

ADULT EDUCATION IN THE LEARNING SOCIETY

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Those of you who have spent most of your professional lives in adult education may find all of the recent hoopla about lifelong learning either amusing or encouraging, depending on how you feel about people discovering things that you have known all along. To read some of the literature these days, it appears that lifelong learning now outranks motherhood, apple pie, and the flag as a universal good in American life. Motherhood and the flag are critized for being too narrow, and apple pie, alas, is too broadening. But the concept of lifelong learning seems to be a universally accepted virtue. An earlier notion that education is for the young has given way to the concept that learning is lifelong and that it is good for everyone.

There are a number of reasons for the new visibility of lifelong learning in the United States and throughout the world. One of the least important reasons from an idealistic perspective but perhaps one of the most important practically and politically, is the simple demographic fact that we are becoming a nation of adults. By the year

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2000, says the National Center for Education Statistics, "the United States population will be dominated by persons in their middle years" (Golladay, 1976, P. 12). The post-war baby bulge that had an explosive impact on the schools in the 1950's and 60's and the colleges in the 1960s and 70s is pushing into the adult years. Those born in 1957 at the peak of the birth rate are now 25, and those born at the beginning of the birth explosion are into their thirties. This aging baby boom generation, coupled with unusually low birth rates in the 1960's and 1970's, is pushing the national center of the age distribution sharply upward. As recently as 1970, the United States was basically a "youth culture," with people under the age of 29 constituting a majority (52 percent) of the population; by the year 2000, the United States will become an "adult culture," with those over 30 years of age constituting 57 percent of the population (Bureau of the Census, 1977).

The entrepreneurs of business are obviously aware of these changes in the marketplace. The makers of Johnson's Baby Shampoo, for example, are advertising their product for the personal use of 30-year-old football players; and Levi Strauss is promoting "fuller cut" blue jeans for the more mature figure. Educational entrepreneurs are not far behind. Some are using the baby shampoo approach, trying to convince adults that educational programs designed for 18 year-olds are equally good for 30-80 year-olds, while others are moving to the Levi Strauss approach and redesigning educational programming for the mature learner. Thus whether one would like to argue for or against increased public attention

to education for adults, the simple political reality is that any society attends to the needs of the predominant group in that society--which until the end of this century will be adults over the age of 25. As evidence of that optimism, a recent news release (December 17, 1981) from the New York State Education Department proclaims that the N.Y. Regents adopted 8 new goals for adult education last month that will insure that "no later than the year 2000, New York will be leading the nation and the world in its commitment to lifelong learning."

The enthusiasm for lifelong learning, however, goes beyond demographics to reflect changing needs and changing lifestyles. Almost certainly knowledge is power on the new frontier of the Learning Society--for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. It is inconceivable that education will be less important tomorrow than it is today. From the ancient occupations of agriculture and fishing to the futuristic "high tech" occupations, workers will need to be better educated than ever before. Moreover, the continued expansion of education to previously unserved segments of the population is inevitable. Everyone is going to need more education--women as well as men, minorities as well as majorities, old as well as young, rural as well as urban or suburban, poor as well as rich, handicapped as well as able-bodied, hard-to-teach as well as easy-to-teach. And education is increasingly important because there are simply more things to learn--appreciations to enrich life, knowledge to enhance personal growth, and skills to improve performance.

More education for more people for more years of their lives would seem to make education a growth industry. The literature and gloomy prognostications of formal education notwithstanding, education in the broad meaning of that term is of growing importance in the society. We have all heard it said that the railroads failed, not because there was no longer a need for their services--indeed the need for transportation was growing at the time--but because the tunnel vision of the railroad operators concentrated on running the railroads instead of exploring the new frontier of the transportation industry.

Many educators within the formal educational establishment today are so consumed with managing their institutions that they are in danger of giving more attention to running the college than to exploring the new frontier of the Learning Society. Those of you who work on the frontier of bringing education and learning to adults may not feel like pioneers anymore, but to a world that has become dependant on adult education to accomplish its work, you are on the cutting edge of major change in the role of education in the society.

If we looked to the broad future of education in the society rather than to the narrow future of any particular brand of education, what would we see?

First, we would see a greatly increased need for learning, for more people and for more years of their lives. Second, we would see a wider range of offerings and an explosive increase in the number of organizations providing education. When society's people and society's organizations are heavily involved in learning and teaching, the Learning Society has arrived.

The need for education on the part of both individuals and society is escalating as fast as the world changes-- and that is at a heady pace these days. Margaret Mead once remarked that the world in which we were born is not the world in which we will live nor is that the world in which we will die. I was born into a world without television, mass air travel, credit cards, frozen foods, or computers. My parents were born into a world without automobiles, radios, or refrigerators. That is a lot of change in a short span of time, but change has a way of escalating so that each new generation is coping with a faster rate of change than the preceeding generation.

