

## **APRENDIZAJE HUMANO Y CÍRCULOS DE ESTUDIO**

Reflexiones sobre una organización fascinante  
para el desarrollo personal y social

### **HUMAN LEARNING AND STUDY CIRCLES**

Reflections on a Fascinating Enterprise for Personal and Social Development

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#### **Resumen**

Una progresión colectiva requiere comunidades sociales funcionales con integrantes que promuevan las interacciones respetuosas entre ellos. Las comunidades, como las redes sociales, se caracterizan por tener una comunicación escasa o densa, una intimidad débil o fuerte, y altas o bajas jerarquías entre sus miembros. La comunicación simétrica se basa en valores universales, tales como tolerancia, reciprocidad y confianza. Estos valores asignan importancia (o valor) a las relaciones. Constituyen virtudes cívicas esenciales para una vida social viable y son usados constantemente como un medio y como un fin en la educación. Después de todo, la educación se considera enfáticamente como la solución a todo tipo de problemas. Sin embargo, lo que está en juego es que las personas tienen percepciones opuestas de lo que es un problema, para quién es un problema y cuáles deberían ser las soluciones potenciales. ¿Cómo podría un programa educacional estar diseñado de tal manera que reconozca la habilidad de sus participantes de pensar por sí mismos y valorar sus experiencias de vida, empoderándolos, al mismo tiempo, para actuar de manera informada y democrática para mejorar sus oportunidades de vida y la sociedad en la que viven?

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El objetivo de este artículo es presentar un razonamiento pedagógico sobre el aprendizaje de adultos, basado en la tradición sueca de la educación pública de adultos (*“folkbildning”*). Una de las características de la educación pública sueca es el “study circle”, un método de aprendizaje auto dirigido y basado en la participación. Los círculos de estudio, así como otras actividades educativas, son organizadas por asociaciones de estudio autónomas, financiadas por el Estado y son abiertas para todos los adultos. Otro atributo de la educación popular sueca, es el fuerte lazo que existe entre las asociaciones de estudio y las organizaciones de la sociedad civil, en lo que respecta a la educación organizativa y de los miembros. Se dilucidarán y reflexionarán los fundamentos pedagógicos de la participación en los círculos de estudio como medio de aprendizaje colectivo emancipador y de creación de capital social. Además, se intentará investigar la desafiante cuestión de si la experiencia del *“folkbildning”* sueco puede ser un modelo para el aprendizaje no formal de adultos y la transformación de la comunidad en otros países.

**Palabras clave:**

Aprendizaje de adultos, educación comunitaria, capital social, círculos de estudio.

**Abstract**

Collective progression requires well-functioning social communities with members promoting respectful interaction with each other. Communities such as social networks are characterized by sparse or dense communication, weak or strong intimacy, high or low hierarchy among its members. Symmetric communication rests on a foundation of universal values, such as tolerance, reciprocity, and trust. These values assign importance (or value) to relationships. They constitute essential civic virtues for a viable social life, and are often used both as means and as ends in education. After all, education is emphatically considered to be a solution to all sorts of problems. However, the issue at stake is that people have conflicting perceptions of what a problem is, for whom it is a problem, and what the possible solutions should be. How could an educational programme be designed so that it recognizes the participants’ ability to think for themselves and values their life experiences, as well as empowering them to act in an informed and democratic way in order to improve their life chances and the society

they live in? The purpose of this paper is to put forward pedagogical reasoning about adult learning, informed by the Swedish tradition of Public Adult Education (*“folkbildning”*). One of the characteristics of Swedish Popular Education is the “study circle”, a learning method for self-directed and participation-based learning. Study circles, as well as other educative activities, are organised by autonomous state-funded Study Associations and are open to all adults. Another attribute of Swedish popular education is the strong bonds between the Study Associations and civil society organisations concerning organisational and membership education. The pedagogical underpinnings of study circle participation as a means for emancipatory collective learning and creation of social capital will be elucidated and reflected upon. Additionally, an attempt will be made to investigate the challenging question of whether the experience of Swedish *folkbildning* can be a model for non-formal adult learning and community transformation in other countries.

**Keywords:**

Adult learning, popular adult education/folkbildning, social capital, study circles.

**As an introduction – “It’s the Learning, Stupid”!**

This article evolved from the content of my keynote address on adults and adult learning linked to the theme of the International Conference “Science of Human Learning”<sup>1</sup>. One convenient way to live up to it is to start by asking two questions: *what is an adult*, and *what do we mean by learning*?

I intend to approach these questions by presenting some aspects of the Swedish Popular Adult Education tradition from a lifelong perspective. But before that, I will try to introduce some tentative

<sup>1</sup> The International Conference on Science of Human Learning: Improving Learning Efficiency and Effectiveness took place on 4th-6th February, 2016 and was organized by the Education Technology Management Academy (ETMA), New Delhi, India, in collaboration with the Institute of International and Comparative Education, Department of Education, Stockholm University.

thoughts on the concept of adult, with the emphasis on the cognitive state of adults, in relation to the phenomenon of learning.

The notion of Learning is at the centre of the discussions at all levels about the character of our societies today and for a sustainable future of humanity. Learning is first and foremost in the core of the teaching profession. Our view of learning ultimately affects the way we organize educational activities, who may take part in it, and what is the most effective way to learn.

