

Lifelong Learning in Denmark: The History and Current Challenges of Labour Market Training

Lars Qvortrup, Dean of the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant – Europe’s great Enlightenment philosopher – was born in 1724 and died in 1804. His great project was enlightenment, the enlightenment of men to become modern citizens, that is, citizens who could make use of their reason in order to realize their freedom.

Kant lived his entire life in the little town of Königsberg, where he served as professor of philosophy at the town’s university. Because he taught at the university and because his project was enlightenment, he also spent a lot of time thinking about education. In 1803 – the year before he died – some of his students published his thoughts and writings on education.

One of the fundamental questions for Kant was why people even go to school. What are they doing there? Why not just stay at home on the farm or at the local shop and learn what happens there by imitation? Why isn’t home schooling – or an apprenticeship, one could add – good enough?

Kant’s answer was that, if education were left solely to the home or the master, then the people so raised and educated would never achieve what he pompously called “the purpose of their existence.” In that case, the individual would be bound by “the limitations of the immediate”, he wrote.

But why am I pulling Immanuel Kant out of the archives on a day like today? I’m doing so because this is exactly the same challenge that was the foundation for the founding of Adult Vocational Training (AVT) 50 years ago – a challenge that has permeated AVT ever since, even if it wasn’t expressed in terms as broad as Kant used at the beginning of the 19th century: How can you free people to develop themselves – and beyond Kant, how can you change people without thereby tearing them from the reality in which they must (continue to) live and function? This is the challenge for any project involving education or upbringing, and so has it also been

for the huge, wildly ambitious project that AVT has realised over these past 50 years.

Even from the start, the goal was change: But change that was not supposed to lead you *out* of a particular reality but to lead you *back* to the very same reality.

In 1960, Denmark was facing two enormous challenges: Agricultural workers were moving to the city to become industrial workers, and women were leaving home to enter the job market.

This double challenge may be illustrated by the case of Funen, the second largest island of Denmark with the city of Odense. Since the beginning of the 20th Century, Odense had a shipyard – the Odense Steel Shipyard. Unskilled workers were employed there, while their wives looked after their children and their homes. But in 1959 – the year before AVT’s birth – a new shipyard was inaugurated: the old steel shipyard was moved out of the city to Munkebo. At the Lindø Shipyard in Munkebo, there was plenty of room in every sense of the phrase. Even in 1959, they already had two drydocks, where they could build ships up to 200,000 tons deadweight; and, in 1969, they added a third dock with the capacity for 600,000 tons deadweight along with the shipyard’s landmark, a huge gantry crane with a lift capacity of 1000 tons. This was the largest gantry crane in Denmark, and it could be seen across the flat landscape almost all the way from Odense. The signal was clear: this is where the most advanced and largest tank and container ships were being built, using the most advanced production methods. There was great pride in August 2006 when the world’s largest container ship, the Emma Maersk, was towed with great care out of the shipyard, so you could almost touch the hull from the edge of the shore of Funen’s Head, a peninsula jutting out north of Odense.

When the shipyard was at its peak, it employed 3-4000 workers. And where did they come from? Some, of course, came along from the Steel Shipyard in Odense, but many, many others came from all over Funen. The prerequisite for them to get a job, however, was that they had to be retrained – from agricultural work to industrial labour and from life in the country to life in a modern suburban house: They had to be highly-specialized welders and painters and ship’s carpenters. But they also had to be modern suburban house dwellers. Therefore, they needed to unlearn everything deriving from “present conditions,” as Kant called it. They

