

Reinhard Hohmann

A new learning culture in Germany

Contribution to the Grundtvig-Conference in London, September 2001

It seems to us not possible to describe the changes of our learning culture as a whole. "Learning culture" is a very dynamic process, always moving between antipodes of progressive and conservative concepts of adult learning. Often those traditional concepts of seminar learning prove to fit learners' needs, and modern concepts (of e-learning, for example) do not. So to a certain extent we have a paradoxical situation.

The following examples have been chosen, because they seem to be typical for the new learning culture, which now comes up in Germany.

"Lernende Regionen" - (learning regions)

"Lernende Regionen" is an initiative of the German federal government which intends to improve the support structures of lifelong learning.

It bases on the fact, that nearly half of the adult population in Germany does take part in the different forms of adult education, i.e. evening and weekend courses, vocational training, language learning etc. offered mostly by folk high schools and similar organisations.

But about 50 % of the people do not take part. Their absence may have different reasons: some people prefer coaching or private learning at home, other practice self-directed learning in private study circles, which are not officially organized. But in fact many people do not know about the different ways of learning or do not like continuous learning at all, mostly because of bad experiences at school. The initiative "Lernende Regionen" intends to bring together local communities, employers, schools, universities, employment offices, adult education organisations and all those, who deal with lifelong learning, and let them develop an network

- to motivate people to learn, i.e. by learning festivals
- to make all the existing offers of adult learning more transparent
- to avoid new handicaps by creating special courses for special target groups
- to avoid competition between organisations and allow them to specialize their offers
- to make better links between supply and demand, that means to create courses, where learners can gain exactly those qualifications, which are actually needed in the region just in time
- to build up new and innovative forms of learning and learning environments (for example: self-learning centers are up to now practically unknown in Germany)

During the next five years, the "Lernende Regionen" will get special funds from the federal government, the whole programme amounts to 70 Mio Euros. Later on it is intended, that all departments and big towns will build up their own "learning region" as an instrument of local-orientated lifelong learning.

Integration of "Spät-Aussiedler"

The term "Spät-Aussiedler" can hardly be translated into English. It refers to people who lived until the 1990s in the eastern parts of Russia. Their families had once immigrated under Zar Peter the Great in the 18th century and they have succeeded in keeping their religion, culture and language, because they mostly lived in "german" villages and had only small contacts to their russian neighborhoods.

During the 2nd world war they were pressed to leave their homes in the Wolga region and to move to Kasachstan. In 1990 they got the chance to leave the Sovietunion due to a treaty between Gorbatschew and Kohl.

Many hopes combined with this "return" have not been fulfilled. German society did not really welcome them, although they got flats and special financial support. There was widespread unemployment. Their qualifications as teachers, nurses or medical doctors were not accredited. Especially the youngsters suffer from having lost their home twice: in Russia they had been called "Germans", in Germany they are now called "Russians", many of them slip into an subculture with their own discos, shops and so on.

In London we presented a catholic adult education organisation ("Katholisches Bildungswerk"), which tries to contribute to integration by teaching media competence. The idea is that young "Aussiedler" should have the qualifications to produce journals or articles in newspapers, arrange and organize exhibitions, produce CD-Roms or emissions in the local broadcasting. The central objective of the project is to encourage them to present their way of life and their special view on the society they life in. - By the way they may gain first qualifications for media jobs.

The journal we presented is product of a group that learned and worked together about half a year and met twice a week. At the beginning the group became familiar with the Internet and arranged it's own webside. Later on it decided to make a journal dedicated to their own people and at the same time to the "Germans" and draw their attentions to the Aussiedlers situation.

Lernfeste (Learning festivals)

For the first time in 1998 there was celebrated an adult learning festival in Germany, following the idea of "adult learners week" in the UK and similar initiatives in Switzerland. The "Lernfest" was sponsored by the german government and combined with a contest, looking for the best festival concepts, which would bring together local communities, employers, the media, Volkshochschulen and other education organisations. The central message of the learning festival should be: It is fun to learn.

In London we showed a video film from Benediktbeuern, a bavarian monastery, where such a learning festival has been celebrated very successfully. It was a "Schnuppertag", as we say in german, where thousands of people, young and old, looked around and were informed about a mass of opportunities to learn in an atmosphere of a funny Sunday afternoon.

Projekt-Arbeit

Many learning groups in adult education continue their work, even when the official course has ended. Learners will go on to find out, how to use their new qualifications in all day life, or they will continue to discuss new questions or problems which have come up during their lessons. We call this "selbstgesteuertes oder selbst-reguliertes Lernen" (self-organized learning), and it is quite a new development in Germany.

An example: The "Katholisches Bildungswerk in Lingen (Ems)" run a course for church guides, who would show people some of the pittoresque old churches in the north-west of Germany. After a 4-months-course, the group decided to continue to meet and to discuss their experiences as "tourist guides". Many of them were highly interested in history and began to organize special lessons about ecclesiastical history and even made a trip to France to see the place from where the first monks had come in the 8th century and had established christianity. – Learning had – to a certain extent - become independent from the "Bildungswerk".