

Unleashed

Adult Education Opportunities

— Richard E. Peterson

COMPARED to most countries, provision of adult education in the United States is decentralized in the extreme. There is no comprehensive federal adult education policy, nor is there in any of the states, with the possible exception of New York. Government policy instead, has called for programmes for categories of adults: unemployed young people, the functionally illiterate, immigrants, and farm families, for example. Beyond these categorical programmes, which account for perhaps a third of the adult education provided there is a remarkable range of adult learning opportunities, the result for the most part of entrepreneurial ingenuity on the part of individual adult educators based locally in diverse school and non-school settings.

Participation in adult learning is both extensive and growing. Approximately one in four American adults has been involved in some form of organized learning in the past year about two-thirds through a school or college, and the rest in the non-school sector (worksites, professional associations, various community organizations, for example).

While adult education provision and participation are extensive in the US, numerous problems, and service needs have been widely recognized. The following eight are among the most significant.

JOB TRAINING

Government in the United States has never given major attention to job training. This, a very modest programme, the federal Job Training Partnership Act, went into effect in 1983. It is oriented towards the young and economically disadvantaged unemployed. Continued funding of local programmes based on numbers of unemployed placed in jobs, JTPA tend to select for training the best prospects for even employment.

Job training for immediate employment can and should be carried out in an ad hoc way with local businesses cooperating with local educational and community organizations. The first challenge would be the mutual respect and understanding between local employers and training providers needed

to plan and implement effective programmes.

Professional competency: There is a social need for professionals—doctors, engineers, teachers to be continuously competent. In most states there are laws calling for mandatory continuing education (MCE) for many professions or quasi-professions. Most of this instruction is provided by universities or professional associations.

In the present MCE context, it is important that continuing professional education (CPE) be effective. It is also important that individual professionals study topics they need to improve or maintain their professional skill.

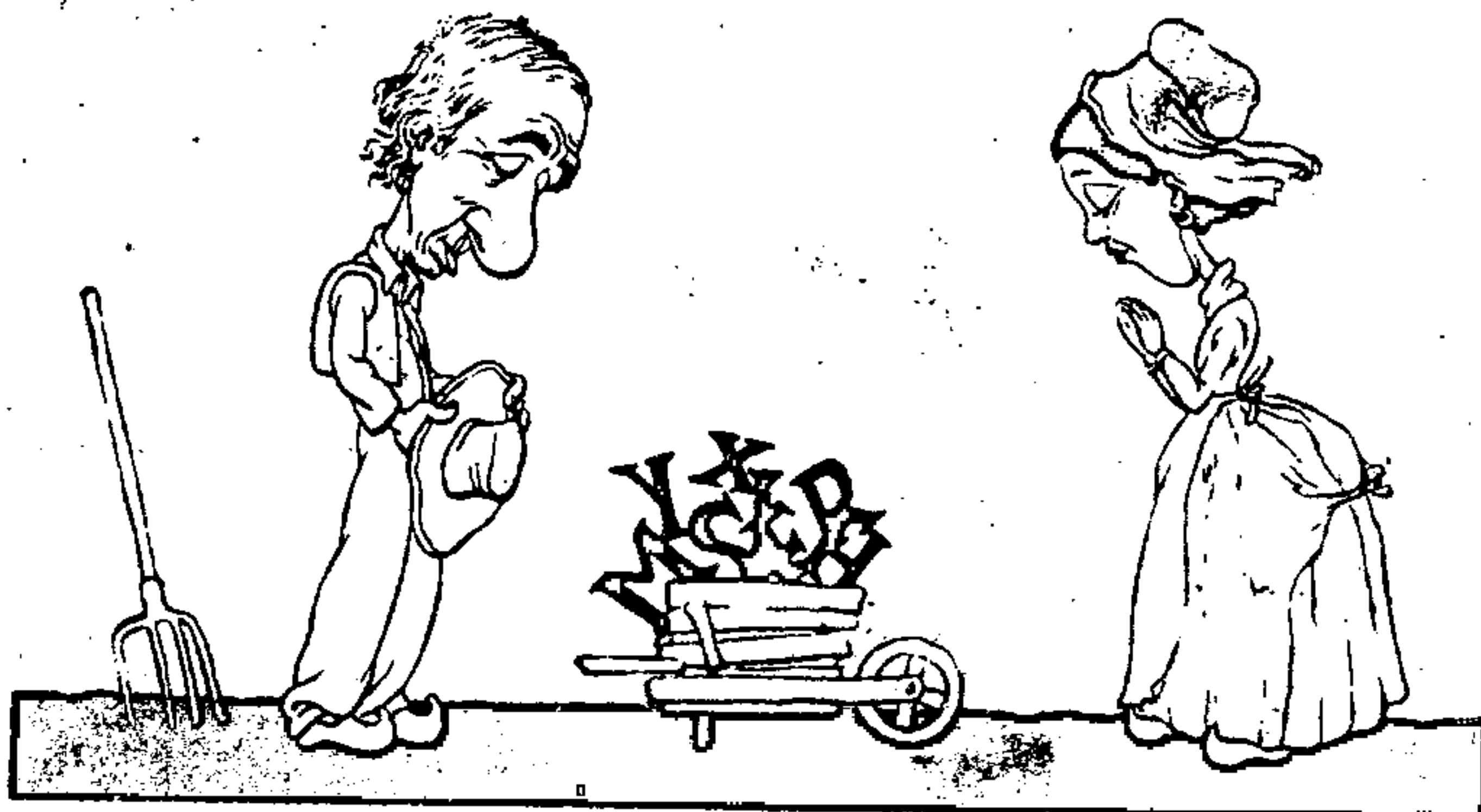
large numbers of adults in the US perhaps 10 per cent can barely read or write English. Most native adult illiterates are acutely embarrassed by their problem, they disguise it and are hard to recruit into literacy programmes. Not so with the foreign-born, most are eager to learn English.

