

Theme 4: Nordic Folkeoplysning/Folkbildning and worldwide challenges

The impact on the global challenges in lifelong learning of tomorrow from the tradition of folkeoplysning/folkbildning in the Nordic countries.

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Scandinavia has a more than 150 years tradition of folkeoplysning/folkbildning. From the start of the folk high school movement in Denmark in the 1840th through the “invention” of the Study Circle in Swedish labour- and temperance movements in the very beginning of the 20th century (1902) you can follow a line up to our days where the development of democracy goes hand in hand with learning and enlightenment.

Because of this connection, many parts of the world have through the years showed interest in “Nordic folkeoplysning/folkbildning”. That is why, when ICAE comes to Scandinavia, we will take the opportunity to enlighten this tradition in several seminars and workshops.

ICAEs connections to the Scandinavian tradition is tight and strong, taking into consideration e.g. that the Nordic countries for many years have supported the work of ICAE, and that ICAE also previously have had important meetings in “the North”. The first IALLA-seminar was held in Norway, at Buskerud Folk High School just back in 2004, and the second in the same place the year after.

This note is about the tradition, and present and future challenges for Nordic folkeoplysning/folkbildning and its possible impact and broader challenges in lifelong learning tomorrow in a global context.

The Nordic countries have been active cooperating partners in lifelong learning and literacy work, policy development in the field and in discussions concerning the role of education and learning for sustainable development, basic skills, the rise of democracy and citizenship etc. – and as such our tradition also is important in a broader context than learning in itself.

The Nordic term “folkeoplysning”(Danish/Norwegian) or the Swedish synonym “Folkbildning” is close to “liberal education and learning”, “popular learning”, “popular education” and “community learning” but has also its special characteristics.

In a new report from the Danish Ministry of Education on “Folkeoplysning and its impact on society”¹ “folkeoplysning” is defined like this (my free translation):

Nordic folkeoplysning consists of liberal education and learning, the education and learning of organizations within civil society and social movements, day folk high schools, popular universities and residential folk high schools². It has never and will never be ruled neither by tradition, science nor the state, but alone be moved by what the popular movements and the popular meetings face to face show up as “benchmarks” for the good life and the democratic development of society. The core of folkeoplysning is the active and voluntary participation in common activities.”

This profile of folkeoplysning/folkbildning tells us much about the close connection this tradition has established from the start 150 years ago and up to now between the

¹ Folkeoplysningens samfundsmæssige betydning – rapport fra Folkeoplysningsudvalget 2010

² Folk high schools after the ”Grundtvig concept”, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1782 – 1873)

democratic development in society and the peoples' own power to develop their own education and learning; their empowerment.

Colleagues from other parts of the world have questioned: Why do the state and public authorities finance (learning) activities that they cannot (and will not) control?

It's been a crucial criterion for folkeoplysning/folkbildning to be free and independent. All the same, the state is funding organized activities built on this tradition, called courses and – especially in Sweden and Norway – study circles.

What has folkeoplysning/folkbildning – in this traditional context – to bring to adult learning and education of today and the future?

In what way can it be an answer to the main global challenges of today – such as illiteracy, sustainable development, climate change, gender issues, active citizenship and so on?

These must be the main questions to rise at the ICAE World Assembly.

How to do it?

We have to make folkeoplysning/folkbildning visible, both in theory and practice, and we wish to have contributions both from researchers, teachers, practitioners and participants. Added to this, we wish to set up “mirrors” to challenge the Nordic tradition, by having inputs from other parts of the world, places where the Nordic concept has been tried – both with success and failure. A dialogue between Nordic popular educators (folkeopplysere/folkbildare) and people from other parts of the world (such as South Africa, Brazil, the Philippines) is one way of doing this “mirroring”.

We wish to enlighten, among other themes:

The value/s and benefit of folkeoplysning/folkbildning

The Global Citizenship – what can be learnt from the Nordic tradition and what can the Nordic tradition learn from other parts of the world?

Nordic folkeoplysning/folkbildning and the question of migration and multiculturality

The concept “Pedagogy³ for the Rich”

Cases from different parts of the world using study circles and folk high school methods.

A workshop held by the Swedish Association for research in popular learning.

The tradition and impact of N.F.S. Grundtvig.

The Study Circle method for “learning democratically”

The influence of Paolo Freire in the North, and vice versa.

The concept “Nordic folkeoplysning/folkbildning and worldwide challenges” will in Malmö be elaborated further in cooperation between Nordic colleagues, practitioners, researchers and others.

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³ This is the name of the project, but “Education for the rich” might give a better understanding in English. As I read it, the title is ironic.