

The Chautauqua Movement and its influence on adult education theory and practice today

Manuscript prepared for

ERIC

by

Scott L. Howell, Director of Evening Classes
Brigham Young University
299 Harman Continuing Education Building
Provo, UT 84602
(801) 422-6280
Scott.Howell@byu.edu

and

Alma D. McGinn, Student
Brigham Young University
152 KMC Building
alma.mcgin@gmail.com

August 3, 2006

Abstract

What is Chautauqua? What contributions were made to adult education theory and practice by three early Chautauquan leaders: John Vincent, Lewis Miller, and William Rainey Harper? How did they handle certain administrative tasks? This article briefly introduces the reader to the Chautauqua Institution that then became the Chautauqua Movement. It will also explore the movement's role and founders' contributions in defining what adult education is today. The early leaders of this popular education movement also called upon not only their instructional genius but also their administrative, managerial, and business acumen to ensure the success of the Chautauqua Institution in providing educational opportunity to an increasing number of adults. Three specific administrative duties of these early adult educators are examined and then likened to today's educators': overseeing finances, handling rewards and responding to competition. The authors' intent is to (re)introduce today's educators to some of the Chautauqua contributions made to adult education theory and practice while also likening their relevant administrative practices to today's adult education programs.

*To look backward for a while is to refresh
the eye, to restore it, and to render it the
more fit for its prime function of looking
forward*

— Margaret Fairless Barber

Whenever adult educators “look backward” in their history they will see Chautauqua—the most popular educational movement of its time. Chautauqua, as an adult education movement, had its start in 1874 at a lake of the same name in southwestern New York. Here, a businessman and inventor named Lewis Miller joined a distinguished Methodist minister and educator named John Heyl Vincent; together, the two men founded a program that provided learning opportunities for those who because of age or life situation could not attend formal schooling. These individuals could attend lectures and lessons at the auditoriums and classrooms set up on the shore of Chautauqua lake, or participate in correspondence lessons. The development of the program led to the official Chautauqua Institute, the “sire of today’s vast, multibillion dollar network of co-operative agricultural extension services, off-campus courses, university outreach programs, and distance learning technologies in America” (Scott, 1999, p. 403).

By exploring the history of the Chautauqua movement, including its underlying theory and the experiences of its founders, adult educators can refresh and restore their eyes and render them more fit to look forward; by examining these lessons of the past, adult educators can also be more fit to make wise business and administrative decisions for the future. This salutary

experience of “looking back” is not limited to those business lessons intended for an adult educator, but the word limit for this manuscript is. (The author has submitted another article to another journal focusing on just the academic lessons learned from “looking back” to Chautauqua.)

Statement of Purpose

This article briefly presents some details of the Chautauqua Institution’s early years, acquainting the reader with the roots of this institution, exploring the movement’s role in defining adult education, and indicating some areas where the movement has had an impact on contemporary adult education. The article introduces early Chautauqua leaders and recounts some administrative challenges they faced, with the aim of applying the lessons they learned to adult education today. These early leaders were required to call upon not only their instructional genius but also their administrative, managerial, and business skills to ensure the success of their programs.

Chautauqua: The Early Years

Chautauqua began when two men, Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent, set out to improve Sunday school in the Methodist-Episcopal church by organizing a two-week training course for Sunday school teachers. Miller, a businessman, was able to provide the financial resources to make this two-week institution possible. Vincent, as a Methodist minister, was named superintendent of instruction and was responsible for overseeing the curriculum and organizing faculty. The Chautauqua Sunday School Assembly, as it was called, commenced during a time when religious camps and revival meetings were prevalent. Both leaders wanted their Sunday School Assembly to be decidedly different from these activities. One way in which they made their program different was by utilizing “the general demand for summer rest by uniting daily study with healthful recreation, and thus render[ing] the occasion one of pleasure and instruction combined” (Vincent, J., 1971, p. 24).

