

A Short History of Adult Basic Education

by Carey Reid

It would take a very thick book to hold the entire “history of adult education.” For example, if we go back far enough in time, we would find ourselves in a world that did not have schools at all or even printed books. The best way to get an education in Ancient Greece (hundreds of years before the birth of Christ), was to walk around with Plato or Socrates and ask them questions. Up until the 15th century in Europe, most information was shared orally because the few books that existed were written out by hand! Very few people could afford to own such expensive items. But then again, with very few schools around, there were very few people who could *read* them. Most local citizens depended on poets, elders, and other “storytellers” to hold in memory important facts to share orally — still true of many cultures today.

Most of the school systems we see around us today have their roots in Europe. Few people know that perhaps the first “system” in the western hemisphere was the many monasteries that were spread across Europe. Back in the days of King Arthur and his famous Knights of the Round Table, “wandering scholars” traveled from country to country to study with famous teachers, usually monks living in monasteries. These learners could travel from Italy to Ireland and have no trouble communicating because there was a common language of learning: Latin. Many of the monks who lived in these monasteries were expert “scribes;” that is, people who copied out books by hand.

The idea of “adult” education really developed only after the schooling of children and adolescents became more formal. European society had to become less elitist before large groups of young people could be educated. It took more than weakening the class system, though, to bring education to large numbers of people. Again, as with the monasteries, religion played a big part. In fact, it was a monk, Martin Luther, who in the 15th century started a movement in opposition to the Catholic Church that indirectly gave adult education a huge push. The leaders of Luther’s Protestant Movement believed that human beings did not need priests to act as go-betweens with God; adults had the mental and moral abilities to deal with God themselves. But, to do so they would have to understand the Bible, and to understand the Bible *they needed to know how to read!*

Among the first European immigrants to the American continent were Puritans, Quakers, and Calvinists, religious folk who held strongly the Protestant conviction that people must be able to read the Bible and interpret it for themselves. Many of us have seen images of the one-room schoolhouses that they built for their children in every community. Gradually, more and more communities enacted laws that *required* children to be in school (except for planting and harvest times, because most American families worked farms until the early decades of this century). Thus, “compulsory” education was born. This was an important development, because the American government was founded on principles of equality; that is, “education for all.”

But what about all the adults who could not speak or read English? After all, many of the huge waves of immigrants that followed from 1800 on were from lands such as Sweden and Germany where English was *not* the common language. There were good political reasons too for increasing the number of opportunities for adults to learn. Many new immigrants were coming from countries with strongly classed systems, countries with kings, queens, or dictators, for example. The thinking was (and still is!) that if these newcomers were going to be effective “Americans” — that is, people who would vote and be directly involved in other ways with government — then they would need to know how the system works. Being able to read newspapers, books, and proposed laws would make them more effective citizens.

All of these forces contributed to Americans’ hunger to know things, to be involved, and to be informed (though sometimes far too few of us exercise these important privileges). Few people know that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, there were thousands of adult education centers called “lyceums” (named after Plato’s first school in Ancient Greece) across the country. Nearly every town had one, mostly halls with benches and a lectern. Farmers and merchants flooded in to hear lectures from local experts or traveling speakers. If you were living in a small Midwestern town in 1859, you might have heard Abraham Lincoln debating his presidential rival, Steven Douglas, at one of these lyceums. If you lived in Upstate New York around 1875, you could have heard the famous Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina, speaking out against slavery. The fact was that thousands of people came from miles around just to see a woman at the lectern, a very rare sight in those days.

The belief in “education for all” prompted many citizens to set up their own schools in poorer neighborhoods, especially those where large numbers of new immigrants had settled. The most famous of these “settlement houses” was Hull House, established in Chicago in 1856 by Jane Addams, where thousands of

newcomers learned to speak English. Addams’ neighborhood school stands as the model that many community programs have taken, with teachers recruited locally, and with volunteers and fellow students doing a good bit of the teaching.

Unfortunately, newly arriving adult immigrants, especially those of color, found themselves barred from enrollment in many schools. Native Americans, shunted to reservations, were often overlooked by efforts to educate the nation’s adults. Some of these groups, however, took matters into their own hands. One of the most famous examples is the Freedmen’s Schools movement that began during the Civil War, when millions of newly-freed African-American slaves were expected to find their way within the larger society with little or no education. This movement remains one of the brightest spots in American history because African-Americans and Whites alike joined forces and shared power in creating a quickly growing network of schools for freed slaves and their children. They formed racially mixed faculties and set up non-segregated schools, many of which were later segregated by state government laws. They also attracted the financial support of dozens of charitable institutions. Already by 1865, the sheer size of this network of over three hundred groups and their many hundreds of schools was so impressive that the U.S. Government established a federal office, the Freedmen’s Bureau, to help support and coordinate the efforts.

Religion and politics are not the only forces that have fueled the steady growth of adult education. Economics has played a very large part, too. As the United States became more industrialized at the turn of the century, business leaders recognized their need for literate workers. Thousands of immigrants learned to speak English right in Henry Ford’s big automobile factories in Detroit, and thousands of young women learned to read and write in special schools set up for millworkers in Lawrence, Lowell, and Methuen, Massachusetts, among many other towns. Military leaders realized that modern armies needed educated soldiers (the GED test was developed by the military). In the early part of this century, economic, military, and educational leaders joined to launch the Progressive Education Movement, based on the conviction that for the U.S. to remain healthy and secure, its “workforce” needed reading, writing, and math skills. After all, most Americans were no longer working on farms, but in factories and businesses.

It wasn’t until the 1920s that some very lucid thinkers began to notice that in many publicly-funded programs, America’s credo of “education for all” did not really include *all*. Too many still denied enrollment to Native Americans, Asians, and African-Americans. Even women found themselves denied entry at most colleges. (Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts was the first college in the U.S. to accept women, back in 1837.) U.S. Education Secretary Raymond Wilbur was one courageous individual who has never been adequately celebrated in the history books. He launched the nation’s first literacy campaign in 1924, and he made sure that it was down in writing that all programs must be open to everyone, regardless of cultural heritage or gender.

Today, we are the beneficiaries of some powerful federal laws: the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Adult Education Act of 1966, and the National Literacy Act of 1991. These and other important acts have directed millions of dollars to adult education programs, usually by giving funds to state departments of education. In some ways, adult education looks very much like it did back in the days of Jane Addams and Henry Ford, with programs in schools, libraries, churches, and workplaces. But what is changing is that nearly everyone now agrees that the *need* for adult education is a critical one. America was once an *agricultural* society, then it became an *industrial* society, and now it’s becoming an *informational* society. With every new age has come a greater need for educating our adult citizens to the highest degree that their lives allow.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY:

- 1 What happened to the Freedmen’s Schools?
- 2 What were some of the important ideas of the Progressive Education Movement? How are these ideas still important today?
- 3 As a class, draw an educational timeline for the United States marking important moments of the 20th century. Visit the History of Education web site for more information and links at [<http://www.socsci.kun.nl/ped/whp/histeduc/index.html>]. Another helpful web site to look at is Education in the 20th Century: Selected Moments at [http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/index.html].