian study circles. But there does seem to be a trend in adult education in the United States toward credit and credentialing. The more available credit becomes, the more adults seem to aspire to it, and the more nontraditional education begins to take on the very trappings of traditional education that they originally opposed. In the case of the study circles, for example, under pressure to meet standards for college credit, the facilitator would gradually turn into a fully credentialed teacher with the presumed expertise and syllabus of a traditional faculty member.

3. Elderhostel. Elderhostel is a distinctly non-credit learning opportunity that also has threads of Grundtvig running through it. Started in 1975 as a way for five colleges in New Hampshire to utilize their student dormitories and faculties in the summer, Elderhostel offered older people a way to combine vacation and education through study for a week on a college campus.

Elderhostel is supported by student tuition; it receives no public funds. The tuition is very modest -- set at \$180. a week for room and board, classes and other activities. Eleven dollars of this amount goes to support a central non-profit corporation located in Boston which handles all of the administration and coordination of the program. Recently the corporation has decided

to build permanent funding for the program by soliciting tax-deductible contributions. The Grundtvig threads in Elderhostel are that it is one of very few adult programs in the United States that is residential. It is low-cost, non-threatening, with no grades and no credit. Courses are taught by regular college faculty members and they tend to be clustered in the liberal arts, with the emphasis on learning for cultural enrichment and satisfaction. Many of the courses capitalize on their location by offering instruction in regional histories, geology, local interests and industries. But there are also courses on personal development, economics, and current affairs.

Unlike the smaller programs that I described in Kansas and New York, Elderhostel has zoomed from a New Hampshire-based program to an international program in the incredibly short time period of five years. This summer, Elderhostel will involve more than 600 colleges and 80,000 students in every state in the United States and in many European countries as well.

The three programs that I have described serve as examples of the enduring contributions of Grundtvig. However, I need not remind you that the ideas of Grundtvig seem to survive better in the learning activities of the common people than in the organizations of society. Millions of people are gathering together in groups similar to study circles to pursue Bible study, gardening, cooking, stamp collecting, music appreciation, investments and a great variety of other interests. But these

activities are loosely coordinated by churches, senior citizens centers, neighborhood groups, clubs, and the like without any central administration and therefore without any particular identity.

In the United States, it appears that as soon as an agency of the state goes in to "coordinate" and especially to "fund" an informal learning activity, they turn it into something that can be evaluated, credentialed, and in general deemed worthy of public funds. While the ideas of Grundtvig remain in the hearts and activities of the common people, they have a hard time making it in the educational bureaucracy.

REFERENCES

- Killacky, Jim. Free Universities: Toward a New Role in Nonformal Rural Adult Education. Unpublished Thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1983.
- Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), Informational Technology and its Impact on American Education. Washington, D.C.: Congress of the United States, 1982.
- MIT Centennial Study Committee. Lifelong Cooperative Education. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, October 2, 1982.