The transportation industry serves as a good example. For thousands of years, people transported themselves and their worldly goods by walking from place to place. With the taming of the horse, the distance travelled and the loads transported became a different order of magnitude. With the invention of trains and cars, another quantum leap occurred. Then airplanes increased the speed of travel, not just from 20 to 80 miles per hour, as improvements in the car had done, but from 80 to 800 miles per hour. Now Voyager II is moving through space not just ten times faster than airplanes but at the rate of 54,000 miles per hour. Once the quantum leap occurs, a whole new industry is on the scene. No amount of careful breeding, attention to diet, or training can make the greatest horse even approach in efficiency the "transportation work" done by the most mediocre truck. Thus anyone in the transportation business must learn an entirely new set of skills and knowledge whenever a quantum leap in technology wipes out one industry and creates another, often within the timespan of a single generation.

Quantum leaps in knowledge are still occurring with considerable regularity across a wide variety of fields. Change is so rapid in medicine, for example, that obsolescence is measured by the "half-life." The half-life of knowledge in medicine is about five years, meaning that within five years of receiving the medical degree, half of all a doctor's information and training is obsolete.

As dramatic as the knowledge explosion is, the lifelong learning movement is more than a frantic race between education and technology. Changing values are calling for less emphasis on material possessions and more on self-realization and the improvement of the quality of life. Although work-related education is still the most popular form of continuing education, enrollments in courses for personal growth and social and recreational activities are growing very rapidly.

Another sign of the times in the Learning Society is seen in changing lifestyles. It looks as though American society is moving away from the "linear lifeplan" in which education is for the young, work for the middle-aged, and enforced leisure for the elderly, toward a blended lifeplan in which education, work, and leisure go on concurrently throughout life. So far in history, there has been a pronounced tendency to increase the separation between education, work, and leisure by keeping young people in school and off the labor market and by forcing older persons into ever earlier retirement (Best and Stern, 1976). There seems to be a growing dissatisfaction now, however, on the part of almost everyone, with this formula for protecting jobs for the middle years of life. Sociologists are observing a rise of what has been

called "rights consciousness" or the "psychology of entitlement." Today almost everyone feels entitled to a job. At the same time, almost everyone feels entitled to education and to full enjoyment of their leisure hours. Older people have insisted upon their right to work if they want to, and Congress has endorsed that right through a rollback of mandatory retirement. Young people are showing increasing dissatisfaction with long years of uninterrupted schooling, especially when there is no guarantee of the well-paid and meaningful job to which they feel entitled at the other end of the education pipeline. Young people who used to spend a brief interval of their lives in full-time study on a college campus are increasingly likely to think about a lifetime of part-time learning. As recently as 1970, most college students were full-time students; by 1985, the majority of college students will be part-time students, combining their education with jobs, families, and leisure. Already, more than a third of all college students are over the age of 25. Adult educators, of course, have always done their teaching in the atmosphere of the blended lifeplan. Your philosophy and mission involves blending study, work, and personal growth as closely as you can. Now educators across the broad spectrum of educational providers are moving to blend education into the everyday lives of people.

Educators, however, appear to be following rather than leading the evolution toward a blended lifeplan. Research is turning up evidence of a great deal of independent learning that goes on every day without the help of educators. Allen Tough (1978), the innovative Canadian researcher who has recently popularized the concept of the self-

directed learner, found an impressive amount of self-planned learning taking place completely outside of organized learning programs. Whereas American researchers have typically counted as adult learners those participating in "organized instruction" of some type, the Canadian researchers include in their definition of learning all activities that could be said to be "highly deliberate" efforts to learn. They counted learners, not by courses taken, but by learning projects completed. A learning project was defined as a series of related episodes adding up to at least seven hours in which the primary intention of the person was to gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skills. Synthesizing findings across a number of interview studies, we can conclude that roughly 90 percent of the adult population conduct at least one learning project each year and that the typical adult conducts five learning projects per year, spending about 100 hours on each project (Tough, 1977). That adds up to about 500 hours per year or ten hours per week.

Given our national image, I was really curious to know what all these so-called average people were doing for ten hours per week that could be called highly deliberate efforts to learn. Some examples of self-directed projects from the Toronto interviews are these (Tough, 1968):

- A 60 year-old woman learned French in anticipation of her visit to Paris.
- A teacher set out to improve reading speed and comprehension so that he could read more material.
- A man learned how to train his dog to be a good retriever for hunting and to be obedient in the car.

