

# The life long learning project of Swedish workers

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Life long learning is a rather new concept, frequently used in Sweden and in many other countries. Politicians and researchers talk about it, and life long learning has become an arena for state interventions. However, it is certainly not a new phenomenon. People have always learnt, as long as they have lived, from the cradle to the grave. We learn new things not only in schools but also in working life, in leisure time, and as family members. We learn from news papers, we learn as we watch the TV, and when we talk to other people. To be human is to be a learner!

The aim of some learning processes is to become more skilled as workers. As the conditions of working life are changing rapidly, the worker's knowledge and skills must be constantly updated. This is one important dimension of life long learning. However, other meanings are also connected to this concept, for example learning for its own sake, just for the fun of it. To read novels may not necessarily make us more skilled as workers, but we can get a better understanding of ourselves or our society. This learning process is also going on throughout our whole life.

Reading books, watching the TV, and the like, are activities that we can do on our own. In Sweden, however, it has also been a collective project: adult people have met to read and discuss books and study various topics. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the labour movement started to organize study groups, so called study circles, and in 1912 Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was established (Gustavsson, 1992). Such voluntary life long learning projects, organised by the workers themselves, are the topic of this lecture. It should be noted that I have not carried out in-depth empirical studies in this field myself, and therefore the presentation is mainly based on secondary sources.

## Educational ideals of Workers' Educational Association

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an average worker had attended elementary school only for a few years and learnt only very basic skills. However, at that time education began to be regarded as still more important, both for society and single persons (Johansson & Florin, 1992). State measures were taken in order to educate adult workers, and several enlightenment campaigns were administrated by middle class people (Frängsmyr, 1991). Representatives of the labour movement were also engaged in various educational projects, and the establishment of WEA indicated that life long learning had become important for the workers themselves. However, different educational ideals influenced the WEA policy. For example, according to Gustavsson (1991) some of the early leaders of WEA wanted to promote citizenship education, others emphasised the ideal of self-education, whereas some others adhered to the neo-humanistic or neo-classical ideal. As for the WEA policy during the period 1945-1970, Ginner (1988) has concluded that the neo-classical ideal was still alive whilst citizenship education gradually declined. In the following I will give a more detailed description of these two main goals characterising WEA's policy.

## Citizen ship education

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial workers were not citizens in the proper sense of the word. They had not yet got the right to vote for the Parliament, and it was difficult for them to make their voices heard. Their working conditions were bad, and the social and economical conditions of the large majority of them were poor (Hirdman, 1983). Usually, the employers ruled the enterprises in a very dictatorial way.

Therefore the struggle for a decent life started, and in that respect the formation of the labour movement was important, because as a collective the workers could not easily be neglected. The workers also claimed the right to participate in politics. But for that purpose they must learn about society, its organisations, and the laws governing social, economical

and political life. As long as they were ignorant of such things, they could not claim the right to participate in decision making processes. Thus, some study circles dealt with such issues. Furthermore, the participants trained how to behave at formal meetings, how to act as chairmen or secretaries, and they became familiar with procedures of debating social issues. In that way they acquired language skills which could be used in politics as well as in negotiations with the employers (Ambjörnsson, 1998).

Members of the ruling class regarded the workers as uncivilised people. They thought of workers as dirty, lazy persons, who were much too fond of drinking alcohol. Therefore they were not worthy of respect. Thus the aim of citizenship education was also to improve the workers' reputation by promoting virtues like cleanliness, diligence, and temperance. These virtues were regarded as necessary for being respected by the employers (op. cit.) In my view, this was also an aspect of citizenship education.

According to Ginner (1988), citizenship as an educational idea was characterised by:

- Belief in human reason, rationality, and in the progress of society. Natural sciences and education were regarded as important means for improving life conditions of all citizens, also workers.
- Utilitarian aspiration: the ideal was to maximise the utilitarian values of life for as many persons as possible. Such ideas were similar to Jeremy Bentham's ideal.
- The importance of active citizens: Every individual should participate in political life.

However, industrial work and its technological conditions were not included in the educational program. Instead, education of the workers was regarded as a compensation for industrial work (op. cit.).

#### The Neo-Classic educational ideal

Thus, the goal of citizenship education was utilitarian and pragmatic: knowledge was a means of attaining other goals, like improving the economical conditions of the workers. The attitude towards science and technology was friendly. However, this ideal was criticised by people adhering to neo-classical ideas for being too materialistic and narrow. Instead education should develop the human being and his personality. Knowledge was an end in itself, not a means for other ends.

