

Features

Let Me Dream a Little

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For the last several nights (since I was asked to write this article) I have had a recurring dream about adult education in the year 2000. I'll give you some of the highlights.

The first scene was a large city, and I was hovering over it as if in a helicopter. The helicopter darted in and out of canyons between the skyscrapers so I could peer through windows and see what people were doing. I was impressed with how many people I saw in seminar rooms with flip charts placed where everybody could see them and read the charts, figures, and writing on them, with the people in small groups obviously engaged in serious discussion. I was also struck by how many small groups were watching television screens and talking about what they saw and heard. There were also a number of individuals sitting at their desks, acting as if they were talking with their computers, and others sitting at their desks reading books and scribbling things in what looked like workbooks.

The helicopter then veered to residential sections, both in the city and in the suburbs, and I saw many of the same sights—people reading, people at computers and various audio-visual devices, people in small groups, and people in pairs obviously engaged in serious discussion. My curiosity was bursting out all over, so I had the helicopter land occasionally so I could talk with some of the people. Guess what they told me?

An amazing number of them told me they were essentially illiterate and were studying the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic—some under the auspices of an educational institution, but many of them doing it as part of their jobs. Most aspired to get their GEDs and go on to higher educational pursuits. I kept thinking about a statement I had frequently made in speeches: "We cannot afford to enter the 21st century with 20 percent of our population functionally illiterate." What I had just seen made me feel hopeful.

A sizable number told me that they were trying to equip themselves to apply for first jobs or new jobs. I was impressed with the large proportion of these people who said they were preparing for work in what they called "information systems"—mostly in industrial settings, but a number in government and community service organizations.

Probably the largest group, however, said they were simply working on acquiring new knowledge and skills needed for holding on to or progressing in their present jobs. The term "technological revolution" was mentioned several times. I was struck by the number who told me that they were preparing for totally new careers--some of them mentioning that it would be their third, fourth, or fifth career change.

One of the strongest impressions I came away with was the increased age of the people with whom I talked. Most of them were in their thirties and forties, but large numbers were in their fifties, sixties, and even seventies. Clearly, I was observing the reality of what I had read about in demographic projections--the greying of America.

Another strong impression I gained was that many--perhaps most--of these people were taking heavy responsibility for planning and carrying out their own learning projects. Many mentioned being enrolled in public school programs; community college, college, and university programs (especially external degree programs); and "Partnership programs" sponsored jointly by business firms and educational institutions. They spoke about the help they were getting from "mentors," "facilitators," and other "resource people," but they seldom referred to them as "teachers" or "instructors." Obviously the concept of "self-directed learning" or "learner-centered learning" had somehow caught on during the nineties.

One conclusion I came to as I reflected on this dream is that adult education had become pervasive in our society--probably the largest segment of our national educational enterprise. It was, in short, truly a big business.

But then several issues were raised in my mind:

--What national, state, and local policies would foster and support the continuing expansion of the opportunities for adult learners? The expansion to date has proceeded with only minimal support from governmental policies; its impetus has come primarily from the need of educational institutions to exploit the market economy, the need of business and industry to maintain (if not improve) their competitive edge, and the demand of individuals. In other words, adult educators have been more responsive to the need for expanded opportunities than have public policy makers. My own prediction is that within the next few decades lifelong learning will come to be a high priority of governmental policy.

--What kind of personnel would be the most effective in serving this expanding field? What should be the role of professional training and certification? From its beginning as an organized movement, adult education has been blessed by diversity in its personnel. A relatively

small cadre of highly trained professionals has evolved whose primary function has been to provide training to a much larger body of part-time paid and volunteer practitioners drawn from almost every segment of society. This diversity has been a chief source of adult education's vitality, richness, and success. My own view is that attempts to homogenize the personnel of the field by imposing standardized entrance requirements and certification or licensing procedures should be resisted and in-service educational opportunities optimized.

As you may have guessed, I am very optimistic about the future of adult education.