

John Funnell Ohliger

A Brief Biography of His Life and Vocations

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John Ohliger was visible and vocal on the adult education landscape for over fifty years. He was a radical liberal scholar, a social instigator, and a communicator extraordinaire, and his roles included union educator, a facilitator for the Great Books Foundation, proponent of media and community education, and academic adult educator. His active relationship with the field of study and practice ended with his passing on January 25, 2004, but his influence remains.

Ohliger is best known for “battl[ing] self-serving professionalism and the mandatory education of adults” (Cunningham, 1991, p. 361). As William S. Griffith (1991) puts it in a backhanded compliment, “With his dedication to adult learning as a vehicle for improving the quality of life, Ohliger has served as the self-appointed conscience of the field, stimulating serious examinations of the commonly accepted popular notions of the appropriate use of adult education” (p. 113). However, John was not haughty. Indeed, he was a humble soul who could connect with people in deep and meaningful ways and learn from his mistakes. While many of his contemporaries might have disagreed with this assessment of a man whom they usually saw as a feisty radical and field dissenter, there is much more to John than the excesses of his personality. In his heart, he was always a social democrat who valued liberal ideals as they related to learner freedom and the learner’s capacity to be and

develop as a person. His ambition was to have every adult learner belong as a citizen in caring communities that made social inclusion, cohesion, and justice the centerpieces of their development.

John was often an angry American. He called himself a radical liberal, a self-characterization that underscored his commitment to a social democracy where citizens as learners, workers, and community members could learn about civics, participation, ethics, and the political ideals of modernity: democracy, freedom, and social justice. John believed in the power of community and in education and activism as vehicles to advance social and cultural learning in formal and informal contexts. He placed value on media as sites to engender social conversations and on arts-based education using the power of poetry and song. He saw both media and the arts as dynamic vehicles for reflexive engagement that promoted dialogue.

Much of John's work from the 1970s onward focused on saving the best of embedded liberalism (associated with entrenching the welfare state and advancing the social; see the description in Harvey, 2005). In doing so, John challenged what is now entrenched as the ideology of neoliberalism that has found expression in the professionalization, individualization, instrumentalization, and institutionalization of adult education. In his quest to defy the systematization of adult education and revitalize social democracy, John was inspired by a lineage of social educators including Eduard Lindeman. Quoting Lindeman in a 1991 reflection on the history of the social philosophy of adult education, Ohliger suggested that these words from a speech that Lindeman gave to the New York City Adult Education Association "were sadly prophetic": "There is ultimate danger that the professional leadership in this movement might get itself in the same box as has the professional leadership in our conventional education" (p. 16). Here John singled out Malcolm Knowles for blame, noting that Knowles, during his tenure as executive director of the Adult Education Association, had sought to have adult education firmly positioned as "the fourth level of our national educational system" (p. 18). Indeed Ohliger (1975) had

long seen Knowles as part of a large and successful professionalizing contingent in the field who had nevertheless naively overestimated the cultural importance of adult education amid political and economic determinants that had greater power to change culture and society. Judging their quest to professionalize adult education, Ohliger felt this contingent had contributed to controlling adult learners to fit into “a rigid, standardized, calcified, ossified, vocationalized world” where no links are made to “energy, environment, economic, population, and resource crises” (p. 39). Moreover, Ohliger (1975) believed these “professional” adult educators had incarcerated adult learners in “a [learning] society where instruction is the dominant overriding mode of learning for supposedly mature adults” (p. 38). Within this instrumentalizing milieu, Ohliger described adult learning as detached from its social history as “mutual learning, free discussion, and the raising of basic questions in educational contexts” (p. 38). Here he blamed academic adult educators for what he considered to be the social demise of the field of study and practice, stating that “too many people have become academics in adult education without any real commitment to it or any sense of responsibility to the development of the discipline” (p. 38). This left Ohliger (1975) questioning whether the notion of the learning society could be salvaged to advance equality and social justice for independent learners.