Learning is not a metaphysical act that takes place in a social vacuum. Learning always deals with some kind of knowledge for a specific purpose in a particular context. It might be about the vibrancy of a community, the personal quality of life, economic viability and business competitiveness<sup>2</sup>; or about equipping citizens with new skills and competencies, as well as a new form of socialization, to allow them to function effectively at work, as citizens and in their leisure time (Ananiadou & Claro 2009); or to be able to face the challenges and demands of phenomena such as (economic) globalization, the information society, multiculturalism and lifelong learning (European Parliament, 2006), by learning to know, to be, to do, to live together (Delors, 1996) for a successful life and a well-functioning society (Rychen & Salganik, eds., 2003).

### **“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”**

Man is shaped through learning in certain cultural and social environments; human learning is a function of human becoming. From a certain perspective, this means that the individual becomes an adult by a development process. Learning is related to development as the two sides of the same coin. Learning and development are linked to change and ultimately associated with human norms and values.

There are certain legal definitions of when you are or become an adult. For instance, you are an adult at the age of 18 and thereafter.

<sup>2</sup> Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, *Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – A Report and Mile Guide for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*, available 2020-02-18 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED480035>

In Sweden, *nota bene*, you are not adult enough at that age when it comes to dealing with alcohol. You are not allowed to buy spirits before you are 20 but you can treat yourself in a pub or restaurant to one or more alcoholic drinks. Moreover, the law prohibits promotion of liquor directed specifically at persons under the age of 25 years.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps adulthood has to do with responsibility, maturity, and with special social expectations. But what does it mean, “to take responsibility”? For one’s own life, choices and actions? If you don’t take responsibility until you’re in your fifties, are you then not considered an adult? And what would we call a 15-year-old girl or boy who behaves as an adult is expected to?

In past times we took for granted that it was a waste of time to get adults to change their habits or acquire new skills. Besides, it was not desirable at all that people (the masses of people, not the elite) thrived by learning and re-learning.

Our conceptions of what an adult is vary from time to time, from society to society and from culture to culture. Our ideas about ourselves as human beings are constantly changing. Therefore, it is more essential to reflect on the question: what a human being is, before examining human existence in terms of different stages or phases of development, as psychologists usually do. Faced with such a task, I feel appealed by Bateson’s discreet admonition:

“The would-be behavioural scientist who knows nothing of the basic structure of science and nothing of the 3000 years of careful philosophic and humanistic thought about man who cannot define either entropy or a sacrament- had better hold his peace rather than add to the existing jungle of half-baked hypotheses.” (Bateson, 2000, p. xxviii)

Keeping in mind Bateson’s understatement as a guiding wisdom, we continue our examination of the notion of “development” (conceived as qualitative change of some kind) that appears to be fundamental to the view of man’s learning, whether it be that of psychologists, philosophers, educators, economists or God himself

<sup>3</sup> Law (2019:345), [https://www.lagboken.se/Lagboken/start/halso--och-sjukvardsratt-och-hal-soskydd/alkohollag-20101622/d\\_3637685-sfs-2019\\_345-lag-om-andring-i-alkohollagen-2010\\_1622](https://www.lagboken.se/Lagboken/start/halso--och-sjukvardsratt-och-hal-soskydd/alkohollag-20101622/d_3637685-sfs-2019_345-lag-om-andring-i-alkohollagen-2010_1622)

uttering on the matter. Aristotle's view of development was related to the notion of *final cause* - "the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done" (Falcon, 2015). The Final Cause of a living organism presupposes a maturity process that starts at birth and ends with the telos of the process - the process of being human!

### **Learning, knowledge and *bildung***

Learning, however, is associated with knowledge. We have learned something when we have knowledge of something that makes us able to think in a new way, to act more effectively, and when we better understand how things relate to each other. From a phenomenographic perspective, Ference Marton and Shirley Booth, in their book *Learning and awareness*, treat learning as coming to experience the world in a variation of ways; people experience situations and phenomena in their worlds in particular ways. The starting point for their discourse on learning is:

"One thing that people have in common is that they are all different. This disturbing sentence - whether considered conceptually or grammatically - boils down to this: people may be created equal, but they do things differently. There are other ways of putting it - for any one of the things people do, some do it better, others do it worse. To the extent they have learned to do that one thing, they must have learned *to do it differently - some better, some worse*. Rather, they have *learned differently - some better, some worse - to do it*. (...) If one way of doing something can be judged to be better than another way, then some people must have been better at learning to do it - or have learned to do it better - than others." (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 1).

In their view, learning proceeds from an undifferentiated and less coherent understanding of the whole to an increased differentiation and comprehension of the whole and its parts. Although they do not reject the inductive way of learning, as a progression from acquiring basic facts (simple forms of knowledge) to more complex forms of knowing, they argue that learning rather proceeds from

wholes to parts and from wholes to wholes: “(I)n order to learn about something you have to have some idea of what it is you are learning about.”

What knowledge is in general, what we can have knowledge about and what knowing ultimately rests on, are essential philosophical (epistemological and ontological) questions. In essence, there are three different theoretical perceptions of the nature of knowledge. Theories of knowledge with a realistic perception claim that *reality* is the source of knowledge. Realism asserts that the existence and qualities of outer objects are independent of whether they are perceived by someone or independent of anything anyone happens to say or think about that matter (Miller, 2014). Theories of knowledge based on an idealist ontology stress the point that what pretends to be our knowledge of things has its origin in the human subject (subjectivity) and an object’s existence or nature is dependent on our consciousness (Guyer & Horstmann, 2015). The third epistemological branch is rooted in a more relativistic perspective or ontology. According to this view, knowledge is a product “of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them” (Baghramian & Carter, 2016). Relativism recognises that claims about objects and their properties as well as truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning and the like are subjective and relative to local cultural norms, individual standards, personal views. It could also be described as a “reality” that gets its existence and representations through linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, or similar parameters.