The success of the first summer (1874) indicated an obvious demand for this type of instruction when 142 Methodist Sunday school teachers from 25 states and four countries attended the assembly. Over the next several years, the assembly underwent a transformation. During the second summer, it was lengthened—participants attended for three weeks instead of two—and all denominations were invited to participate (Simpson, 1999, p. 33). In 1876, the program was lengthened to eight weeks.

Miller and Vincent recognized that the demand for education was not limited to Sunday school teachers. Of the adults who participated in the program, Vincent remarked, “One had to watch them only a few minutes to discover that they heartily enjoyed going to school at an age when school was supposed to be over and done with” (Vincent, L., 1925, p. 122). They realized that their institution should extend its reach even further. Vincent’s theory of adult education has been summarized as follows: “Mature men and women are able to learn, educational opportunities should extend beyond formal schooling, life is education, agencies promoting adult

learning should work together, and adult education should examine current social issues” (Scott, 1999, p. 391).

Miller and Vincent began to change their institution to meet the needs of students in every walk of life. In 1878, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) began as a book club and correspondence course. If measured by enrollments, name recognition, and popularity, the CLSC can certainly be recognized as the most significant correspondence school of its time in the United States. According to Jesse Hurlbut, Vincent’s assistant, the purpose of the CLSC was to reach “the rich, the middle class, and the poor—all in one class in their condition and their needs” (Hurlbut, 1921, p. 126). The creation of the CLSC was the first major step in secularizing Chautauqua, moving the focus from providing religious instruction to teachers to providing a much broader education to all those who sought it.

Over the next several years, Chautauqua continued to change and progress rapidly, furthering its goal of providing education to the greatest number of people. In 1892, William Rainey Harper (a man whose involvement with the Chautauqua Institution will be discussed later in this article), as president of the University of Chicago, incorporated the ideas of Chautauqua into his university and created the first official university division of adult education as an “integral unit of the university” (Stephan, 1948, p. 104). Though this first division of adult education was based on the principles that Harper adhered to while part of Chautauqua, “academia has never fully acknowledged its debt to Chautauqua for historical innovations in adult and university education” (Scott, 1999, p. 389).

Chautauqua Lessons

Clearly, the Chautauqua movement pioneered the idea of extending learning opportunities to adults and nontraditional students. Its early success exposed the need for programs to quench the intellectual thirst of those who could not attend formal universities, or those who wanted to continue learning beyond their formal education. Today, adult education programs continue to fulfill this need. As adult educators, we may learn from Chautauqua’s lessons and be more fit to administer current adult education programs. We may apply what we learn to the improvement of these programs, building future success on a foundation of tried-and-true principles.

This article addresses three specific elements of administering a successful adult education program: (1) financial management, (2) the benefit and handling of rewards, and (3) responding to competition. In each section, we explore ways in which the original Chautauqua leaders handled each aspect and we apply a lesson to today’s adult educator, thereby looking to the past in order to improve the future.

Overseeing Finances

For many adult educators there is not only the educational dimension but also the financial and operational dimensions of their job—something they would rather not have to worry about yet something they never stop worrying about. In describing the financial state of affairs at Chautauqua in 1919, one author wrote, “Debts had been incurred by enlargement of the grounds, a sewer system, a water supply, electric lighting, new buildings, new roads, and a hundred items of improvement” (Hurlbut, 1921, pp. 350–51). Chautauqua’s adult education management teams, and others today, have “a hundred items of improvement” to deal with as part of the support operation, in addition to ensuring its primary objective: providing a quality education.

Since many adult educators assume some administrative and financial responsibilities throughout their careers, it is important for them to learn something about financial management and make certain they associate themselves with those who have the necessary financial skills. Vincent himself was described as not having “that peculiar talent for raising money,” but Miller brought to the leadership team not only his own money but also the business acumen that Vincent needed to ensure the financial and operational success of the institution (Hurlbut, 1921, p. 228).