needed to acquire specialized skills that were standardized but labour-market relevant. But they also needed to learn to be industrial workers, that is, to be part of a collective whole. In other words, there was both a competency element and what in German is called a *Bildung* (an acculturation) element in what they were supposed to learn. They had to change as wage-earners in the expectation that the welding course they were taking fit exactly with what was required to be a welder at Lindø. But they also had to change as people and as citizens: They had to unlearn the way of life of a farm worker in order to become an industrial worker with a sense of precision and a collective thought process. At the same time, however, there was an expectation that this one change in qualifications, skills and outlook were sufficient for the rest of life. People changed, yes, from farm worker to industrial worker, but they did not make themselves “ready for change” as we understand it today, that is, ready and competent for recurring change. When in 2009 it was announced that the Lindø Shipyard was to close, the statement made by the union shop steward Per Andersen to the newspaper *Politiken* was characteristic: “Many people are not only losing a job, they are losing an *identity*. We were proud of working at the Lindø Shipyard, of working for the Møller concern, and of being a part of the trade union movement on Funen.” That’s the way it was then, but that’s not the way it is today. Today, we are not looking for a life-long identity but a flexible one.

But women also went through a transformation. Think about what it meant to go to Munkebo: A.P. Møller-Mærsk did not only build a shipyard. They also built a little town of small, single-family cluster houses and condominiums, which were practical for the modern family: With backyards, shared facilities (laundry, etc.), and access to kindergartens and schools. One of the points was that this made it possible for the father to work at the Lindø Shipyard even as the mother had the opportunity to make her entry into other aspects of the workforce. Therefore, women had to learn to be wage-earners in the service, textile, or electronics industries. They – through AVT, among other ways – had to go through, perhaps, an even greater readjustment: They had to acquire relevant skills at the same time they had to administer a whole new way of life. You can see it in the suburb that still exists there, which was the first wave of the biggest building boom of our day: Koch houses. But you can also see it in the advertisements from that time: This is when,

so to speak, self-cleaning housekeeping products were introduced, and the first supermarkets were established. In fact, the first Føtex store opened in Århus in 1960. And why was it and is it called “Føtex” (“Fotex”, in English)? Because it was the first supermarket where you could buy both “fo” and “tex”, both foodstuffs and textiles, in one place. For the modern woman who was handy and efficient wanted to do her shopping at one stop when she biked home from the job just before closing time.

It was this whole revolution to which AVT was an answer: The greatest overall social change in Denmark since the Second World War demanded a revolution in vocational education. And the education that emerged was in many ways a reflection of the labour market from which it grew: Education was centrally organized; and teaching, which was based on centrally-produced teaching materials, was aimed at the instruction of defined operations and skills. If you couldn't keep up with a course, you had to drop out, and this in itself provided a significant socialization aspect with respect to the often very diverse and self-sufficient farm workers who participated. They learned – in short – to be industrial workers. But they also learned that an emphasis was being put on skills different from those the public school supported; and, for many, therefore, these courses with their focus on practical skills were the first real success they experienced in the education system.

One of the characteristic things about this revolution in the Danish education system was that it was implemented as a *national* project. Act no. 194 of 18 May 1960 on the vocational education of unskilled workers was adopted by a unanimous vote of Parliament, because education – even at that time – was a matter of decisive significance for the welfare of society.

A second characteristic thing was that, at that time, AVT was incredibly centralized. Not only was the primary responsibility for education placed in the education council. Its foreman was even appointed by His Majesty King Frederik IX.

A third thing was that AVT required what in modern terms is called partnership: The education council's 14 members were selected by The Danish Employers' Confederation and The Confederation of Danish Trades Unions on an equal basis, because these organizations took on a significant responsibility in connection with the task of implementing education in real life.

And one could possibly add a fourth thing: namely, that the state came in and provided a grant for up to 85 percent of the operating expenses. For then, like today, one idea was that a way to ensure relevance was partial user payment. Another idea was that education was an investment and not an expense: An investment to secure the continued development of social wealth, whether this wealth is measured in gross national product or in cultural participation and citizenship. AVT was and remained large and expensive. In 1987, the total annual operating expenses exceeded a dizzying billion Danish crowns (200 million USD), while salary and mileage allowances for the participants cost over 700 million Danish crowns (140 million USD) .

Thus, my first point is: Education is an investment in the welfare of society and a project to which all parties contribute and for which they take responsibility.