A Chronology of Ohliger’s Life and His Half-Century in Adult Education

John Funnell Ohliger worked in adult education for over fifty years. He declared, “From the 1950s on I defined myself as an ‘adult educator.’ But that term has become encrusted with corporate sales junk about the wonders of training and engulfed with bureaucratic oppression forcing most adults to go back to school” (Ohliger, 1997, part 1, p. 4). Despite this assertion, and probably because of it, Ohliger, as a social educator, journalist, consultant, researcher, editor, writer,

radio host, peace activist, and public speaker, made adult education more than his line of work. It was his heartfelt vocation, and the focal point for his commitment to and passion for radical social education and social justice that focused on the freedom of citizens as learners and workers. Ohliger's social philosophy and his radical approach to practice are variously described among more than two hundred manuscripts, from book reviews to extensive bibliographies that comprise his intellectual legacy. Of course, in his humility, Ohliger felt any sober treatment of his work in this book might give "the impression of intense, almost insane grimness" since "much of my so-called 'work' is flippant and almost all of it is superficial" (e-mail communication, March 9, 2003).

Still, such self-deprecation mixed with humility and a little humor cannot belie this fact: John Ohliger had a deep knowledge of the overall field of study and practice, which he criticized as much as he loved it. Whether colleagues were liberal or conservative, criticalist or instrumentalist, on the fringes of the field or in the mainstream, they could all feel the sting of his words when their ideas clashed. Ohliger's perception of radical social education situated adult education as proactive, voluntary, adventurous, freewheeling, and dedicated to making the lot of citizens better. Many people and many things bewildered Ohliger, not the least of which was the perplexing nature of adult education. In his Christmas 2003 *Basic Choices Newsletter*, Ohliger expressed his puzzlement: "I am still confused by the fact that, though there are more dollars and personnel devoted to adult education than all other portions of education combined, the field itself is still practically invisible" (excerpt from the newsletter, in e-mail communication, December 16, 2003).

In our early stages of researching and writing this book, John was still with us. After we shared the book proposal with him, John, being the bibliographer, journalist, and scribe that he was, commented:

These are offhand comments and, if used, will need more complete or correct bibliographic references. First, it has just occurred to me that I'm more of a journalist than an

adult educator, or maybe a journalist on/in adult education. If a journalist writes “a first draft of history,” then that’s more where I am than a scholar. I’ve been writing journalism since high school, as well as in the army and elsewhere, and have put out a number of journalistic newsletters over the years.

I identify more with journalists in adult education (who, as I have, wrote in other fields as well) such as Sam Brightman, Ron Gross, and Bob Blakeley (an editorial writer who was VP of the Fund for Adult Education), C. Hartley Grattan (who wrote for *Atlantic Monthly* and other magazines, and author of the only history of adult education I like), and Lyman Bryson (more of a radio journalist). . . . Of course, journalists don’t have a very good name these days (see *Sneer when you say journalist* by Michael D’Antonio in the *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 2003), but perhaps citing some of the great ones from the past will help rehabilitate the label [e-mail communication, August 28, 2003].

Many of John’s characteristics come through in this e-mail: his lifetime puzzlement over his space and place in the world, his fastidiousness as a journalist, his voracious appetite for reading, and his desire to acknowledge peers whom he admired. And, of course, there was his humility. In a later e-mail (August 29, 2003), he reflected, “I should have made it clear that I regard myself in the same category (‘journalist’) as the great and unheralded Sam Brightman . . . and others, but not the same class.” John always second-guessed himself, and one could sense a pervasive insecurity about the man. Contributors to this book provide various reasons for this, not the least of which is the degradation he experienced at the hands of certain field colleagues after he left his position at Ohio State University.

