

THE NEW LEARNING: AN AGENDA FOR THE EIGHTIES

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Sixty-two years ago a small group of educators met in Madison, Wisconsin to launch the NUEA as a challenge to the assumptions and practices of the traditional education of their day. That challenge remains with us today as our much larger group meets in and out of Tucson to talk about new learning environments and to set an agenda for the 1980s.

The agenda for the 80s will no doubt bear some similarities to the agenda for the 20s that must have concerned our predecessors. But the agenda setting for the 1980s is occurring in a new and quite heady environment. Educators working with adult part-time learners today have found themselves catapulted from the wings of the educational periphery to center stage. The agenda set for continuing education in the 1980s will have more influence on postsecondary education than ever before in history.

In the recent anniversary issue of The Spectator, the observation was made that adult education is finally moving into mainstream higher education (dePorry, 1976). I think it might be more accurate, however, to say that mainstream higher education is moving toward adult education.

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There are several reasons for the recent shift but the most obvious, I think, has more to do with demographics than with educational philosophy.

The World War II baby boom has had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on higher education. In 1964, the year of the Free Speech Movement, 17 year olds constituted the largest single age group in the country. Peter Drucker (1971) has observed that the youth revolution was predictable by anyone who took the trouble to look at population statistics. In the five-year period between 1960 and 1965, the center of population gravity in this country dropped from a predominance of 35 to 40 year olds all the way down to age 17, which is the youngest it had been since the early 19th century. Furthermore, because so many of these 17 year olds stayed on in school rather than joining the work force, the psychological impact on education was considerable.

Higher education is not about to be caught napping this time as the population statistics move up the age scale and the World War II baby boom generation moves into the adult years. Higher education is moving toward adult education, in full awareness that during the present decade, the number of 18-24 year olds in the population will grow a modest 8 percent, while 25 to 34 year olds will increase a walloping 44 percent. And in some strange way history repeats itself, and once again we face the post World War II phenomenon in which the interest in higher education of the predominant age group grows even faster than their numbers in the population.

There are many reasons for the escalating interest in education, but for the sake of parsimony, let us boil the classification down to two major reasons. People are engaging in a great variety of educational activities because 1) they want to learn, and the time and resources are increasingly available, and 2) they have to learn because the world and our knowledge about it is continually changing.

The year 2000 is less than 25 years away, but with the exponential rate of change in human society, it is safe to state flatly that much of what we think we "know" to be true today will be proved false by the end of this century. A famous architect wrote recently, "Almost nothing that we were taught by our betters in or out of the architecture schools of the mid-century has stood the test of time. Nothing--or almost nothing--turns out to have been entirely true (Blake, 1974)." If a pragmatic discipline such as architecture (where one assumes the validity of knowledge by whether structures stand or fall) has no edge on truth, ponder the permanence of knowledge in a field such as psychology. I thank my poor memory that I have forgotten so much of what I was taught about psychology in graduate school in the 1950s. I would surely be in trouble today if I remembered it as the truth that I thought it was at the time. Indeed, the president of the American Psychological Association recognized the temporary state of knowledge when, during a recent meeting of the Association, he urged his colleagues to teach so as to remove "any arrogant scientific certainty that psychology's current beliefs are the final truths in these matters (TIME, September 15, 1975, p. 94)."

Knowledge changes so rapidly now that lifelong education has become a necessity in the professions and in many technical areas as well. Milton Stern (1972) has coined the phrase "compulsory adult education" to reflect the growing tendency of professional associations and licensing boards to require continuing education. The American Academy of Family Physicians now requires 50 hours of continuing education each year plus the passing of an examination every seven years for physicians to maintain their specialty. This trend will most certainly accelerate, and it will call for some rethinking about curriculum and delivery systems on the part of educators.

Many Americans however are moving away from the work ethic, establishing new life styles, and finding satisfaction in learning for personal growth and for the sheer fun of it. Although I have great difficulty verifying the statistic personally, we are told that leisure time for the average American is growing as the work week continues to decline. In 1900, the average work week was 62 hours; by 1945 it had dropped to 43, and today it is 37 1/2 hours. More people are enjoying life styles that place new values on recreation and leisure. In the six years between the 1969 and 1975 Triennial Surveys of Adult Education, participation in social and recreational education increased a dramatic 65 percent. Not only is education used for leisure, it is used as leisure. Are television viewers of Roots and The Ascent of Man being entertained or educated? It is a new day for both education and entertainment when colleges throughout the country testify to the educational content of much non-collegiate learning through offering academic credit for a variety of adult learning experiences.

