

## Features

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### *A Look Back to the Future*

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Dear Editors Gary and Trenton,

Did you know that the adult educator selected for the Ten Year Interplanetary Mission had been a student of mine at the University of Wisconsin? I'm a bit jealous; she has ten years in space to develop and manage the resources for a group of one hundred independent learners over that extended operation. What an opportunity!

But this is not why I'm writing you. I have just been clearing the last years of my files and am embarrassed. I discovered a letter you wrote to me in March of 1991. You asked me to do an article for the *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*. You wanted me to write of my vision of adult education by the year 2000. Attached to your letter was my response saying that I would get it to you by the end of August that same year. I am very sorry for the delay.

Now I need not demonstrate the vision for which you asked. Instead, I will look back from this year, 2001, to 1991, summarize a few of the intervening developments, and provide a status report on old issues.

#### **What Happened to Adult Education?**

##### *The Computer*

Remember the vision of computers as star teachers? They ended the decade more addictive than functional as a learning tool—more fun for a few than an aid to the many. More than any other factor, they were responsible for the slogan: "Learning to play rather than learning to learn." The computer was called by many "the sandbox" for over-aged graduate students. In short, the technology of learning the process replaced the acquisition of knowledge and solving of problems.

##### *Older Students and Improving Teaching*

I was surprised that the trend toward older students increased rather than slowed during the 1990s, and not only in colleges. Classes in the workplace, dreamed about and tried in a few places in the 1950s

and 1960s, became mainstream. During the 1990s space for vocational, technical, and liberal studies became part of new facilities built for business and industry. Professors of adult education were recruited for positions at corporate headquarters and became key resources for the development of the private sector's independent learning programs.

After World War II, an "older" student meant those age 24-30. In the 1980s the college age soared until 43 percent of all students were between the ages of 25 and 32. Now, in the new century, the average age is 35. (Adult educators' involvement in improving college instruction for mature students should have begun in earnest with the G.I. Bill after WWII. Another opportunity missed!) Although in some instances professors in adult education graduate programs sat back until other departments developed programs without them, in-service education at colleges and universities for those now teaching the mature, experienced adult learners was essential. Improvements in the college teaching of older students revolved around breaking the inertia of professors teaching as they were taught by professors who were taught by professors whose models were formed early in the twentieth century. A few adult educators broke the chain and helped develop the setting for learning growth for experienced adults who know their own goals and will work independently to reach them.

### *Time of Classes*

I remember the three-year battle I had with the University of Wisconsin Graduate School in the early 1970s to provide graduate credit to students taking week-end courses--there seemed to be something holy about holding classes from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on week days! Yet by the year 2000 the demands of the educational marketplace had changed the face of higher education. Today we learn around the clock.

### *Lifelong Learning Act*

Federal support to all high school graduates for up to four years of college, university, or vocational study is now in place and funded. The Lifelong Learning act enables all who desire education for a specific skill or professional area to reach entry level if intellectually capable. It was signed into law just in time to greet the new century. Of special interest to adult educators was the amendment providing access to the program at anytime up to one's 65th birthday.

You may not remember when Wilbur Cohen first proposed this concept and Senator Hubert Humphrey worked for its passage in the 1960s. When it was not funded, some of the old timers in adult education commented: "It will come around again. It's too good an

idea to be lost forever." Thanks to a broader vision during the 1990s and to presidential leadership, funding for education is now law. Another contribution of the 1960s generation!

### *Learning to Learn*

Early in the 1990s the disastrous state of K-12 public education was recognized. The early efforts to improve this situation focused on the same ideas I had heard in 1935 when I began teaching elementary school: devote more time and effort to basics, reading and math; cut out the frivolous music and art; limit sports; and get tough with discipline. The only new ingredient was the loss of parent involvement in childhood education.

I had difficulty believing the "about face" of the major professional educational organizations (NEA, AFT, etc.) as they moved from old solutions to focus on "learning to learn," but by the end of the 1990s the move was total. Adult educators were astounded at the speed of change. Those few who were not ready joined those living in the past.

## **What Happened to the Old Issues?**

### *Some Don't Go Away*

Your journal continues to present some issues I heard about when I entered the field in the 1930s, issues that resurfaced in the 1950s, in the 1970s, and again in the 1990s. Perhaps some cannot be solved; they were placed on earth by the Lord of Learning to help us sharpen our wits (or lose them). Here is my list of those issues sticking around:

1. Vocational vs. liberal education--Some believe that true work requires soiled hands.
2. Adult educators' involvement in social reconstruction--There are still those who want to wait for George to do it.
3. Adult education bill--Who pays it? The state? The individual? Business and industry? The Professions? The state says it is broke. Individuals say they can't afford it. Business and industry are caught up in their own issue of short or long term goals. The professions try to ignore it.

### *Some are Forgotten*

Among the forgotten issues are those on which society moved without listening to the educators. An example of this is the issue of mandatory continuing education. Education became such a part of the overall culture that those who screamed the loudest in opposition to

mandatory continuing education heard only their own voices and not the voice of change. The explosion of information in all fields made continual learning a part of living. Consequently, "mandatory" continuing education is a moot point.

Another issue on which society moved was the issue of certification of adult educators. Only when certification fails disastrously will those who were opponents (now certified) speak out again. Today this issue, too, is moot.

One issue with a happier outcome was credit for life experiences--an issue nearly defeated in the 1970s and 1980s. Research demonstrating that those studying independently had better job performance than those in formal classes put it over the top, and the move toward learning to learn in elementary and secondary schools moved it out of the issue category.

### **And There Are the New Issues**

#### *Use of Technology*

How much higher education can be accomplished within the Communication Exchange Network (CEN), the Independent Study Pod (ISP), and the Worldwide Interchange Network (WIN) which are now a part of international business, industry, and government offices, and all of the professions? All data, research reports, books and journals, essays and materials from radio and TV are available in seconds by remote from library terminals. There is global access.

This is a dream come true for some adult educators and a living nightmare for others. With the use of the information sources listed above and a professor as a process resource, what else does a learner need? Some say, "Nothing else." Other adult educators never conquered the technology of modern systems. To move learners toward this rich future, adult educators need both the technology and the theoretical base to accompany their vision.

#### *Role of Libraries*

Should libraries as the physical resource and gathering place for scholarly work give way to processing, correlating, and integrating existing and developing knowledge? Adult educators schooled in sociology and psychology are very concerned about the personal isolation they note among scholars. There are those who promote the continuation of library research and study at a physical site even though all information is available in their ISP. Do you remember how we had to struggle to find time for a bit of solitude? Now the struggle is to find a way to break away from our Pods.

*New Test for Competency*

The way we now view competency makes it a new issue. Is using technology to access information a real measure of competency? Some would say, "Yes"; others, "No." Others still say: "I want things done the right (old) way." They are not willing to accept the use of electronic resources to find answers and solve problems.

So, Gary and Trenton, the above are my comments on that old promise. I beg forgiveness for the ten year wait and for doing it the easy way.

I want you to know that I had mixed feelings about being retired during the whirlwind of changes that occurred during the 1990s!

Very truly yours,

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