Nonetheless, as the human perspective is the product of socialization and learning that occurs in meetings and communication with others, knowledge is fundamentally relational, regardless of what its (epistemological) foundation is. Therefore, the knowledge and the truth of this idea cannot be found in the “object” itself, nor in the “subject” if considering that

“(…) the individual phenotype is formed by the interaction of multiple genetic factors, not by any one of them in isolation; and all of them are expressed in a complex dance with the surrounding, air and earth and other organisms.” (Bateson, 2000, p. vii).

An article of this kind is not a suitable platform for an archaeological excavation of human development. Therefore, let it suffice to declare that humans are shaped through learning in certain cultural and social environments. Learning is ultimately the offspring of the “ecology of mind”; an ecology of ideas, information and patterns “embodied in things - material forms” constituting a mental system with the capacity to process and respond to information, ideas and patterns (Op.cit., p.xf. and xxiii).

### **Man is doomed to learn... always!**

Learning is related to change and to a striving toward maturity. Maturity as an effect of learning and development is linked to changes and associated with norms and values. Until today and as long as we know, the development outline for men/women followed a fairly stable pattern: children were raised to be adults, adults were expected to create and raise the next generation, make their livelihood, create economic value, contribute to the welfare of society and live a good life.

Accordingly, and to achieve all this, mankind invented particular technologies, of which education, as a systematic formalized training, is one of the most conventional, utilized to prepare the new members of society to perform what is expected of them when they become adults, and reach maturity:

“MAN is the only being who needs education. For by education we must understand nurture (the tending and feeding of the child), discipline (*Zucht*), and teaching, together with culture<sup>\*4</sup>. According to this, man is in succession infant (requiring nursing), child (requiring discipline), and scholar (requiring teaching).” (Kant, 1803/2003, Introduction).

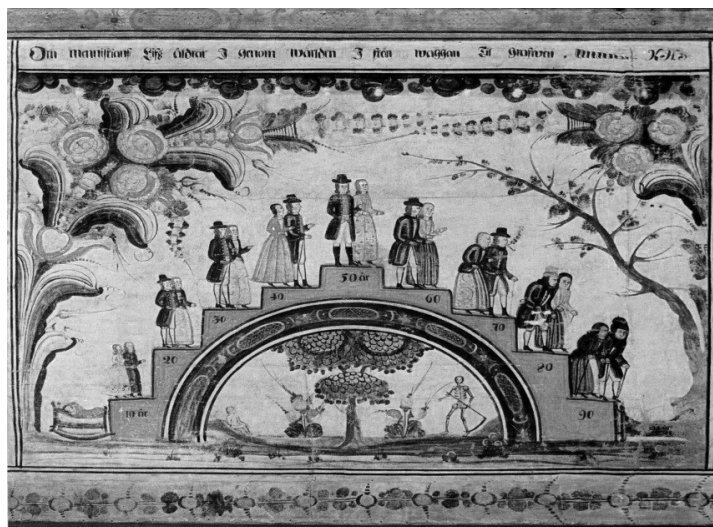
On the whole, we still wander along the same path, and we do not. Learning is no longer linked to a particular age as it was before and

<sup>4</sup>\*Culture (*Bildung*) is used here, as notified by the translator Annette Churton, in the sense of moral training.



nothing suggests today that education is only reserved for children.<sup>5</sup> In the past, the human life cycle used to be depicted in the shape of stairs that until a certain age go up and then descend:

**Figure 1.** “The ages of man through the world from cradle to grave”.



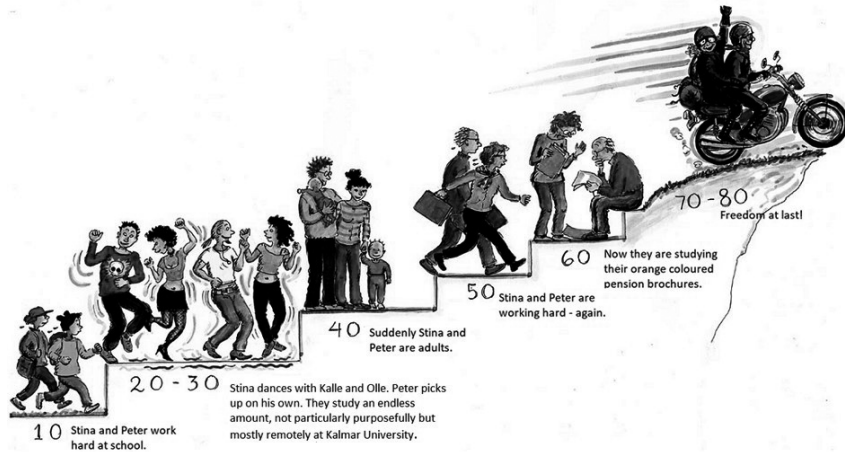
Note: A painting with kurbits ornamentation, by Winter Carl Hansson from 1799.

At that time people also believed in the old Jewish saying/proverb, which linked aging and wisdom: “*those whom the gods love die old*”!

