

Adult Education in the Americas: The Victory of Spontaneous Action

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The increased use of media, such as radio and TV, allows for very low cost programs that have proven to be effective and that are able to reach more students than conventional methods have been able to do in the past. The Internet and CD-Roms are also widely used for these types of learning. In addition, there are thousands of “do-it yourself” or “how to” manuals available both over the web and in print that are used by adults that want to practice self-learning techniques. Distance education offered through the use of satellites, TVs, videos and the Internet is mushrooming throughout the region as well. These developments are path-breaking advances in lifelong education and offer endless possibilities.

Where Is Lifelong Education Taking Place?

Due to the scarcity of research and data, most evidence in this article comes from the United States and Brazil, countries with which the author is more familiar. But one would expect the situation of other countries not to be much different. It may be interesting to notice that, by contrast to Europe, the United States and Latin America have two characteristics in common which are relevant to this article. They share systems of education that have flaws, are less integrated and less managed from the top (if not in theory, at least in practice, in the case of Latin America). They also have governments with more entropy and more ambiguities in the division of roles. In some respects, they have less powerful central governments than Europe does. Therefore, lifelong education compensates for these shortcomings.

1. When Education Takes Too Long, It Becomes Adult Education

The poor quality of most education systems in Latin America results in frequent repetitions. Yet, increasingly students and their parents perceive that education is the passport to good jobs and modern society and they refuse to leave school. They become older and eventually reach adulthood. In Brazil, for instance, more than half of the secondary school students are technically adults. Also more than half of the secondary school students attends evening courses; often, they already have day jobs.

In the Brazilian case, adults can bypass regular secondary schools and take a compact version of primary or secondary education designed for adults and leads to public examinations that grant diplomas that are legally equivalent to primary and secondary certificates. This possibility has led a large number of private institutions to offer courses preparing for these examinations.

A very interesting development along these lines is the Telecurso 2000, a TV program to prepare students to take the examination. This innovative program is broadcast throughout the country and the written materials are sold in newsstands. Around seven million people watch the program for entertainment since it is lively and amusing. But in addition, enterprises, education authorities and other organizations maintain classrooms with TV sets and instructors following the students. At present, close to half a million students are formally enrolled in these classrooms.

By the same token, higher education is essentially adult education. In the United States, the average age of students keeps increasing¹ and in Brazil, the mean age of students is close to 30 years, and 70 percent work. The pattern of finishing secondary education, finding a job and subsequently returning to evening

¹ Forty-two percent of the higher education students are between ages 24 and 64.

higher education has become the predominant path. Not surprisingly, most course offerings are in the evenings. A dramatic example is the Pacheco branch of the Argentinean Technological University. Being an industrial town, more than 95 percent of the students attend evening courses and work during the day.

The open universities, pioneered by the United Kingdom, have mushroomed around the world and Latin America is no exception, despite the strong objection of education lobbies in many countries. The United States has a wide range of initiatives. Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela have distance universities. Internet offers booming new avenues for distance education but the numbers are still modest.

The situation with post-graduate schools is even more skewed towards middle-age adults. Many students return to universities to take graduate degrees after several years of professional life. This is true in the United States, as well as in Latin America.

2. *Extension Courses: The Official Lifelong Education*

In the United States, the course catalogs for extension courses are several times thicker than those describing regular offerings. In some cases, these courses are considered a cash cow to cross-subsidize other levels of education. Many American community colleges enroll each year the equivalent of 20 percent of the population of the towns where they are located. Adult education is a booming business.

In Latin America, there is much going on. In fact, leading business schools have taken this route. IESA, in Venezuela has 300 post-graduate students, no undergraduates and 6,000 extension students enrolled in its short management courses. Business schools in Peru and Costa Rica have taken the same route.

3. *Training and Retraining for Jobs*

There is a progressive shift in training programs, from youth to mature adults and from pre-employment to in-service training. In the United States, pre-employment training has been erratic and often inadequate. To compensate for this casual and heterogeneous system, the United States has a vast array of training programs geared to adults and young adults. High schools and community colleges offer many evening courses opened to local residents and focusing on a broad range of subjects. Many of them are in the traditional trades, such as auto-mechanics, welding, electricity, woodwork and construction trades. But in addition, office technology has become a popular area, with courses in computing, accounting, opening business, secretarial and so on. Equivalent offers come from municipalities and other government agencies. Immigrants are frequent clients of these courses.

Most Latin American countries have structured systems of training, run outside the regular education system, and are funded from a levy on the payroll. Over three fourths of the funds, if not more, are allocated to activities that could easily be considered adult education, since the clients are adults and take the courses while employed. In Brazil, every year, around three million people take courses in one of these institutions. One of the new agencies—in charge of training for the trucking industry—has rented time on a satellite and beams eight hours a day of courses to the employees of transportation firms. Reception is done at classrooms in transportation companies and presently reach more than 300,000 employees.

In the recent past, many ministries of labor have created training programs geared to young unemployed adults. In Chile, funded by an IDB loan, the Chile Joven project pioneered a new model of contracting courses with private or public institutions, conditioning the contracts to the existence of jobs or internships at the end of the course. A similar program is in operation in Argentina and others are to follow. Brazil has a similar program sponsored by the Ministry of Labor, training more than 300,000 workers each year.

The budgets of the American armed forces for training has been estimated at thirty billion dollars and a large share of pilots, mechanics and electronic technicians in that country have received their training from the armed forces. In Brazil, most airplane mechanics received their training in the Air Force.

