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Learning as a life's work

BY HANS ZBINDEN

The 19th century saw the introduction of elementary education for all. Now we are faced with the challenge of comprehensive further education: universal and accessible to anyone who is interested in additional qualifications.

THE RAPID and dramatic changes sweeping our world and society are impacting us in contradictory ways. On the one hand they are releasing us from fetters, traditions and obligations, opening up new freedoms, choices and hence options for lifestyle and living. That is the upside of modernisation.

But this release from the constraints of habits and safety has its downside. It demands that we continually adapt, re-orientate and take personal responsibility for shaping our lives. The price of modernisation is uncertainty and the loss of security, ties, stability and routine. This is the downside of our modern world of social and cultural change.

In this contradictory environment of human and social existence, education and further education play a key communicative role. They span the bridge between the newly acquired freedoms of choice and lifestyle in a fast-changing world, and the uncertainties, problems of integration and threats that accompany such an environment.

Hartmut von Hentig, an established expert on pedagogy and educational policy, once stated: "The answer to the alleged or actual lack of orientation in this world is not science, nor information, nor the communication society, nor moral re-armament, nor more order, nor more personal experience and group dynamics, nor the frantic search for identity. Quite simply, it is more general education!"

Lifelong education as a compass

Von Hentig was talking of a comprehensive education and further education. Because education is not only an asset which enhances an individual; in a democratic society it is also a valuable material which holds society together at its very core, since such a society promotes the equitable distribution of this vital asset, irrespective of regional origins, age, gender, social class or race.

On the one hand this is due to the prerequisites of persons interested in further education. People who have successfully completed a basic education are keen to go on to further education. On the other hand, integration in the job market and career success play an extremely important role.

In terms of age, under-55s are significantly more interested in further education than older age groups. On a comparison of linguistic regions, German-speaking Switzerland is much more active in further education than the French-speaking and Italian-speaking regions of the country.

The gender factor is particularly marked in further education. Men account for a far higher percentage in professional training than women. This underlines the male domination in the upper echelons of business. In terms of general non-professional education, however, women account for a resounding 70 per cent of students.

There are also major discrepancies in the range of further education options on offer. Thus Swiss further education, which neither government nor cantons are helping to shape, is dominated by a diverse, lively yet at the same time un-coordinated and incohesive range of offerings from different providers.

As a result there are major variations in the accessibility, quality, transparency and funding of existing further education offerings and institutes. Only a fundamental political re-assessment of further education and a joint effort on the part of government, cantons and the general public will lead to the creation of common goals and development strategies for a Swiss further education policy, among other things through integrated modular concepts, public quality checks and a financing system harmonised between those interested in education, private companies and the public sector.

"Further Education Forum" established

In Berne the "Further Education Forum" has been created with Vreni Müller-Hemmi, National Councillor for the Zurich SP, as President. According to Heinrich Summermatter of the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology, the aim is to increase the quality and structure of further education in Switzerland: "As an informal organ, the Forum will provide a platform for co-ordination and information in the adult education field."

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The art of learning

Absorbing knowledge or re-learning how to study calls for a strong, clear motivation as well as an internal desire and a deep-seated willingness to take personal responsibility for further education and commit oneself to life-long learning: coupled with confidence in one's own abilities, the courage to overcome difficulties, and a curiosity and interest in questions and problems of a social or cultural nature.