But now, the classical age ladder is challenged by a mighty competitor as we have enough evidence that life just goes upward. Comparable to the view of the old Greeks, it seems that we today embrace the ideal of eternal youth(ful)ness, staying young, strong and sexy: “*those whom the gods love die young*”!<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf “Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.” Mark Twain

<sup>6</sup> Those who the gods want to punish make them to teachers, to paraphrase the classical quotation “Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad”. See also Pearse, R. (2015): Is “those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad” a classical quotation? Available 2020-02-18 at <https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2015/10/31/is-those-whom-the-gods-wish-to-destroy-they-first-make-mad-a-classical-quotation/>

**Figure 2.** Drawing by Cecilia Torudd

Note: The text in the picture is translated from Swedish.<sup>7</sup>

Doubtless, the above drawing (Figure 2), captures a significant shift in the prevailing view of what an individual is and what she/he is able to do in the course of life. The individual is considered nowadays not to be entirely conditioned by nature but also as a self-directed development project, constantly active and learning. This view is not new and at least in the West originates from the renaissance tradition of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It carries the belief that humans can be shaped to anything. According to this belief, humans are free and capable either of sinking to the level of animals or plants, or to rising to the level of angels. This is a view which Pico della Mirandola expressed boldly in his work *De hominis dignitate* in 1488, where he lets the (Jewish-Christian) God tell the first human:

“We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your

<sup>7</sup> The picture is published 2005-03-08 in the newspaper article “Full fart - från 0 till 100”, *Aftonbladet*, available 2020-02-18 at <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/OnonOl/full-fart-fran-0-till-100>

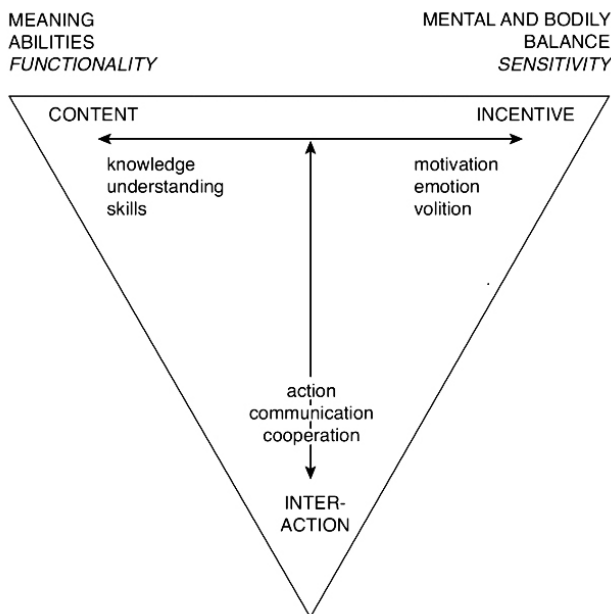
own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.” (Pico della Mirantola, G. (1488/1994, p. 497).

Throughout the ages, man’s innate potentiality has been governed by human culture. Education is definitely one of the most organized endeavours to control the thinking and behavior of society members. With a clear reference to Plato, Pico della Mirantola claims that using the «science of morality» and dialectics, people will be able to focus their gaze on “the good, the truth and the beautiful” (op.cit; cf Boylan, 2008). There are many notions about what kind of education promotes good learning experiences. Yet, the absence of coercion and free search for knowledge has the character of an axiomatic rule for all those who maintain that the aim of education is to make people flourish and become empowered and less fearful. This is also the meaning of the concept of bildning/Bildung which includes not only education and training processes, targeted for example at a degree, but in particular the idea of the individual’s continuous change and growth (formation and transformation), in interaction with others (cf. Dewey, 1916/1966). Knowledge is seen as a value in itself and not as a means for something else.

Evidently, education is not a panacea for all the problems that humans and their societies are facing. However, education is deemed as the *sine qua non* for a better and more successful life both for individuals and for society.

I also put forward the assumption that all education is educative and flows into learning of some kind, which in turn implies development, either in a positive or a negative sense. Learning does not arise out of nothing; it is contextual and subject to sociocultural factors and prevailing power relations. Moreover, learning is understood as a process of two different types: an external interaction process, through which learners find themselves in constant interaction (communication) with their social, cultural and material environment, and an internal interaction process, fundamentally psychological, through which the learner receives and elaborates new impulses connecting them to his or her prior learning. These assumptions are encompassed in Illeris' theory of learning which also includes a cognitive dimension of knowledge and skills, an emotional dimension of feelings and motivation, and a social dimension of communication and cooperation. All three dimensions, the theory stipulates, are embedded in a societally situated context (Illeris, 2009).

**Figure 3.** The processes and dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2009)



## Learning and *folkbildning*

When we get to grips with learning something new, we are drawn into a formation process that in one way or another will shape us. We are rarely the same as before we started the learning process. Learning is usually associated with some kind of institutionalized activity in “schoolish” settings. So an underlying assumption related to it is that learning is delivered by people, who know, in specific pre-packed forms to other people, who don’t know. Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, analysed the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside school, and found that this relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient listening Objects (the students). In the process of being narrated, the contents tend to become lifeless and petrified which, according to Freire, is a palpable symptom of the “narration sickness” of the education. Freire continues his reasoning with the famous banking metaphor:

“The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration -- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity. (...)

Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human.

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire, 1993, p. 71f).

Institutionalised education in its banking form had undoubtedly a positive side. It made it possible to extend teaching beyond the chosen few. However, a disadvantage of mass pre-packed education is that it emphasizes teaching rather than learning, and subsequently disempowers the would-be learner. When learning is anchored in the context of the learner's life it becomes more efficient, whereas institutionalised learning is de-contextualised and as such less meaningful and the learners are subjugated.