There has been much talk and eager anticipation of the coming learning society. But depending on how one chooses to define learning activity, we may already be living in the learning society. Using a fairly conservative definition of learning, researchers for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study found that almost one-third of the adults surveyed reported that they had received instruction in some subject or skill during the year prior to the study (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974). But those figures, surprising as they were to some people, seem tame in the light of Allen Tough's (1975, p. 6) probing interviews with adults. When he defined a learning project as a series of related episodes adding up to at least seven hours of "a sustained, highly deliberate effort to learn," he found that the typical person conducts eight learning projects per year, and that 98 percent of the adults complete at least one learning project each year.

If we were thinking of entering planning for the learning society on our agenda for the 1980s, we should be prepared to meet many adults who will no doubt be pleased to welcome the educational establishment into the learning society. Perhaps the first resolve of professional educators who would move into the learning society in the 1980s should be to do nothing to stifle the spirit of spontaneity and independence that reigns among adult learners who learn because they want to.

I am certain that everyone participating in this conference has a personal agenda for adult education in the 1980s, and it probably includes concerns about staff training, curricula, methods of delivery, cooperation and/or competition with educators in government and industry, institutional reorganization, and a host of other practical problems that must be faced and solved at the institutional level. In a brief overview I can't touch upon all of the agenda items that will determine the shape of things to come. Hence I am going to concentrate my attention on two broad policy issues that represent national concerns about the future of adult education. What everyone wants to know, I am told by neighbors and legislators alike, is who is going to pay for all this education and who is going to set the standards for quality?

The Committee on the Financing of Higher Education of Adult Students (1974, p.3) concluded that "part-time students on the whole are massively discriminated against in federal and state student and institutional aid programs, social security survivor's benefits, institutional tuition rates and financial aid programs, and income tax requirements."

Frequently considered a pastime and occasionally considered a luxury, education for adults has rarely been viewed as a public responsibility, and only recently have people begun to talk about age-neutral vouchers and entitlements. With this pay-as-you-learn philosophy, it is not surprising that almost any research description of the characteristics of today's adult learners shows that they are, by and large, the privileged members of society. They are disproportionately young, Caucasian, white-collar,

well-educated, and well-to-do. Without societal intervention, the educational gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" will surely increase. Indeed the handwriting is already on the wall in the data of the Triennial Surveys.

Although blacks constituted 10 percent of the adult population in 1975, they represented less than 7 percent of the participants in adult education, and things seems to be getting worse instead of better. The greatest decline is occurring, not in the younger age group where we might rationalize that young blacks are moving from part-time into full-time education, but among middle-aged blacks where participation rates went from 9 percent in 1969 to 7 percent in 1972 and to 6 percent in 1975.

I think that there is a good chance that in the not-very-distant future, continuing education could rival the bachelor's degree as the route to upward socioeconomic mobility. For one thing the bachelor's degree is becoming less distinctive as the nation continues its drive for equal educational opportunity. While the lack of a college degree will handicap upward mobility, there is no assurance that the possession of a degree will assure a boost to even the first rung of the career ladder. But more important is the fact that with the continuing explosion of knowledge, the relevant question in employment will be, not what degree do you possess, but what learning activities have you participated in in the last three years?

The answer to that question will have implications for mid-career change as well as for the opportunities for promotion. When that much-

celebrated baby boom generation moves into middle age, it is likely that the press of their numbers will create a "promotional squeeze," as large numbers of people compete for relatively few leadership positions.

As we move into our Third Century, continuing education will be relatively and absolutely important in determining the quality of life. As a nation, we have had some experience in breaking down the barriers to opportunity. We know, for instance, that financial assistance and information networks are necessary. We can take heart that the two most frequent recommendations appearing in the flurry of statewide studies are for entitlements for lifelong learning and for brokerage services that put people, especially those who lack personal networks, in touch with information about educational opportunities.

My second major agenda item isn't much easier to solve than the first one, but it is a matter that might profit from a little airing. For some reason, adult education has suffered from the stereotyped stigma of second class education for second class students. The old jokes about night school persist right along with the legendary successes of some night school students. In the last five to ten years, however, half of the image problem has been solved. No one is questioning the capability of adult learners. Quite the contrary; institutions of all kinds are out in hot pursuit of adult learners, and not simply because they are warm bodies that will fill the chairs left vacant by the declining teenage population. Adults have proved themselves moti-

vated, able, and fascinating students, with a richness of experience that is challenging and exciting to teachers. Indeed, the new competition for adult learners may have unintentionally exacerbated the other half of the inferiority equation. The notion now seems to be that evening colleges, extension programs, and most so-called non-traditional programs are not good enough for these fine students. Ergo, they should have the opportunity to go to "regular" college or "real" college.

How do we go about responsibly certifying the value or worth or quality of an educational program? Basically, there are three models for determining the worth of educational programs, and all three will continue to exist in some tension for years to come.