All of us are constantly exposed these days to tempting learning projects. How-to-do-it paperbacks, ranging from gourmet cooking to stockmarket investments, are experiencing record sales, and television programs ranging from "Shakespeare" to "The Backyard Gardener" are attracting enthusiastic followers nationwide. Far from fitting our popular stereotype as a nation of twelve year-old minds unable to comprehend any task more complicated than "Name that Tune" or to sustain interest in anything less gripping than the latest misadventures of a soap heroine, we are pictured in the new research as a society of serious and rather persistent learners.

The research on self-directed learning, however, has also turned up evidence that most people would welcome more help with their learning projects. The fuel for the Learning Society of the 1980's is the mutual desire of learners and providers to widen the variety of organized learning opportunities. Who are the adult learners who are signing up for classes, workshops, short courses, tennis lessons, and other forms of organized instruction? With all of the research surveys of the past decade, we do not lack descriptive data. In the 1970's, most states conducted needs assessments to aid in planning and coordinating education programs in the state. In synthesizing data across these studies (Cross and Zusman, 1978; Cross, 1981), I found that patterns of participation and interest were remarkably similar from state to state. That similarity makes it possible to present a national profile of the characteristics and educational interests of adult learners. A profile, of course, is a statistical average which ignores the tremendous diversity

of the adult population, and it doesn't purport to describe any real person who ventures into a workshop or classroom. Nevertheless, the statistical summaries do serve to put together, as our individual experiences cannot, a generalized picture of a typical adult learner. The typical learner I am about to describe is the person who engages in the type of organized instruction that is ordinarily represented in adult education activities such as workshops, seminars, short courses, or classes.

Using this definition for organized learning, a national survey (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974) found that approximately 30 percent of the adult population can be classified as learners, and another 46 percent can be called would-be learners, i.e., those who are not currently participating in instructional activity but who express an interest in doing so. About 23 percent of adults in the United States say they are not interested in further learning. Unfortunately, those expressing the least interest are predominantly older, have little formal education, and few of the comforts of life. I'll return to the problem of non-participants in a moment, but first, let us talk about what the research says about the interests of learners and would-be learners.

Fifteen years ago, the classic study of adult learning concluded that, "the major emphasis in adult learning is on the practical rather than the academic; on the applied rather than the theoretical; and on skills rather than on knowledge or information" (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965, p.3). Nothing in the myriad of surveys since has changed that general conclusion. Adults are by and large pragmatic learners, more interested in learning how to do something than in how to think about it.

Learning that is relevant to jobs is far and away the most popular type of learning, with almost half of all adult learners engaged in it.

Consistent with their pragmatic orientation, adults are willing to pay more for career-relevant education than for education that might enhance the quality of life through adding to appreciations or understanding.

There is every reason to think that career-related adult education will continue to grow. Employers are probably the fastest growing source of adult education. For most corporations, education has become a huge and expensive arm of human resource development. On any given workday, AT&T has 30,000 employees engaged in a half-day or more of instruction at a total cost, including employee salaries, of 6.8 million dollars per day. It is estimated that industry spends more on education and training than the total appropriations for postsecondary education in all fifty states (Lynton, 1981). Professional associations too are becoming the builders of vast educational networks. The American Management Association, with an annual education budget of 50 million dollars, uses 7,500 lecturers and discussion leaders to conduct 2,000 formal education programs each year. The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants offers extensive professional education programs, consisting of individual study and regional workshops, that rival the degree-granting monopoly of higher education because licensing boards that determine who is licensed to practice accounting, recognize AICPA education as appropriate to professional practice. Indeed, the tendency of state licensing boards to require continuing education for accountants, optometrists, nursing home administrators, doctors, lawyers, and a host

of other professionals who serve the public, is a significant factor in the rise of non-credit adult education.

What people want to learn influences how they want it taught. Most people would prefer to learn how to fix a car by actually working on one. If the learning is in history, however, then classes and reading seem more appropriate. Thus the diversity in preferred instructional methods equals the diversity of subject matter interests. Generally speaking, however, most people seem to like teaching methods that are familiar to them. Traditional lectures and classes, for example, lead any other single method in the preference polls, but actually three-fourths of the potential learners would prefer something other than the traditional class lecture. On-the-job-training and internships are popular, as are institutes and workshops, and the demand for these more active forms of learning appears to be greater than the present supply. While media instruction such as radio, television, and audio or video cassettes are not rated very attractive by most survey respondents, I would not underestimate the potential impact of these new delivery systems on the Learning Society. Their chief handicaps at present are lack of familiarity as learning tools and lack of opportunity for interpersonal interaction. But these handicaps must be weighed against the advantages of tremendous convenience and the potential for exceptionally high quality instruction. Furthermore, as technology becomes more sophisticated, interactive forms of learning are increasingly possible. Certainly, the new computerized television games seem to be catching on,

and the knowledge already exists to make machines highly responsive to human actions at a more sophisticated learning level than the current paddle and torpedo television games. While I think it highly unlikely that computers and television will ever replace human teachers and counselors, it seems apparent that the new technology has an important role to play in the Learning Society.