Unlike the traditional formal school education, which in many respects is designed to operate as a "bank", another form of education in Scandinavia, and Sweden in particular, is associated with a different view of the individual, knowledge and learning, namely *folkbildning* (Popular Adult Education).

The Swedish tradition of *folkbildning* organized in study circles is for many, an identity component of the country's social and cultural model. Olof Palme's metaphor by which he tagged the country as a «democracy of study circles», is quite indicative:

«Sweden is basically a **democracy of study circles**. Through participation in study circles, entire generations have practised critical analysis in order to conclude reasonable decisions, co-operating with each other without leaving aside their ideals in this process. It is often in study circles that proposals for change in society were originally developed.» (Olof Palme)<sup>8</sup>

Historically, *folkbildning* is linked with collective associations (social movements and civil society organisations). Nowadays it is equated with activities arranged by the state-funded *Study Associations* and *Folk High Schools*. All are given a public mandate, that is, they are expected to meet certain requirements, for instance helping to strengthen democracy, being free and voluntary and

<sup>8</sup> Quotation of former Prime Minister Olof Palme's speech at the Congress of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, 1969.

non-profit-making. The State's support of adult education is justified by the aim to enable people to influence their own lives and participate in the community development. Ultimately the aim is to get rid of educational disparities, by raising the level of education in society and giving priority to socially and culturally disadvantaged groups, such as immigrants and the disabled (Prop. 2005/06:192).

Folkbildning in Sweden is closely linked with efforts to “enlighten” the broad masses of the impoverished. Common to all popular adult education activities was initially the emancipation of common people from the Church's grip on doctrine and prohibition by teaching them to become fully literate, as well as to think and behave in line with the morality and rationality of modern times. Folkbildning, as we know it today, arose in the wake of the industrial breakthrough and the emergence of great social movements during the second half of the 1800s. It is the outcome of a long cultural evolution process, characterized by constant power struggles between different social groups. In this respect, it is justifiable to talk about the valued heritage of Swedish Popular Education, from at least the Reformation to the advent of bourgeois democracy and the introduction of universal suffrage for all adult citizens. (Gougoulakis, 2001; Gougoulakis & Christie, 2012).

Two major currents of ideas are alleged to lie behind the emergence of the phenomenon of *folkbildning*: The Enlightenment and New Humanism. The Enlightenment turned against authorities, such as the Nobility and the Church, and against tradition's paralyzing influence on people's thinking. Reason and experience were the principal canon for the search of knowledge regarding humans, nature and society. Knowledge was a prerequisite for creating conditions for individual happiness and prosperity for societies. Within the political realm, Enlightenment advocated recognition of nature-given human rights and a societal development based on science, which would ensure members of society the greatest possible benefit.

Enlightenment's basic ideas have had a lasting influence on subsequent thought systems such as positivism and historical materialism. The historical and philosophical foundation of a new humanist's

education (Bildung) was laid by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Bildung, in Humboldt's view, represents both the harmonious development of the human individual's abilities and an actualization of humanity.

Within the humanist tradition, competing ideals and goals for Bildung have co-existed. The educational ideals of enlightenment philosophy placed the development of citizenship in the centre, while the new humanism emphasized the importance of fostering individuality and belief in the free development of the individual. Both orientations share the same credence in science and technology as the basis for social development. Thus, humanism either strove to revive the ancient ideals, through the study of the classical texts and languages, or it had as a starting point human emancipation. Different orientations of humanism embrace a common goal: the human is taken as the point of departure. Progress is the aim and Bildung its vehicle! Enlightenment, and in particular Comte's positive education program<sup>9</sup>, has in many ways influenced the epistemology of Swedish popular education.

### ***Folkbildning* today and its importance**

Every year, millions of Swedes meet in various forums to share knowledge, exchange views and discuss opinions. The forum could be a course or a study circle, and the subject could be painting or Italian, botany or how to run an organization. But the result is always

<sup>9</sup> Since the late 1960s the term positivism has symbolized one particular research approach. It was subjected to sharp criticism in academia and in some circles was perceived as a synonym for a rigid and outdated research paradigm. But Comte's positivism was quite different from what it is accused of today. The search for nature's and society's laws was Comte's scientific program and his worldview was based on scientific evidence. The discovery of laws and regularities in nature and society constituted the basis for an almost unbridled optimism, a belief, which it was possible to explain in order to intervene. Positivist doctrine distanced itself from all kinds of metaphysics and theological dogmas. Virtue and morality, reason and harmony, purity and order, altruism, and "sociality" were qualities that positivism espoused. A sentence borrowed from Andersson (1980) can summarize the positivist philosophy and educational ideal: "*order without restoration and progress without upheaval.*"



the same. When people whose paths would not normally cross meet in this way, new ideas and new insights inevitably come to light. A kind of cross-fertilization occurs, and this contributes not only to the development of those present, but also to the development of society as a whole. This mix is a crucial element of a successful democracy. Together, study associations and folk high schools constitute a national structure for learning that has played a major role in taking Sweden to the top of the league of participation in adult education –and education in general– (see also Folkbildningsrådet, 2014, p.45).

The history of the Swedish popular education movement is the narrative of a poor agrarian country's remarkable transformation into a modern, high-tech welfare state with well-functioning institutions and a transparent democratic system. Sweden's social infrastructure of opportunities is relatively inclusive and cares for all its citizens free development. It constitutes the society's web of intelligence. It rests on solidaritarian tax and redistribution policies that take into account people's differences based on the principle of all humans' equal value. *Folkbildning* in Sweden developed in the wake of industrialism and was practised in a very specific context marked by its history, cultural traditions, fixed power relations and not least geographical and environmental conditions. Meeting, learning and socializing in study circles proved to reflect a genuine Swedish pattern of social communication; it was neither too intimate nor too formal: it was "*lagom*", just about right.