Countries like the United States have a thriving proprietary market for training. Hundreds of courses in any major city are offered in office technology, secretarial skills, computers and a multitude of short courses geared to the service sector. Exactly the same happens in Latin America, where in any downtown city the signs for courses are as abundant as the ones for pharmacies or bars. In addition to the areas mentioned above, English language training is a popular subject. These are the typical second-floor schools in the downtown areas, with signs outside, advertising their courses. As one could expect, the quality is varied, ranging from serious and decent, to fly-by-night operations, often closed down by the police. Be that as it may, they offer services that people are willing to purchase, year after year. It is unreasonable to expect that consumers—and they are adults—would take such courses if they were completely ineffective.

Major players in the proprietary training business are the correspondence schools. Some are local branches of American schools but the majority is local. They offer radio and TV repair, drafting, sewing, embroidery, electricity and more recently, computers. Like their second-floor counterparts, they have low status and deserve little respect from highbrow authors and public authorities—both in the United States and Latin America. Yet, they perform a social function, particularly for those who live far away from face-to-face programs. More than three million people have taken a course from the second largest Brazilian correspondence school. Research conducted by the author indicates that they are very cost-effective for the students who graduate.²

One would expect the Internet to become a major force in such training, stand-alone or in conjunction with printed materials or personal encounters. This is already happening in the United States and we should expect countries like Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Costa Rica to follow the same path.

4. *Employer's Training*

There is at least as much learning taking place at the work site as in regular schools. There is presently a strong tendency for firms to use information technology to deliver their training. From IBM's two satellites beaming training around the world to its staff, to videotape in less formidable enterprises, it seems that the new media are taking over industry. Videos and CD-ROMs are becoming more common as a means to deliver training inside enterprises. Available evidence is scant but trade fairs suggest a vigorous production of training materials using the new media.

Probably the most spectacular development along these lines is the so-called Corporate Universities. Motorola University is well known, as is "Hamburger University" created by McDonalds and the graduate school of public policy created by the Rand Corporation. But several other large organizations have similar institutions. The total is getting close to one thousand. Two years ago, the oil company of Venezuela created a corporate university (CIED) along the lines of Motorola. Initial reports suggest that it is a well-run operation, running nine campuses and attracting professionals from other companies in the same industry.

5. *Self Learning and "Edutainment"*

A lot of learning takes place along the life of citizens who received some education. We can have an idea of the effort if we consider that a very significant part of the titles published in the United States are of the "do-it-yourself" or "how-to-do" category. In this respect, it is necessary to consider the role of the

² Lucia Guarany and Claudio de Moura Castro, *Ensino por correspondência: Uma estratégia de desenvolvimento educacional no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, IPEA, 1979).

American public libraries that are unique institutions, even compared to rich European countries. Every little town and every corner of big towns have their own libraries with all the usual magazines, reference books, how-to-do books, classics, as well as helpful librarians. One could well imagine that everything else pales, compared to the self-learning effort in mature societies.

But there is a lot more that is not strictly self-learning. Television and computers have created a new category of activities sometimes called “edutainment” to connote the combination of education with entertainment. With the popularization of cable TV and satellites, the number of channels multiplies and allows for greater specialization and lower costs. Some channels specialized in this mixture of culture, education and entertainment. The Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel are typical examples of this new model. In general, these channels aim at a general audience that wants more intellectually sophisticated entertainment, such as archeology, history, geography, science and technology. Programs such as James Burke’s *Connections* offer an intriguing version of the history of science and technology. Documentaries about the petroleum industry or the theory of evolution are also in-between education and pure entertainment.

On a more pedestrian or practical vein, the cable channels have produced a large number of programs on cooking and on woodworking and household repairs. These have become genres on their own, with different characters and styles of presentation competing for the preference of the Saturday viewers.

The new satellite channels pave the way to dedicated education channels operated by commercial networks. This is a new chapter in edutainment TV. Venezuela, Brazil and other countries are just beginning to operate commercial TV channels entirely dedicated to education.

The other noteworthy trend is in computers and Internet. CD-ROMs and Internet are true learning tools and many people have understood it and use them intensely. Even in Latin America, the number of Internet connections grows at unimaginable speeds. The practical uses of Internet are not ignored by a large proportion of subscribers, even though chat rooms and e-mail remain the most widespread use.

More than We Thought; Not Where We Thought

All these developments are path-breaking advances in lifelong education. They have an incredible penetration in society and offer endless possibilities. By using direct interviews with adults, Paul Belanger found that in the United States about 40 percent of the adult population is attending some form of education or training program (the figure reaches 50 percent for Sweden). The same survey also found that there are more adult learners than there are children in school in several OECD countries (this does not take into account the intensity of the effort of youth compared to adults).³

Adult education for lifetime is taking place where it is not expected to and it is failing where it is supposed to happen. None of the programs discussed above are considered official “adult education.” And yet these are the people who have made lifelong education stronger and more meshed in our life than anybody could have imagined, even in their most utopian dreams. This effort is not coordinated and defies coordination. There is no planning, no blueprint, and no governance. It is a form of anarchy, perhaps an “organized anarchy,” as Martin Trow suggested. The systems adjust and readjust by the force of markets, quasi-markets and random events. There is little if any quality control.

The traditional adult literacy has failed, to a large extent. What is blooming is a lifelong education for the affluent, for the modest and for the almost poor. Charity and equity failed. The markets won and we are far better off than we would have been without it. But the poor remain illiterate and unable to find the lifelong education promised by the different international initiatives. The use of media such as radio and

³ Paul Bélanger and Albert Tuijnman, *New Patterns of Adult Learning: a Six Country Comparative Study* (Amsterdam: Elsevier/Pergamon, 1997).

television allows for very low cost programs with proven effectiveness and reaching numbers that are many times larger than the conventional methods. Helping the barely literate poor with some of these programs seems more promising than the efforts at the traditional versions of basic adult literary.