

# NORTH AMERICAN ADULT EDUCATORS

Phyllis M. Cunningham Archive of Quintessential Autobiographies for the Twenty-First Century



For all of the accolades that Phyllis justly receives as someone totally committed to social justice and “equality for all,” she would be the first to warn you not to romanticize her or the work of spacemaking. Only in books, in the realm of ideas, is spacemaking easy. Real-world spacemaking is hard, full of contradiction—she has never let these contradictions get in the way of being a spacemaker.

In the end, Phyllis would want us to focus on the question: Spacemaking for whom? And it’s the practical answer to that question that makes Phyllis’s legacy so enduring. She has been a spacemaker for people whose lives have been delimited by unequal relations of power and whose stories have been silenced. Phyllis’s most profound legacy is that through her mentoring and support, “others have been encouraged to be spacemakers as well.”

— Ronald M. Cervero and Sharan B. Merriam



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Autobiographies for the Twenty-First Century

Keith B. Armstrong, Lee W. Nabb, Anthony P. Czech, editors  
Special Tribute by Ronald M. Cervero and Sharan B. Merriam

Armstrong  
Nabb  
Czech

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## Jost Reischmann

### Becoming a Professor in Andragogy—Lived History

Should I really be a part of this book? I know of at least two arguments against it: First, I am not an American adult educator; I live and work in Germany. However, for more than 25 years I have regularly visited conferences and colleagues at their universities in the USA and have them as guests and friends at my university and home. Phyllis Cunningham commented about me at the annual conference of AACE (American Association for Adult and Continuing Education) 2002 in St. Louis: "Perhaps Jost is more American than some other professors!" (Still I hesitate – Was this a compliment?).

Second, I have an identity problem: Am I an adult educator? For a number of years I clearly would have said, "Yes." Still today I sometimes work in adult education institutions (companies, churches, adult education centers) for some extra money or fun or because I cannot say no; but in my main profession I am and I feel like a professor of adult education (officially, "Chair of Andragogy"), educating students in an academic discipline. We teach, learn, research about the education of adults, but I see my university work not as adult education.

Nevertheless, both anti-arguments also offer opportunities. Sometimes things can be seen clearer from a distance. The international-comparative perspective from outside provokes to overcome ethnocentrism. Occasionally I had the feeling this provocation was my role in the collegial interchanges. I have to confess: Now and then I enjoy playing this provocation role! Moreover, the professor's perspective has the advantage that (because I do not have to represent one specific direction of adult education) I have the academic freedom to think beyond the different institutions, traditions, and movements where adult educators in the practical field are sheltered. (Are you aware that I do what I described one sentence above?) I hope that helps to justify my inclusion in this book.

#### How I Came (Not) into Adult Education

I started fairly early to "work" in adult education. As I could operate a slide projector and a 16mm film projector I was asked in my late teenage years to become the technique guy of our local adult education center (*Volkshochschule*) - \$1 for showing slides, \$2 for films. Especially I liked the presenters that brought slides and film (\$3). Beside the money being momentous for me, I could listen to lectures without paying. "Beautiful flowers of the Alps,"

## QUINTESSENTIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

"Great Philosophers," "The New Movie-Culture," "Traveling to Wheresoever," that bouquet of enriching and entertaining themes plus a number of language courses represented the majority of public adult education one or two evenings a week in the 1960s in Germany.

Adult education? That was in the 1960s no option for a vocation. In adult education I met slide-showing or book-selling travelers or humanists with a firm income otherwise. There were the spouses having an earning husband, so they could offer a mixture of social and educational work. There were the school teachers, teaching a foreign language or another school subject to make some extra money and/or to escape for some hours from their child-oriented schoolwork. This all provided no prospect for making a living wage. Adult education was volunteer work, part time, no training was available, so it had to be done "by the heart," with conviction and often with pride. Adult education was neither a vocation nor a profession.

This situation lies in many countries not very far back in history. No wonder that this image of adult education—volunteer work with full heart, empty pockets, done with content expertise and teaching intuition, and sometimes with a lot of vulnerable pride—still can be found widely.

Today, only(!) 40 years later, I am Chair of Andragogy at Bamberg University, Germany. About 100 students study andragogy as their main subject, 150 more as a side subject. This number doubled in the last ten years. They all will work in adult education and make their living as andragogical professionals. This is not an optimistic hope, but reality, as we know from our own as well as others' research about graduates in andragogy/adult education.

Adult education within one generation within my life, developed from "volunteer moonlighting" to academic study and profession. No wonder there are tensions and confusions in the field of adult education; they result from the rapid changes that happened in the years between 1970 and 2000 and started a new chapter in the theory and practice of adult education.

### Was It a Detour?

It was clear from the beginning that I wanted to work in education (at least I knew nothing else). As a teenager I was in several boy groups and often found myself in leadership-functions, i.e., a boy of 14 taking care of the 10-year-olds in summer camps.