Popular Adult Education is subsidized by the State, yet maintains its autonomy. This means that the State sets certain goals under the state subsidy, but the institutions themselves decide how these objectives will be achieved and how each grant should be distributed.

The State exercises control over the Popular Adult Education institutions, both directly, through grant regulations by the government, and indirectly, through periodic evaluations. Control is exercised also by the actors' obligation to present annual activity reports, including a report on quality assurance of the educational activities. State's subsidies towards Popular Adult Education aim, according to the legal framework, at:

- Supporting activities which contribute to the strengthening and development of democracy;
- The creation of conditions which should allow citizens to influence their lives and facilitate their participation in social development;
- Reducing the educational divide in society and increasing the training and culture level of citizens;
- Broadening and strengthening the motivation for taking part in cultural events in society.

The ensurance of the autonomy of the subsidized institutions of Popular Adult Education is based on a contract of mutual trust, where the State sets up general requirements with concerning quality and the societal usefulness of the educational activity. Trust is also based on two-way sharing of information and ongoing dialogue.

### **Education for trust and social capital**

Education has a special place in many cultures and especially in our time. The history of civilization is in some ways a story about the power over beliefs and social arrangements for education. At all times, individuals, groups and communities have regarded education as a powerful means of protecting their interests and pursuing different goals. Society's powerless people have long been excluded from education with different arguments from the "mighty". By and large they were considered uneducable but, in reality, those in power realized the power of knowledge for the awakening of the oppressed and the threat to their privileges (Gougoulakis & Bogataj, 2007; Gougoulakis, 2016).

In the current education debate, education is portrayed as the solution to all sorts of problems. By means of education, disadvantaged groups gain access to society, immigrants become integrated, the unemployed strengthen their position in the labour market, society will cope with necessary structural changes and lessen all the risks that we are facing. Improved knowledge seems to remedy deficiencies at all levels. Obviously, education and knowledge help

individuals and communities to get better. But there is no automatic link between high levels of formal education and social improvements due to the fact that education and knowledge are context-bound phenomena, dependent on certain material and cultural conditions. Ultimately, the societal value of education and knowledge is determined by its pedagogical philosophy and the educative processes this allows. In the course of time, different educational ideas have been formulated and practised.

Despite the existence of various pedagogical ideals, the strength of the Swedish popular adult education has been its diversity in employing a variety of learning forms. Not least in study circles, participants of all kinds are engaged in learning based on their needs and resources. Study circle activities are distinguished as a form of studying for availability, accessibility, flexibility, acceptability, adaptability and participant-centered learning (cf CESCO, 1999).

Studies on study circles conducted within the realm of a large state evaluation of *folkbildning* (SOU 1997:159, SUFO 96) exhibit among others:

1. Those joining a study circle have different motives for participating. Common to most people is the desire to learn something new. Studying in study circles is a way to maintain previous knowledge, to keep abreast of what is happening in the world and to keep up with technological developments.
2. Study circles help participants acquire new skills to cope with the demands of everyday life. Circles are also used by civil society associations to develop their activities and to raise the competencies of their members. Not least, the training of officials of these associations is carried out in the form of study circles organized in cooperation with one of the ten Study Associations with which the associations have a collaborative agreement with.
3. Many people participate to acquire basic knowledge as a preparation for further studies or to acquire skills for the working life.
4. Others feel that their studies enrich them as individuals by giving them a better understanding of themselves and others.
5. Participation in study circles has, not least, a social function.

In the collective environment of a study circle, people meets others with similar interests but also with a different background or life situation. In this way, social networks are extended beyond cultural and professional boundaries.

6. For many people outside the labour market (pensioners and unemployed), participation in a study circle is a way to structure their day and life.
7. Participants emphasize the differences in studying in voluntary study circles compared attending regular classes. They believe they can influence the content of the learning approach.

The following features are said to distinguish the study circles from other forms of study:

- The collective learning environment (learning from each other)
- The informal study situation (with the dialogue as the predominant method)
- The easy going atmosphere
- The free, non-hierarchical forms of studying (the leader is a fellow participant - “a primus inter pares”)
- The common interest and inner motivation for the subject studied, and finally
- The absence of examinations and ratings.

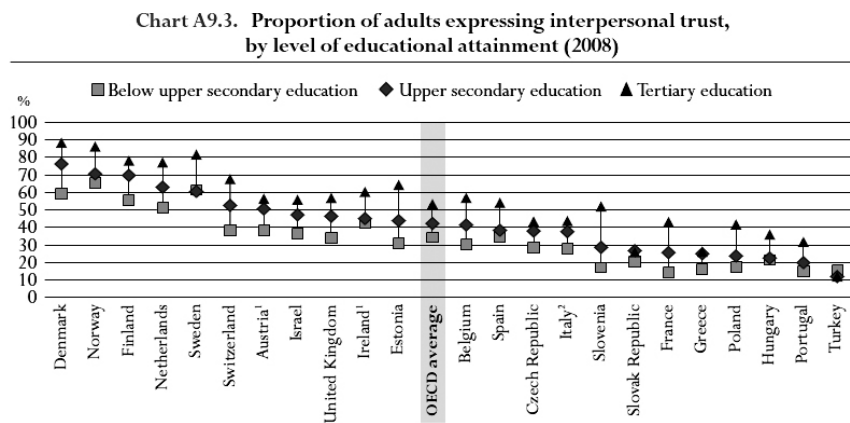
Conversation as an educational form means that the participants are trained to express themselves, arguing for their positions and opinions. Being involved in an open dialogue also demands respect for others and their opinions. The endeavour to understand others also implies a willingness and a readiness to be influenced. This is important for the way in which good judgement, public discourse and democratic transformation develop in society (Gougoulakis, 2006).