As with Chautauqua, so it is today: Adult education programs do “not subsist on kind words and loving thoughts” (Vincent, L., 1925, p. 128). Vincent and Miller acted as collection agents in Chautauqua’s early years until they “resolved to dispense with the collections, and have a gate fee for all comers” (Hurlbut, 1921, p. 31); this policy decision also necessitated the building of a fence around the entire property. While one type of problem was solved by establishing a gate fee, they did not entirely eliminate the people who sought exception to the tuition by using “subterfuges to escape paying forty cents a day, on high moral grounds no doubt” (Vincent, L., 1925, p. 128).

All adult educators seem to share with their Chautauqua fathers a passion for learning, an altruism for living, and a willingness to sacrifice their own financial interests—no one has ever accused an educator of being in the field for the money! The same held true for Chautauqua: “Never has the aim of Chautauqua been to make money; it has had no dividends and no stockholders. . . . It has not sought financial gain. Neither of its Founders nor any of their associates have been enriched by it, for all profits—when there have been any—have been expended upon improvements or enlargement of plans” (Hurlbut, 1921, p. 393).

Most adult education programs are nonprofit in not only legal terms but also financial measures, (e.g., net income, residual income). For many adult educators, if their programs break even and cover costs, they consider themselves financially successful. In these cases, excess financial reserves in one class may be used by the adult education administrator to subsidize a lower-enrolling but important course elsewhere. On the other hand, many programs do make healthy profits that are used by their sponsoring institutions as a cross-subsidy for other programs. In these cases, adult educators must be able to juggle the needs of their own program with the expectations of their sponsoring institution.

The Chautauqua lesson: Sound financial management is a necessity. If the skill set doesn’t exist in either the responsible leader or among the leadership team it is only a matter of time until the

program meets its demise. However, enough money allows adult education programs to perpetuate and in some cases leverage themselves so that they can expand to meet even more learner needs.

Handling Rewards

Adult educators do not forget the role that rewards play in adult learning and must provide for rewards in their budgets. While most learners who participate in adult education activities do so for the pure love of learning, many participants expect—and traditions encourage—some kind of reward. Adult education administrators know how important rewards of almost any creation are in the learning experience of program participants. Some rewards are strictly defined by professional associations (e.g., Continuing Education Units [CEUs], diplomas, and records of registration); others by the vivid imaginations of adult educators who know best the local characteristics and interests of their participants. Many administrators marvel at how important small rewards (e.g., cloth patches, inexpensive T-shirts, lapel pins, trophies, and even paper certificates) are to program participants.

Chautauqua was no different. Its reward system acknowledged participation, completion, and competency in an atmosphere of pomp and ceremony. However, its early administrators also realized the importance of rewards and acknowledgments not being confused with the certificates and degrees associated with traditional institutions of higher learning. One author observed that the Chautauqua Scientific Learning Circle (CLSC) diploma, “although radiant with thirty-one seals—shields, stars, octagons,—would not stand for much at Heidelberg, Oxford, or Harvard . . . [it was] an American curiosity . . . it would be respected not as conferring honor upon its holder, but as indicating a popular movement in favor of higher education” (quoted in Gould, 1961, p. 23).

The son of one of Chautauqua’s cofounders recounted the importance of ceremony as part of the participant reward:

Great stress was laid on these ceremonies [recognition or graduation] at the outset. Their value was patent to the inventor of the Reading Circle. . . . John Vincent maintained that sentiment has always played a large part in fostering what is commonly known as college spirit. . . . [He was] convinced of the worth of the class spirit in keeping people together, and of the songs, the emblems, the set forms—of everything, in short, that goes to make up the pageantry of academic life (Vincent, L., 1925, pp. 133–4).

Clearly, the intent of Chautauqua’s use of awards, ceremony, and pageantry then, as it is now in adult education, is to encourage, motivate, and sustain student learning.