Adult literacy efforts so far in the US, both government and voluntary, have been small and piecemeal. Just in the past year in Washington of a federal literacy initiative, and a national Coalition for Literacy has been formed with leadership from the private sector (specifically,

quite different one. Many quickly find their way to communities of their own people, others settle in towns that are entirely foreign to them.

To facilitate this entry into a new culture, a broad range of human services is needed, most of which are essentially educational in nature. Refugees and other immigrants must not only learn the language of the new culture they must learn how to function in the culture.

The federal Adult Basic Education (ABE) programme, which operates through local government adult schools, with classes mainly in the evening, is the principal educational resource



Too often CPE takes place on Caribbean cruise ships, on subjects that may or may not be vital to the individual's professional competence.

The general means by which professionals in the US will be required to stay competent are likely to change in the near future. The shift will be away from MCE in the sense of some number of courses completed in a specified period of time to MCC, or mandatory continued competence that will involve periodic recertification on the basis of assessed competence. The emphasis will be on diagnosis of an individual's professional strength and weaknesses and then individually planned and tailored study.

Reducing adult illiteracy: Very

from a retail bookseller). In California the relatively well-funded California Literacy Campaign which operates through the state library system is in its second year.

These efforts notwithstanding the organizational and financial support that has come forth so far is nowhere near commensurate with the national need. What is needed are multi-institutional, multi-media campaigns, perhaps along the lines of the British adult literacy campaign of 1975-1978, which was spearheaded by the BBC.

Hundreds of people from foreign countries arrive in the US every day, both legally and illegally. They have moved from their own culture to an entirely new and

for immigrants. ABE programmes, however, seldom have the financial resources necessary to meet the full range of educational needs of non-English speakers. Specialists working with these populations moreover need to determine the most effective methods for teaching English to non-English speakers. Are so-called ESL (English as a second language) techniques more effective than bilingual approaches? Evaluative research and dissemination of models of effective instruction are needed.

INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

Most people, much of the time learn on their own, directing their own learning so to speak, without the help of schools in the customary sense. What is (See Page 6)

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needed are systematic planned arrangements in the community to encourage and facilitate this self-directed learning. Numerous institutions and organizations in the community should be involved, including museums and churches, but most especially the public libraries.

Arguably the public libraries in America all 8,000 of them should be the key facilitator of independent learning which most of course, have always attempted to be. State and local government should not allow the libraries to deteriorate, as they have in periods of fiscal retrenchment. Quite the opposite: the public libraries need to be funded so that they can expand their services to respond to the vocational and intellectual interests of independent learners.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

In contrast to the experience of many nations, America has never had major distance education institutions or programmes that would operate through some mix of television radio or correspondence. Distance education models as represented by the Open University in the United Kingdom have never found favour in either private or government circles in the US. Several erstwhile programmes have been attempted by university-affiliated groups in the past decade, one failed, two others with only meager resources and organizational backing, are not currently meeting with notable success. America is probably too diverse culturally and geographically for a single national "open uni-

versity". American institutions furthermore have tended to oppose new distance education programmes, whether national in scope or limited to a single state or region, both out of suspicion of distance education methods and of fear of loss of student enrollments.

Unquestionably there are populations in the US who are unable to conveniently attend conventional classes and who could benefit from distance education: for example people in sparsely populated areas individuals with physical disabilities military personnel at isolated outposts and the homebound elderly. State education bodies need to assess the interest in and feasibility of various distance education strategies with population groups such as those just cited.

Many adult educators in the US have been saying for over a decade that what is needed, more than anything else, to facilitate adult learning is simply access to information about learning opportunities in a given local area. In a typical city there are numerous organizations offering educational programmes including ostensibly similar ones, but in slightly different formats (time place, cost etc). The idea is that a potential learner needs information about available programmes and a service by which his or her learning needs can be matched to the learning opportunity that best fits that set of needs.

In recent years services of this sort in the US have been referred to as educational "brokering", and numerous brokering agencies have been established

in the past decade, usually with the help of grants from the federal government. Most, however, have closed down for lack of stable funding.

Local Planning and Coordination: In some American localities there is an almost total lack of adult education facilities. In others there are many, often in competition and complementing each other.

American communities have seldom engaged in a systematic study and planning to meet the full range of educational interests. It may be argued that some sort of cooperative mechanism, such as a council is needed in which all those providing adult learning in a locality would be represented. Its tasks would include the comprehensive analysis of adult education needs, planning to meet these needs negotiating with agencies that would respond to the needs and monitoring programmes to ensure their quality and accessibility among other activities. The money to pay for the work of most such councils would have to come from the state government.

Although there are very large inequalities in access to adult education resources in the United States visionaries can think plan and work to create something akin to a society in which learning pervades virtually all aspects of people's lives. The goal is both to help individuals achieve minimally satisfying lives in a complex culture and to move an already developed society towards the authentic learning society of our imagination.

(UNESCO FEATURES)