In the case of Sweden, I could easily argue that the large degree of social trust recorded in international comparative studies is due, to some extent, to the country’s great tradition of popular adult education and adult education in general (Seong Ho Le, 2018; Rothstein, 2011). The ten Study Associations are offering training activities in every municipality. In total there are about 335 branches of these Study Associations operating all over the country. Members of these Associations are civil society organizations. *Folkbildning* also comprises also

154 Folk High Schools (Folkhögskolor). These schools are independent adult education colleges. The folk high schools in Sweden provide mainly formal adult education (operating as second-chance schools), although based on the “free and voluntary” folkbildning tradition. To a large extent, Folk High Schools are financed by grants from the state and county councils. The ownership of these schools consists either of civil society organizations (popular movements, NGOs, trade unions) or of local government bodies. Every education institution has its own profile depending on the movements and organizations that cooperate with them (members). In 2018, nearly 1.7 million adults (mostly) participated in about 260,000 study circles throughout the country. Unique groups amount to about 700,000 people. In addition, every year the Study Associations organize more than 380,000 cultural activities (lectures, choirs, musical and theatrical events) involving almost 20,000,000 people. (Folkbildningsrådet, 2019)

According to the OECD (2010, Table 1 and 2014, Table 2), the percentage of Swedish adults who say they trust their fellow citizens is more than 60%.

**Table 1.** Proportion of adults expressing interpersonal trust, by level of education (OECD, 2010)



1. Year of reference 2006.

2. Year of reference 2004.

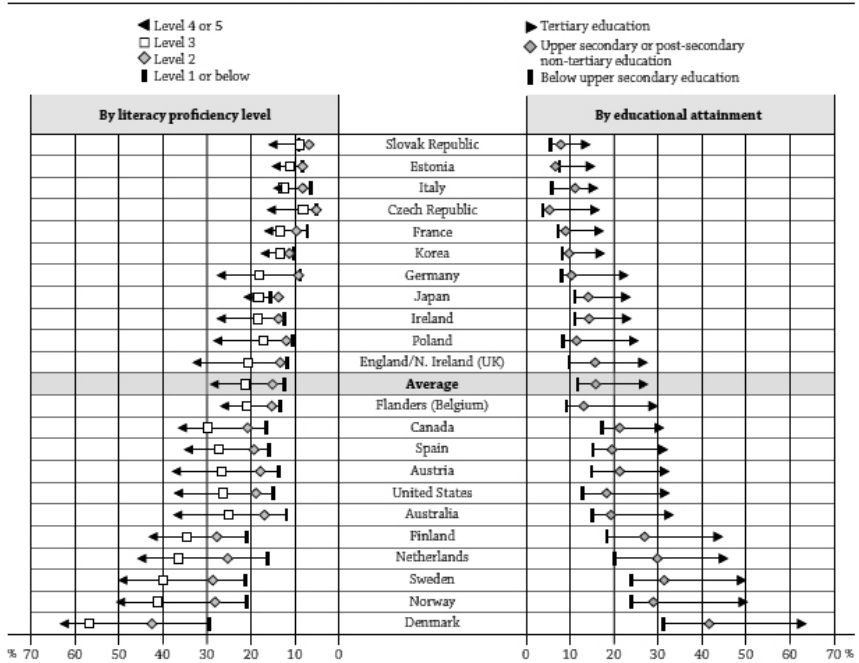
Countries are ranked in descending order of the proportion of adults expressing interpersonal trust among those who have attained upper secondary education.

Source: OECD, Table A9.3. See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eag2010](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2010)).

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932312044>

**Table 1.** Percentage of adults trusting others by education and literacy level (OECD, 2014)

**Chart A8.4. Percentage of adults reporting that they trust others, by educational attainment and literacy proficiency level (2012)**  
*Survey of Adult Skills, 25-64 year-olds*



Countries are ranked in ascending order of the proportion of people with tertiary education reporting that they trust others.

Source: OECD, Table A8.3a (L). See Annex 3 for notes ([www.oecd.org/edu/eaq.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eaq.htm)).

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933116699>

It is ascertained that individuals with low educational level and low skills face greater employment problems, with consequences for their income as well as in other areas, such as quality of life and health.

For example, as stated by the OECD, the difference between highly educated adults and adults with lower education who say they are healthy is 23 percentage points. Differences are even detected concerning levels of interpersonal trust, participation in voluntary activities and the belief that one has opportunities to influence the political process in accordance with education and skill level. Furthermore, societies that exhibit high levels of low-skilled citizens run the risk of a deterioration of social cohesion and

prosperity, with uncontrollable effects on social costs, health, unemployment and security, for example. (op.cit.)

### **...and transformation**

Like most concepts in the human sciences, transformation is multifaceted and there is little consensus about its aims and means. Here I make an effort to explain my views on the matter. For an examination to be meaningful, it is necessary to distinguish perspectives and levels. As mentioned earlier, transformation as a processual phenomenon is associated with learning, actions and change. Learning always requires action and action is in turn based on knowledge and insights. Nevertheless, not all changes are prudent and certainly not all are desirable, but learning is a fascinating endeavour. We know what it is, yet we do not know. Maybe this explains the existence of so many theories of human learning!