Consequently, after finishing high school I started to study at a teachers training college. I am still thankful that this introduced me in a systematic and profound way into pedagogical thinking and acting. There I learned—and that still is part of my understanding today—that educational situations have to be rationally planned and designed, that "knowing content" is not enough, but that "designing seminars," "activating methods," or "didactic and methodic" are necessary; these all are contents today in our curriculum at Bamberg university. Andragogs must have the competency to teach didactically as a professional.

There I also learned a more hidden lesson still important for me today. I found there two different groups of professors. One group was the "experienced practitioner," having missions and visions, telling us about their successful years of practical experiences. This group I loved; it was convincing to listen to them, learn their tricks, and follow their un-

derstanding of successful education. They knew the answers. There was the other group I liked much less: the young "academic" professors that made us read scientific (= difficult) books. In addition, they made us reflect critically and not to just believe, they made us doubt, compare, and test hypotheses and theories. They knew the questions (and I very much doubted the teaching competencies of these "theoreticians"). In my first years of being a school teacher I tried to imitate the practitioner-professors and to forget the theory-professors. However, the longer I stayed in education the more often recollections came to me about the theories and books. Today I know that this knowledge of pedagogical theories helped me for a longer period of time and more than the practical tricks or visions which in the beginning were a survival toolkit but became either outdated or did not help in complex and difficult situations. I discovered theory is not theoretical, but a help to understand practice. Some theory-texts of that time I still teach to my students today. "Theories," "history," and "foundations" are of course today contents of our andragogy curriculum. Andragogs (and I limit this title to academically educated persons) must be able to perceive, describe, analyze, reflect, and criticize andragogical situations, now as well as in twenty years, when they will face new institutions, tasks, movements, and problems we don't even know today.

I do not want to be remembered by the following specific experience. Being a young school teacher I was asked to teach a class of adults in the local adult education center. I did exactly what I found later criticized in adult education books: I treated the adults at night the same way I treated children during the day. Please, participants from then, forgive me! What else had I learned?

I taught a couple of years in public schools; then I went to a "real" university (the University of Tuebingen, Germany) where I studied, now being 23 years old, pedagogy, psychology, and sociology for another nine semesters.

After graduation (1970) I stepped into academia again as a technique guy. As I could handle punch-cards and do some basic programming I was hired by the university in educational psychology and did my dissertation about effects of testing in school classes. What remained from this: academic professionals (= our graduates) must be able to ask questions open-mindedly, research them with methodological rigor, and add new knowledge to themselves and the field. No doubt, like in other academic studies, research classes and a research thesis are part of the andragogy curriculum.

Then I was hired by the Department of Media and Distance Education and still was focused on children and student learning. But what I did not know at that time, by studying pedagogy I had learned basic lectures for my work in andragogy today.

### A Whole New World

During the 1970s a hurricane-like storm of developments triggered a transformation. First: The three professors of our chair, headed by Guenther Dohmen, a truly international person and later (1999) in the first group of Germans inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Hall of Fame, team-taught a class called "How Do Adults Learn?" The literature and research at that time in Germany filled one or two bookshelves. However, I had the clear feeling this is not only a field of application and practice, but it has and deserves a firm and genuine anthropology and theory, going beyond particular convictions and movements. The institutions, the practice, the various "missions and visions" existed,

Knowles offered methodic and didactical arrangements for “modern practice of adult education.” This taught me the next new lesson: Adult education is only a part of the education of adults. The learning of adults happens not only lifelong but also *lifewide* in a multitude of traditional and nontraditional, formal and informal settings (workplaces, families, churches, marketplaces, television, “the life” ...). Consequently internships, classes about “institutions of adult education,” research and workplaces today exceed the traditional institutions and fields of what was perceived to be adult education four decades ago.

Looking back on these hurricanes of adult learning and education ideas in the 1970s and later, the challenges in understanding adult learning that my age group went through seems to me nearly incredible. In this formative decade of the 1970s the face and understanding of adult learning changed for me as a person as well as for the field as a whole. This may be a common experience my age group can report in Germany as well as in the USA.

In this stream of experiences my adult education baptism experience took place: I had to teach a credit course, Educational Psychology, at an adult education center in a little city in the Black Forest. I did everything new: arranging the chairs in a circle, welcoming the 15 participants, and letting them close their eyes to meditate about their goals for which they came. Then I asked them to hold their neighbors’ hands for two minutes to come in contact with the group. After that they had time to interview one other person in the room and to introduce this person to the group. I felt very innovative. Nevertheless, after all of what I thought were beautiful beginnings, the group clearly told me: No gimmicks any longer! You are the professor—teach us! At that critical point I was able to beg them for trust to try this new way of referring to their own experiences for three sessions, then we would make a decision to go on with the new way or change back to the old way. This course became a very enriching experience for the group and me. It clearly felt totally different from my prior teaching experience. After three sessions it was clear; we went on the new way. I had that flash-like insight: Now I am an adult educator!