The Chautauqua lesson: Adult educators should not overlook the importance of appropriate rewards and ceremony for their learners who reach certain milestones. They may even benefit by analyzing their current reward system to see where additional reward intervention may help adult learners overcome common learning obstacles.

Responding to *Competition*

Some say the greatest compliment paid a successful adult education program comes when either other institutions imitate the program, or when the associated university initiates a friendly takeover and mainstreams the program. One of the most obvious Chautauquan imitations occurred just after the turn of the century when promoter and entrepreneur Keith Vawter “combined the Chautauqua idea with an older American institution, the traveling speakers’ bureau known as the lyceum, and came up with the traveling Chautauqua tent show” (Erbland, 1978, p. 17). Even though the original Chautauqua founders did not sponsor these traveling tent shows, they must have been flattered by their popularity and the publicity that the use of their name had given the popular educational movement they had set out to ignite some 25 years earlier. Over a 30-year period, the traveling Chautauquas went from city to city, and “in their peak years, tent Chautauquas gathered an audience estimated as high as 35 million” (Erbland, 1978, p. 17). Then “changing tastes and the advent of radio and motion pictures with sound led to their demise in the mid-thirties” (Erbland, 1978, p. 17). Although the tent Chautauquas were flattering, other imitations were disappointing; “Chautauqua was sometimes honored and sometimes embarrassed by the uses to which its name was put” (Morrison, 1974, p. 161). Furthermore, unlike the corporate world, where companies go to great lengths to protect trade secrets, educators, including the Chautauquans, did not seek to protect any educational “secrets”—pedagogical or otherwise—that might help other educators.

The most immediate Chautauqua-like imitation occurred just across the lake and was sponsored by the Baptist Church; the Baptists called their imitation “Point Chautauqua.” Vincent wasn’t pleased that the “rival institution was started across the lake, in plain view of the original. He had no objection to its existence, only to its location. He doubted the purity of the motive that led to its establishment in that exact spot” (Vincent, L., 1925, p. 130).

Vincent’s response to this Baptist competition was to hire one of its most promising educational luminaries, William Rainey Harper. He was destined for greatness, and Vincent knew it. Harper graduated from college at 13 years of age, completed his PhD from Yale by 19 years of age, became an integral part of Chautauqua at 27, and then president of the Rockefeller-financed and Baptist-affiliated University of Chicago at 36. Harper’s years at Chautauqua deeply and permanently influenced his appreciation for, and understanding of, the important contribution that adult education could make to a wider range of students. While Harper’s hire by Chautauqua was crucial for this particular chapter of the Chautauqua experience and kept him away from the Baptists for a time, it was his return to the Baptist-sponsored University of Chicago—an influential university that became a model for many other universities at the time—that arguably brought about the most important Chautauquan contribution to adult and higher education today: he integrated and legitimized adult education programs as an official part of a traditional university (Simpson, 1999, p. 51; Scott, 2005, p. 58).

The Chautauqua lesson: Plan on successful adult education programs being imitated or “taken over” by the host university. The better the adult education program, the sooner it is adopted by others and the more widespread its effect in enriching the lives of adult learners. Adult educators actually help others with their programs while at the same time doing what is necessary to

protect the interests of their own. As more competition exists in adult education, more learning and better learning occurs.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, Miller and Vincent established an institution that extended education opportunities to adults who were unable to attend formal schooling. Vincent also became to many the father of adult education theory today. Like Vincent then, today's adult educators believe that "education, once the peculiar privilege of the few, must in our best earthly estate become the valued possession of the many. It is a natural and inalienable right of human souls" (Vincent, J., 1971, p. 2). As we look backward to examine the administrative theory and practices of the early Chautauqua leaders, we are rendered more fit to look forward and apply lessons learned to a contemporary setting that calls for increased access as well as better financial management, the proper handling of rewards, and an appropriate response to competition.

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