Model A, the traditional model, derives its value from the prestige of the sponsor or provider of educational services. A degree from Harvard or Michigan or Stanford, for example, has high value, quite apart from the actual learning of the student, because these are well known and prestigious institutions with certified faculty, extensive libraries, and fine physical facilities. The implied assumption of the traditional model is that student learning is a direct function of institutional characteristics. Harvard students receive a quality education because Harvard is a fine institution.

Non-traditional degree programs are challenging that assumption through proposing Model B for judging the quality of education. Non-traditionalists say quite explicitly that they do not care where or when or from whom the student learned, and they advocate using student

outcomes rather than institutional characteristics as the measures of quality learning. Non-traditionalists are likely to speak of the assessment of student learning, of credit for experiential learning, and of competency-based degrees. Theoretically, they don't care about the credentials of the faculty or the prestige of the institution.

They argue that if those factors contribute significantly to learning, they will show up in measures of student learning, and if they cannot be seen in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students, then they are not significant educational variables.

The third model, Model C, is best represented by non-credit programs for adults. In crass terms, Model C is a marketing model. In this model it is the student who determines the worth of the program. If the student gives time and money to participate in educational offerings, then the education is valued to the extent that it serves the needs of the learner. Model C advocates are inclined to speak of self-determined education, and explicitly or implicitly, they have faith in the student to judge the quality or value of the education.

Each model has strengths and weaknesses. The problem with Model A is that there is no good evidence that measures of institutional prestige such as credentialed faculty members, size of endowment, and physical facilities bear any direct relationship to student learning. It is also disturbing, but not surprising, that college grade point averages show almost no correlation with later success in life, how-

ever one chooses to define success. Admittedly it is hard to show a respectable correlation since grading standards vary enormously by professor, subject area, and institution. But beyond that, the abilities required for success in academe are rather different from those required for success in the outside world of business and government.

On the other hand, Model A survives because most of us trust the professors of academe to maintain reasonable standards, not to rip off or exploit students, and to weed out the obvious laggards and dilettantes.

Logically, it is hard to refute the position of those who argue for Model B, maintaining that we should look at student learning rather than at institutional characteristics if we want to judge the quality of education. Fair enough. The problem is that we don't know how to measure student learning very well. It is easy to use competency-based measures for skills. Indeed, the measures of typing skill, for example, are so clear that we literally don't care where a typist receives his training. But measures of competency are not at all clear when it comes to certifying the learning of students in less skill-oriented fields of study.

Nevertheless, some progress is being made in measuring the outcomes of education. If these new measures become available and credible, the effect on institutionalized education will be enormous because learning can be converted at any time into useful currency in the form of degrees or the enhancement of employability.

Now let us look at Model C, non-credit education, which many adult educators claim is the quietly rising star of the future. Model C is really a radical departure and conceivably a considerable threat to traditional education, but people don't get very excited about it because it carries no academic imprimatur. While there are plenty of people who don't care about degrees or credit, it is also true that a college degree is a valuable piece of paper, exchangeable for higher salaries and better jobs. At present it is sufficiently valuable that people will sit through a boring course that seems completely irrelevant to their needs. While I certainly do not wish to imply that traditional courses are necessarily either boring or irrelevant, there are some that are both, and clearly they would not survive without degree credit.

Non-credit education, on the other hand, must make its own way; it must be inherently useful to the learner. Today's non-credit education ranges across the entire spectrum. There are the so-called general culture courses where credit is simply irrelevant. There are courses that become the butt of satire, represented by titles such as "Natural Foods and Their Effect on Mystic Experiences" where credit is unthinkable. And finally, there are advanced institutes and courses where the worth of the experience is so obvious that credit is unnecessary. A lawyer who attends a two-week institute on new tax laws, for example, is not likely to be very concerned about academic credit, or even about a certificate attesting to her attendance at the institute.

Between the courses where credit is unthinkable and those where it is unnecessary lie a host of learning experiences that could be converted to credit through the traditional methods of examining the course or learning experience (Model A), or through non-traditional methods of examining the learner (Model B). The further we move in the direction of measuring education as a quality of the learner rather than of the sponsor, the more all learners will be free to pursue education wherever they find it. And all forms of education will become truly accountable.

As we anticipate the agenda of the 80s, one thing seems certain. Diversity of students and alternative forms of education will increase. Learners of all ages and from all walks of life will be pursuing learning for all kinds of reasons and in a great variety of ways. If our society is to provide the appropriate opportunities, we will need traditional and non-traditional approaches to education and we will need to establish new relationships with educators beyond the walls of higher education.

This opening session has been planned to provide an overview of the range of issues facing education in the Third Century. Traditional institutions, non-traditional institutions and educators beyond the walls of higher education face a new era, an era based in part on the promise of new science and technology and in part on a better understanding of humanity throughout the world.

Our first speaker, addressing the role of traditional institutions in the new era, is Daniel G. Aldrich, Jr. Chancellor of the University of California at Irvine.

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