My second point is that every education – particularly, AVT – must be both liberated from and closely connected to the reality of the labour market. Upbringing and education are transformational projects, but they must not transform students away from their reality but, rather, transform them into independent actors and, thus, resources for the job market. This challenge has characterized the whole history of AVT, in the concrete, in the pedagogical and professional, and in the organizational structure. Pedagogically, they have tried to meet the challenge by – for example, in 2001 – distinguishing between but at the same time linking together specific, general, and personal qualifications. Structurally, they have done it by gradually developing a system of units: Preparatory adult education, basic adult education, vocational adult education, and general adult education. Physically, they have done it by offering education “on site”; because when teaching takes place at the workplace, it ensures that the student can make a connection between theory and practice and that the teacher is obligated to be specific. The teaching takes place on the student’s and not the teacher’s premises. But also on a completely personal plane, it has always been a challenge that was not always successfully tackled. Just listen to part of an interview with a course participant from a 1987 evaluation: “The vocational course has been fine. (...) But the general course was terrible. (...) Most of the class, for example, were passive the whole time with geometry – we didn’t understand it (...) and the teachers’ incompetence made it impossible for us to get anything out of the – quote – ‘teaching.’” Here is someone who has very definitely

not been able to link the general with the professionally specific and, to put it mildly, is not kindly disposed to that part of the teaching, which evokes memories of a failed public school education.

But at the same time that AVT has a duty to be specific and relevant to the reality of the course participants, AVT must also always be a forward-looking. This is my third point: AVT has been characterized by the fact that, at least at decisive time points, it has been one step ahead of the trend. It has been a sort of educational “product development machine” they created in 1960: An education system that is “ready for change”, to use today’s jargon.

But if this is correct, I must also ask the question: What challenges do we face today? Where are we headed?

Perhaps, this question can best be answered if we return to Munkebo in northern Funen: With the closing of the Lindø Shipyard in 2009, A.P. Møller-Mærsk decided that they would convert the area into an industrial park where the shipyard’s facilities could service new businesses in the area. An example of how this idea could be transformed into reality came in March 2010, when the company Skykon Offshore entered into an agreement to lease 100,000 square meters, corresponding to 10 percent of the acreage of the industrial park at the Lindø Shipyard. Thus, 220 new workplaces have been added to the area.

This is an emblem of the new times: In 2010, it won’t do to bind your whole identity up with your job and the way of life it currently represents, because nowadays people must be able to manoeuvre in a complex and changeable labour market, a sort of national industrial/business park, where jobs and workplaces come and go and where there are always new demands for qualifications and skills within the same business and industry.

What demands will current trends make on the AVT system – not over the next 50 years, because no one can see that far, but just over the next ten years?

I would like to formulate it in five points:

1. Even more people need to improve their qualifications. It has reached a point where only a very, very few can make a living as unskilled labour. I agree with

the foreman for the Adult and Continuing Education Council, Kjeld Møller Pedersen, that the AVT system must contribute to making many unskilled workers into what he calls “half-skilled.”

2. I also agree with him that we need to spend more time on the phenomenon of practical competencies. For some years, we have worked with and tried to develop systems for the valuation of practical competencies, but we need to work on it more. To be able to evaluate prior learning and to be able to operationalize these valuations in a career plan for the individual citizen is a prerequisite for the AVT system to function on the preconditions of our time in which many wage-earners do not only change their work identity once but many times over the course of their working lives. And it is a precondition for career planning to become something for which the individual wage-earner takes responsibility and makes himself or herself a subject.
3. Then, we have to put great effort into strengthening basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. It is a sad fact that 15-20 percent of those who leave school in Denmark after the 9th grade do not possess these basic skills that modern employers require. They cannot complete a qualifying education; they cannot read the manuals required for them to carry out, for example, janitorial work. Today, it has fallen to adult and continuing education centres to provide preparatory adult education as an option, as it is so beautifully put, for “adults who wish to improve their ability to read, spell, write, or do arithmetic.” I am impressed at the efforts these adult and continuing education centres make, but I think at the same time that it is shameful that such an effort is necessary to the extent it is. This should not be a problem for the country’s adult education but should be solved in and by the public schools.
4. The AVT system must also do its bit to put the brakes on a too early withdrawal from the labour market. The debate about early retirement is raging, but instead of only arguing for or against early retirement, one could also focus much more on that segment of the labour force that is in their late 50s. For many, there is a great need for what in the old days was called retraining and today is called continuing education. Many can and should remain in the labour force – even in their 60s – but in a job (at least, for many