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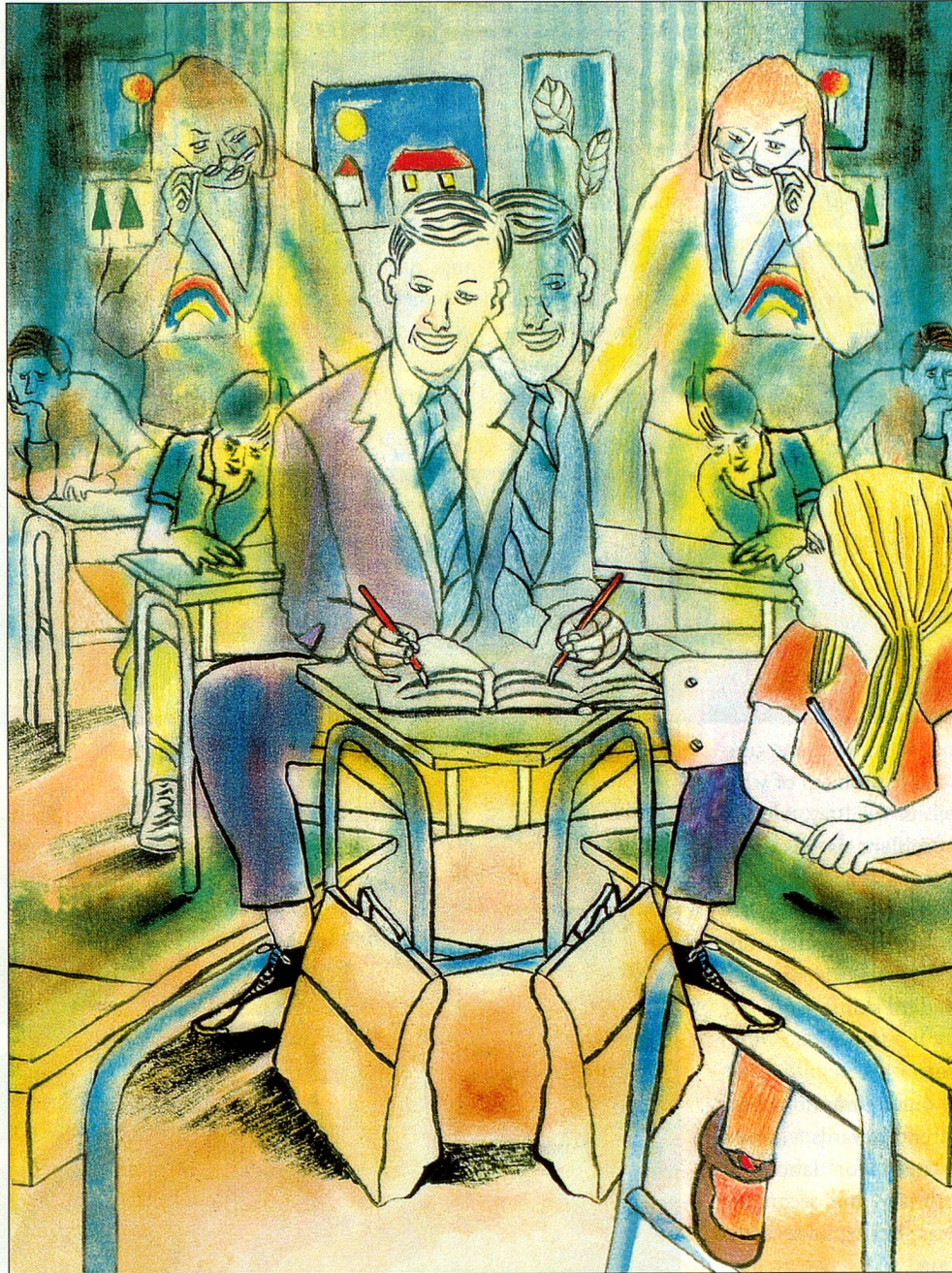



Illustration: Eugen Bachmann-Geiser

Even at an advanced age it's never too late to go back to school.

These prerequisites are at the core of the ability to learn. They form the foundation on which a life of ongoing personal and professional development can be built. All efforts at further education stand and fall by these precepts for learning to learn. The concept of a need for further education must therefore be continually instilled at the basic education stage. All students will subsequently become responsible seekers of knowledge, able to shape their life of study with their own hands.

For this reason they need to develop self-assessment skills at an early stage, along with

learning maps which will help them to find their way through the educational maze. This way they will be able to practice self-criticism and recognise in good time where

there are gaps in their education and where new paths can be taken on the road to personal further development. 

Vouchers for further education?

The canton of Solothurn has submitted a state initiative, calling on the government to intensify its commitment in the further education area in order to increase the numbers of people attending further education. The main proposal concerns demand-indexed promotion and funding whereby, rather than the suppliers, persons in further education are subsidised by means of vouchers. The proposed change in the system has been submitted as a postulate to the Federal Council. LS