As a matter of fact, all indications are that the new technologies, including educational television, will stimulate rather than satiate adult learning. One of the clearest and most consistently reported findings of the research on adult learning is that the desire for learning is addictive and apparently insatiable. Being introduced to something or knowing a little about it usually stimulates the desire to know more. In that simple fact of life lies one of the greatest problems for the Learning Society. It is quite clear now that the people taking the greatest advantage of the new educational opportunities are those who are already among the best educated adults in the nation. A college graduate is seven times as likely to be participating in some form of organized learning as a high school dropout, and the gap between the well-educated and the poorly educated is widening rather than narrowing as the Learning Society picks up speed. The almost certain result is that as opportunities grow, so will the gap between the educational "haves" and "have-nots". The situation is far easier to understand than to remedy. Almost everything the college graduate does adds to the probability of further education, while almost everything the high school dropout does militates against it. The college graduate frequently enters an employee training program, works for a company or

in an occupation that is likely not only to support but to require further education. College graduates typically belong to social and professional groups that discuss educational opportunities; spouses and friends are supportive and admiring of educational accomplishment. And finally, those who continued in school long enough to graduate from college were usually happy and successful in school and are familiar with the procedures and people that inhabit educational institutions.

The situation is exactly the reverse for the poorly educated. They enter low-paying jobs with few educational requirements and no educational benefits. They consort with friends and family who know little about education and may even be hostile to it; they lack the information networks to know about opportunities and the skills to take advantage of them. They are on the downward spiral with respect to education, and they become the hard-core undereducated, taking up lifestyles and values that spawn new generations of undereducated.

Many forms of adult education in which you are involved constitute a critical link in the extension of education to underserved populations. Rural Americans to take one example, are among the most educationally disadvantaged of all population subgroups, participating in organized instruction at about half the rate of the average American. Worse yet, because many people living in remote areas are older and have low levels of formal schooling, the handicaps to further education pile up, and there is very little chance that older people with low levels of educational attainment will be participating in the Learning Society without the intervention of educators who provide "low-threat" learning opportunities.

There is good reason to think that there is a hierarchy of threat in educational opportunity and that adults will enter the Learning Society at the threat level that is tolerable for them (See Cross, 1981, Chapter 6). Among the most threatening of all educational opportunities is the traditional college classroom. The adult learner enters into the competition out of practice, unsure of her own skills, probably overestimating the skills of traditional college students, often unfamiliar with the environments and practices of academe. Less threatening is non-credit adult education. There is some public commitment in joining a learning group, but no assessment in the form of tests or grades is involved. The learner retains considerable control over level of performance, and the atmosphere is collegial rather than competitive. Less threatening still is the televised course that can be received at home. We know from research, for example, that adults who build self-confidence as learners by taking a television course at home are likely to venture out to try other forms of education as their interest and confidence grow. Similarly, adults who participate in extension workshops may discover interests and abilities that carry them into other learning opportunities.

If the Learning Society is to serve all adults, we need to nurture a varied system of entrances into educational opportunities. The services offered by extension, television, employers, community agencies, and other providers of non-credit education give adults who have been out of school for some years the support, self-confidence, and skills that they need to participate fully in the Learning Society.

Unfortunately, for many poorly educated people, adult education has the task of undoing some of the attitudes built up by the competitiveness of the formal school system. Learning, when it is graded on the bell-shaped curve, always leaves 50 percent of the class classified by the teacher as "below average" learners. It is those below average learners who drop out of school early, thereby compounding their problem of low skills and poor attitudes about themselves as learners. To reexpose these students when they become adults to non-threatening, satisfying forms of education is a high priority task to which all educators should give serious attention.

In closing, let me observe that most people talk about the Learning Society as though it lay somewhere off in the distant future. But when studies indicate that 90 percent of the non-school population are spending up to ten hours per week on self-planned learning projects, 30 percent are attending classes or otherwise receiving instruction, and an additional 46 percent are interested in further learning, it appears that we have sufficient evidence to proclaim the arrival of the Learning Society. One of the purposes of meetings such as yours here in Michigan is to make sure that the Learning Society is as good as it can be for as many learners as possible. May your meetings over the next few days be good learning experiences--stimulating, productive, and personally and professionally satisfying.

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