Some leaders of the popular education of workers embraced the Neo-Classic educational ideal. However, in doing so, they also accepted the culture of the ruling class as the most valuable culture. The study circles adopted a cultural tradition and educational goals from the old ruling class. As a consequence, the workers' own culture, their work experiences and way of living were devalued (op.cit).

The reason for this might have been that leading representatives of WEA strived to put the status of workers' on a par with (so called) intellectual workers. It was regarded as important that also industrial workers learned to appreciate cultural activities like reading books of famous authors, listening to the opera, visiting museums, art exhibitions and so on, activities which had earlier been the privileges of the ruling class or the middle classes. The goal was to give workers access to "high" culture (Gustavsson, 1991; Ginner, 1988).

According to Ginner (1988), the basic ideas of the Neo-Classic educational ideal can be summarised as follows:

- Focus on the individual
- Critique of civilisation and a pronounced scepticism, even hostility, towards technology
- The cultural shaping of personality as the most important goal of education. Aesthetic and ethical training were means to this end and the standards were set in accordance with the culture of the ruling class.

Industrial work and its technological preconditions were excluded from the educational process. Thus, both citizenship education and neo-classic education were assigned a compensatory function for industrial work.

### From autonomy to dependency on the state

The learning processes going on in study circles soon became supported by the state. The labour movement also established folk high schools, i.e. schools for adult people, which gradually became more dependent and controlled by the state (Johansson-Eriksson & Johansson, 1999). The Temperance movement was also important for the life long learning process aiming at fostering orderly, tidy and well-behaved workers (Ambjörnsson, 1998). At the Workers' Institute in Stockholm lectures were held by researchers about new scientific findings in Natural sciences, psychology and the like (Frängsmyr, 1991). The state also supported researchers who travelled around the whole country to give lectures on different topics, for example the temperance issue (Johansson, 1987). In short: a huge life long learning process was stimulated.

What, then, was the result of the life long learning project of the Swedish workers? Well, many goals were attained, but it is difficult to judge to what extent this was a result of the educational policy of WEA. Anyway, the workers got the right to vote in 1921. From the 1930s to the 1970s Sweden was ruled by the Social Democrats. But as a consequence, WEA became almost part of the state apparatus.

During the first decades after WWII the Swedish economy prospered. The standards of life increased for all groups, and the belief in science as the means of developing society became even more firmly rooted in the workers' association. At the same time the nature of the workers' educational ideal changed. Earlier citizenship education had been a kind of bottom-up process, aiming at the mobilisation and activation of people. The ultimate end was to radically change society. However, the fact that the Labour Party was the ruling party might have promoted the idea that the battle for democracy was won, once and for all. The workers were turned into passive members that should be represented in political life by a few leaders. Therefore there was no longer any need, neither for training meeting techniques and language nor debating skills. In the 1950s and 1960s the life long learning process aimed at the rationalisation of working life and adjustment of workers to existing society, not at radical transformation of society and working conditions (Ginner, 1988).

Leisure time was regarded as a compensation for dull work tasks, and therefore leisure time must be spent on valuable activities: in this regard, neo-classical ideals were still prevalent. The worker's good taste must be educated as a counter-offensive to commercialism.

Ginner (1988) concludes that the poly-technical ideal has never influenced the policy of WEA. One reason for this is that the workers' own experiences were never highly valued. Another reason is that the belief in science and technology was firm. Science and technology would contribute to the positive development of society, and they were not questioned but taken for granted.

Today, the life long learning processes administrated by study circles are hardly part of a collective political project. However, study circles are sometimes used as a means for citizenship education. For example, when the Swedish people were to decide in a referendum whether to join the European Union or not, the state subsidised many study circles. In that way people should learn about the union and what the consequences of a membership or a non-membership would be. Thus, today occasionally the aim is to foster European citizens, not Swedish citizens as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Many study circles are also important for the development of personality and creativity: people meet in leisure time to paint, sew, turn ceramics etc. Cultural activities like reading literature are also going on in study circles all over the country. However, such study circles are organised by all political parties, not only the labour movement. My conclusion is that the contemporary life long learning process of Swedish workers has, to a large extent, turned into an individualistic rather than collective project.

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