However, my activity as an adult educator always remained like in the old tradition a side activity, at public adult education centers, with churches, with companies. In my main profession I made my living at Tuebingen University and the new “Chair of Adult and Continuing Education.” There I was an associate professor, until I got a call to Bamberg University as full professor and chair. As I described about Tuebingen University in the beginning, here at Bamberg I have three professors working with me, and we have twenty to thirty graduates every year (<http://web.uni-bamberg.de/ppp/Andragogik>). Most of my life I had the privilege to work in a university context that allowed me to research, read, analyze, theorize, and I had the pressure to publish or perish and the opportunity to reflect on the practice I had at various institutions. There was a clear difference between my activities and my identity as “adult educator/trainer” and as “researcher/scholar.”

### The Chance of International Exchange and Learning

I love to travel. This brought me in the last 30 years about 30 times to the USA and other countries, in the beginning mostly to conferences, in the last years more and more for vacation (a snowbird in Arizona).

but was an academic (sub-) discipline “above” these fields of practice conceivable? In spite of the scholarly work done since the 1920s in Germany, at that juncture the answer was “No.” Nevertheless, the fact that university faculty asked this question and started to include topics dealing with adult education in their curricula (and not only exchanged it at outside institutions or within interest groups) helped to change perspectives and awareness.

Second: From the international contacts of Guenther Dohmen we learned about a project Courses by Newspaper, at University of California—San Diego. Nationwide newspapers published a series of weekly articles for 12 to 16 weeks, covering a specific topic (i.e., “Oceans,” “Death and Dying”), additional textbooks were available, and colleagues offered courses. I transformed this idea into the German system and for five years was director of *Zeitungskolleg* at the German Institute for Distance Studies (DIFF). In this practical work grew the awareness that general theoretical concepts were blended into the practical project, worthy of being researched and developed: “open learning,” including “nontraditional learning,” “self-directed learning,” and “life-related (meaningful) learning.” All together I focused on two questions, one of practical application and the other of theoretical reflection. The practical-application-oriented question was, “How can adults be supported in lifelong and—as I called it later—in ‘lifewide’ learning?” The theoretical-reflection-oriented question was, “What sort of ‘learning’ is that, and how does this experience help us to better understand the learning of adults in their life?” I currently require my students at Bamberg University to answer these two standard questions in their diploma thesis.

Third: In the mid- and late 1970s a new movement sprang up, the encounter movement. The term “encounter groups” originated from a book by Carl Rogers, but besides his “person-centered approach,” many other concepts added to that movement: Fritz Perls’s Gestalt therapy, Alexander Lowen’s bioenergetic, the T-Group movement and others. Some were more reflection oriented, some focused more on feelings, others on sensory awareness and body work. My pilgrimages included to Carl Rogers’s Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, CA, and the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, CA. “Touch me, feel me, heal me” was a great message. Moreover, as I saw it, all these were oriented toward learning and education. Adults were learning in a powerful and personal way, sometimes painful, sometimes joyful, in learning settings far from school formats. Here I learned about “freedom to learn” (Rogers) and the personal power of meaningful learning. Even more, I learned methods how to support this type of learning, not by teaching but by counseling. This opened the access to listen carefully to adults on their journey “on becoming a person” and to facilitate and accompany their personal learning in a professional way, another professional method andragogues must have at their disposal. Classes and trainings about “Communicative Skills for Andragogs,” “Strategies of Counseling,” and “Coaching” represent these competencies now in our curriculum.

Fourth: “Schools do not solve educational problems, they produce them!” was the provoking statement of authors like Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire, claiming to “de-school society.” “More organized and institutionalized learning, or less?” seemed to me a difficult question for children learning, but for adult education it made sense. Alan Tough had empirically proven that adults spend about two hours every day in learning projects, most of them self-directed, using a wide variety of outside resources. This confirmed self-directed adult learning was not a romantic myth. Moreover, for institutionalized learning Malcolm

An important role in starting these international contacts was in the 1980s an active exchange between AACE and the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband DVV. Representatives from AACE and DVV visited for a couple of weeks the other country in organized tours. In 1982 the German group experienced Texas hospitality in adult education centers and at the AACE conference in San Antonio. I was not prominent enough to be invited into the German travel group, but I travelled on my own and got to know not only American colleagues but, to their surprise, also German adult education representatives. This made me "visible" not only to the American colleagues but also to the German. The visibility became very rewarding: At most conferences in the USA I was the only German, so I was individually named, welcomed, and had to get up and smile around (which never happened to me at German conferences). This visibility opened many doors and allowed me to meet respected colleagues and dear friends. Just to name some: Tom Damon, Alan Knox, John A. Henschke, Roger Axford, Alexander Charters, Malcolm Knowles, Douglas Smith, Trenton Ferro, Huey B. Long, Lorillee Sandmann, Sharan Merriam, Judy Koloski—many who today have been inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. A personal and professional enriching network of "internationals" came into being. Contacts and friendships between institutions and persons from that time until today still exist. The problem I fear today and am uncomfortable about is that the persons being active at that time are now 20 years older and retiring. Consequently, these contacts and networks soon will be outgrown, and no young people are following in the footsteps of these pioneers. It seems time to start again such an organized exchange.