The world we live in is not fair. People's living conditions are different in almost all respects, depending on geographic domicile, social and cultural background, gender, race, innate abilities, access to resources and other factors. Inequality is most obvious when we compare those who live in the countryside with those who live in cities. There is an invisible wall between the population in rural (and peri-urban) areas and those living in urban areas. Rural populations have higher morbidity and are poor to a greater extent; they have lower education or no education at all, and generally they suffer from a generalized discrimination whenever "common" resources are allocated. This may involve the unequal distribution of wealth, of power, of education and employment opportunities, and of human dignity. And many are suffering from hunger. What is worst is that we have become accustomed, or learned to accept this order. Optimistically, another world is possible but the question is HOW can we make the world better for everyone? is ever-present. It might be too easy to answer: through more and better education. Being convinced of that, I furthermore believe that the future of humanity and humanism is designed in all those everyday (small) meetings we are involved and participate in. Thus, my answer to the question stated is: We need more and qualitatively better places to meet, communicate and understand each other to become better beings!

## Concluding reflections

Living today under the tyranny of PISA and other evaluating and comparing surveys under the auspices of the New Public Management regime, it becomes extremely difficult to use the word “learning” to mean anything other than a measurable commodity. This approach contrasts with the notion of learning, according to which all humans have the potential to learn and develop throughout their life course when they get opportunities (not only one and certainly not at a specific age) to deal with their own learning needs.

We live in a very peculiar time with specific characteristics that undoubtedly affect the nature and quality of life on a collective and individual level. A central issue that organized societies face since their constitution is how to transmit to future generations all that is important and valuable, which they have collectively learned, invented and created, that is their cultural heritage. From pre-industrial times, when the process of transferring the cultural heritage was confined within the small community of rural settlements up to today, when humanity is moving in the galaxy of globalization and ICT, education and learning are important processes and mechanisms. The evolution of perceptions about what is knowledge, what one needs to know and who are those who can and should learn and be educated, is a history of constant conflicts and struggles. The outcome of it endows us with the ideology and practice, the discourse, of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning has without exception become the prevailing educational dogma of our post-industrial time, functioning as the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts for all. Owing to global competition, every country is undergoing a major transformation that affects all societal sectors. The European Council, for example, affirmed in March 2000 that Europe had moved into the Knowledge Age, implying extensive changes for cultural, economic and social life (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). Education and lifelong learning are perceived to lie at the heart of the transformation towards a knowledge-based economy and society.



Transformation is the word used frequently to highlight and denote the qualitative leap that every citizen, every community and every society is compelled to undertake. Apparently, transformation is related to development. But what is development and what is transformation? Are there particular stages that we pass through in our life course?

The first and obvious element of development and transformation is change, involving movement from one state to another. The mechanism and the underlying process that promote change is learning. However, not all learning implies change (development or transformation).

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning assumes that developmental learning derives from a better understanding of a situation (Mezirow, 1990). Through transformative learning, learners change consciously their old, established frameworks and assume a critical, reflective and open perspective, developing new ways of understanding and learning. This movement is emancipatory in that it frees learning from old habits of seeing. Through such a change in perspective, basic conceptions (meaning perspectives) are changing, not just superficial opinions (meaning schemes) change. A tool for this most stimulating form of learning is reflection, and applies to both young people and adults.

Mezirow recognizes that his theory of learning is an idealized model, grounded in the nature of human communication. He is inspired by Habermas (1984; 1987) who in his theory of rational communication claims that the individual must have the possibility to express his/her own opinion in order to participate in a social discourse. An ideal dialogue means that everyone should have equal opportunities to freely participate in. The ideal dialogue requires communication skills, helping a person to take part in a comprehension oriented processes. Habermas highlights two different rationalities that controls the ability to act communicatively. One entails efforts to influence others, the other aims at achieving consensus. Anyone who tries to influence others is termed success-oriented. Those seeking consensus are oriented to understand others. When individuals try to understand each other

in an ideal dialogue situation they become interdependent and are keen to have equal opportunities to be heard. Hopefully, such an attitude and approach could possibly work as a viable solution for a sustainable (free, open, democratic and ecological) lifestyle in every community that will be inclusive, with learning – for all.

In this paper, the Swedish popular adult education experience was presented to exemplify a democratic model of non-formal education. Its characteristics are codified in the study circle which may also be used as a metaphorical representation of a model of social interaction and communication, which, in its national extension, corresponds to the historical allegory of *folkhem* [the people's home], a synonym of the Swedish social welfare state. The history of the Swedish *folkbildning* movement is the narrative of a poor agrarian country's remarkable transformation into a modern, high-tech welfare state with well-functioning institutions and in essence a transparent, democratic system. Sweden's social infrastructure of educational inclusion, is all-encompassing, creating the sheltered basis for all citizens' free development. This structure of opportunities rests on solidarity tax and redistribution policies that take into account people's differences based on the principle of all humans' equal value.

Nonetheless, the Swedish model is Swedish, and under no circumstances can it be copied or conveyed uncritically from one country to another. It is the result of specific cultural, geographical and social circumstances in which it is activated. However, the answer to the question whether the Swedish popular adult education movement can serve as a model for other countries is unequivocally yes, if the ambition is to assume a core of universal humanistic values that rest on creating a better life for each individual and the entire society.

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