of them) that has other requirements than those for which young people are rewarded.

5. But, as my last point, I would like to return to what I started with: It is necessary to continue to integrate the so-called “soft” qualifications into adult vocational education. It was necessary even in 1960. It became painfully clear in the 1980s. But it is absolutely crucial in the complex reality of our day. I’m impressed by the examples there are of AVT going in as a sparring partner in relation to competency assessment and competency development, *inter alia*, in connection with strategic development projects with small businesses, and I am convinced that, today more than ever, it is important not just to learn *something* but to learn to learn. At the same time, it is crucially important that these sorts of qualifications are closely linked with the education’s focus on practice, because it must not happen that it all becomes abstract and theoretical, for then you can rightly blame education for being “academic” in a bad way. Therefore, in my opinion, we should focus even more on qualifying the many teachers who work in the AVT system. As is well-known, we talk a lot – sometimes almost *too* much – about teacher education for the public schools. But, perhaps, we are talking too *little* about adult pedagogy or AVT pedagogy.

And so I would like to add on my own behalf: We often have visits to The Danish School of Education from foreign delegations that would like to know something about adult education and lifelong learning in Denmark; and, of course, I relate to them everything I’ve said today. But I also try to tell them the real secret behind the success of the AVT system: namely, that it is guided and administered by the labour market. “That can’t be,” they say – but it can.

But I would also like to start a discussion of two hot potatoes: an historical one and a forward-looking one. The *historical* discussion is whether AVT has always helped get the unemployed back into the work force. Has it succeeded or, in some instances, has AVT been a sort of buffer zone in relation to the fluctuations of the labour market? We could learn something from a straightforward, unsentimental study of this. The forward-looking one is whether we could advantageously introduce other guidance mechanisms into AVT (and other parts of the education system). I’m thinking of what is called, in an excellent word, “accountability”. This means that

you control the output (not just the number but also the acquired skills or, perhaps, the return to and relevance of the labour market) and give a free hand to the input side, that is, in relation to the professional and educational organization.

But if this sort of project is important, it is not just because we would like to understand why it works as well as it does. It is also because we are dealing with a bumble bee that is facing very great challenges in the coming years: Not only are the requirements for qualifications and skills today completely different from 50 years ago. I also believe that the Danish labour market is facing the threat of a bifurcation in which, on one side, we'll have the knowledge-heavy businesses that will increasingly operate in a global market and will be located where research-based qualifications are found. And, on the other side, we'll have those businesses that operate in the domestic market and still think nationally. AVT should avoid to contribute to cementing such a bifurcation.

As I started by saying, the Danish AVT project is reminiscent of the project launched by Immanuel Kant 200 years ago. But on two points, it is both different and more ambitious. It is *different* in the fact that, whereas Kant took his starting point in the human being as citizen, the AVT project takes its starting point in the human being as wage-earner, citizen, and human being – in that order. Therefore, the project is not just a 'Bildung' project, but a skills *and* 'Bildung' project. It is far more *ambitious* because, whereas Kant was only thinking of the elite, the AVT project is aimed at everyone – even, and particularly, those whom the ordinary education system has not been able to help.

But on one point, the projects are the same: The goal is to elevate people *above* the limitations of "present conditions" without *alienating* them from those conditions. That is – today and also in the next 50 years – a feat.