In general I found adult education in theory as well as in practice not more developed in either Germany or the USA, only different. Main topics of American adult education, like adult basic education, ESL, or GED preparation, are marginal in Germany. Historical, institutional, and even theoretical themes in the USA are different. We do not know much about the other country. When I published the book *Adult Education in West Germany in Case Studies* (Reischmann, 1988), I discovered with surprise that this was indeed the first English-language book about adult education in Germany. Americans seldom show up at German conferences and have a language barrier. So my role on one side became a "bridge-builder," informing about foreign experiences, and my role on the other side a provoker, asking confusing questions, offering alternative explanations. Perhaps this was the "exceptional and innovative leadership" mentioned in the AACE President's Award which I received in 1998.

After conferences in Montreal, Quebec, Ljubljana (Slovenia), Prague, and Berlin, the network of internationals became more formal in the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE). In 1992 at the AACE conference in Anaheim, CA, Alexander Charters nominated me president of this society. About 140 colleagues working in international and comparative adult education in 34 countries are members today. We organized conferences in Bamberg (1995), Ljubljana (1998), St. Louis (2002), and again Bamberg (2006). The upcoming e-mail and internet—becoming a hobby of mine—(http://www.ISCAE.org) opened immediate access to persons, institutions, and information in many countries. Need information about adult education in Alaska? No problem, send an e-mail to Gretchen Bersch, University of Alaska at Anchorage. Making a visit to Ljubljana, Slovenia? Just call Ana Krajnc or Zoran Jelenc, who will be glad to present their work. One

of my students was recovering from graduation stress by travelling in Australia. I gave her the address of Roger Morris. "Yesterday he invited me to attend his class," she tells me on a postcard.

Some of these international activities led to my induction into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame in 1999 (http://www.occ.edu/hallof-fame/). Jost Reischmann has been a dynamic force in the field of adult education, building vital bridges between theory and practice" is written there. However, knowing that some of those who recommended me to this honour had been guests in my house, I believe that a big reason for my induction was the good German breakfast that my wife presented to those friends when they visited in our home.

Enriching value through the international contacts helped reduce some personal blindness and ethnocentrism. Better understanding of adult education in other countries helped me develop a broader and deeper understanding of adult education in my own country. The personal benefits of being a more "international" person include understanding, open mindedness, tolerance, and humility—and good times with good friends in many places in the world (for example, in a *Biergarten* during the summer in Bamberg, Germany). Moreover, there is also a global perspective. The UNESCO Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education (1997) put this in words: "One of the foremost challenges of our age is ... to construct a culture of peace based on justice and tolerance within which dialogue, mutual recognition and negotiation will replace violence, in homes and countries, within nations and between countries." That is the reason why I try to include my students in international meetings (i.e., Cincinnati, Phoenix, Prague, St. Louis).

### Towards a Scientific Discipline: "Andragogy"

The term "andragogy" in the USA is mostly attached to the specific concept of the American author Malcolm Knowles. In Europe this is different. "Andragogy" became connected to academic and professional institutions, publications, and programs, as for example the Yugoslavian Society for Andragogy, the Andragoski Center Republike Slovenije, the Katedra Andragogiky of Prague University (Czechia). Similarly, Venezuela has the Instituto Internacional de Andragogía; Korea publishes the journal *Andragogy Today*.

An academic discipline with university programs, professors, students, and graduation is a rather young element in the history and division of labor of adult education. I experienced its development firsthand. It exists today in many countries, perhaps not for very long, but it exists. Furthermore, this new element (in most parts of the world) confusingly still labels itself with the old name used for the field of practice. So we are not clear in what we talk about when we discuss "the future of adult education," "methods in adult education," "the history of adult education." Do we talk about places where adult education is practically carried out or about universities? Teaching an ESL class or writing a thesis about ESL classes—should both be named "working in adult education"? It confuses the clarity of thinking and acting when we cannot discriminate between the field of organized practice ("adult education") and of academic reflection ("andragogy") because we use the same label for both. We need a separate word for the newly grown field of scholarly work at universities.

That is the reason why I aggressively promote the term "andragogy" to brand the scientific discipline dealing with the lifelong and lifewide education of adults (http://www.andragogy.