What follows is a brief chronology of some highlights from John’s life and career (Hiemstra & Goldstein, 1990; Nathans, 2004; Ohliger, n.d.). A more extensive chronology is found in Hiemstra

and Goldstein's (1990) *John Ohliger: Personal Vita*, which is posted on a Web site that has been updated over time:

- 1926 Born in Cleveland, Ohio, to Louis and Aura (Funnell) Ohliger on November 11
- 1944 Graduated from Northern High School in Detroit, Michigan, where he grew up
- 1948 Completed his three-year stint as an information specialist, newspaper reporter, and writer in the U.S. Army in the former West Germany, where he had his first experience as an adult educator teaching radio Morse code to other soldiers
- 1951 Completed a bachelor of arts, majoring in social sciences and speech, from Wayne State University, which had taken less than three years due to special considerations given for prior learning to World War II veterans under the 1944 GI Bill
- 1956 Began his second adult educational venture: two years of work with the Extension Program, University of California, Los Angeles
- 1957 With a one-year leadership grant from the Ford Foundation's Fund for Adult Education, completed a master's in adult education from the University of California, Los Angeles
- 1960 Having completed advanced studies in adult education with Cyril O. Houle at the University of Chicago in the late 1950s, and following what he describes as an abortive attempt to start doctoral work with him, returned to California to work in alternative adult educational broadcasting
- 1966 Graduated with an educational doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles, where he

completed his dissertation, “The Listening Group in Adult Education”

- 1967 Completed a one-year stint in Canada as the director of continuing education at Selkirk College in Castlegar, British Columbia’s first regional community college

- 1971 Received the Ivan D. Illich Dystopia Award, which he described as the greatest honor he had ever received, for his critical writing on lifelong schooling, notably his 1971 article, “Adult Education: 1984” (published in *Adult and Continuing Education Today* and included as Chapter Three in this book) [“My memoir mentions the party in Cuernavaca where the award was presented, where Ivan supplied a case of tequila. I still have one of the empty bottles and the powdered worm” (e-mail communication, August 28, 2003).]

- 1973 Having worked for several years as an assistant and then associate professor in the graduate adult education program, left Ohio State University, offering this reason: disenchantment with what he saw as the decline of social education and voluntary participation in academe and the commodification of adult education to bolster economic advancement

That same year moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and cofounded WORT-FM, an alternative, public access radio station

- 1976 Having consulted and freelanced as a visiting lecturer at several universities in Canada and the United States after leaving Ohio State University, founded Basic Choices in Madison, Wisconsin, as a center for exploring and clarifying social and political ideas and actions in radical education for adults

- 1993 Received a Certificate of Recognition from the Adult Education Graduate Program, Syracuse University, for outstanding contributions to the field, which Malcolm S. Knowles acknowledged by saying, "Just keep up the good work"
- 2002 Inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame
- 2004 Died January 25 at age seventy-seven in Madison, Wisconsin

Another Pilgrim of the Obvious: Getting to Know John Ohliger

We end this brief biography with stories of how we came to know John Ohliger. These stories help explain why we wanted to complete this edited book as a tribute to John and a testament to his influence as a radical social educator.

We both were drawn to John Ohliger's intellectual and cultural work as graduate students, although we found him following different paths. Like Ivan Illich, who labeled himself a "pilgrim of the obvious" (Ohliger, 1997), we see John as another important pilgrim, as a wayfarer exposing the conventional and the cliché in adult education. In the vignettes that follow, each of us describes how we became intrigued with this man as a radical social educator and an oppositional voice in our field of study and practice.

Tonette's Vignette: Joining the Club

William D. Dowling and John Ohliger both came to work in the adult education program at Ohio State University in 1967. They were colleagues until John resigned in 1973. Dowling retired in 1992, but returned frequently to visit. As a new graduate student in the adult education program in 1992, I found Dowling's lunchtime stories about John Ohliger fascinating and funny. However, I would

learn that these stories often misrepresented John and his intentions. For example, as a required reading, I read Phyllis Cunningham's (1992) chapter on ethics in adult education in which she presented a very different story of Ohliger. She took OSU to task for its "unethical" treatment of him, asserting, "When John Ohliger spoke out on mandatory continuing education and, on principle, resigned his tenured full professorship [sic] at Ohio State University, he was punished by many, if not most, in the professorate, who either ignored him or acted directly against him" (pp. 111–112). This piqued my curiosity, and I set out to discover, or uncover, the "truth" about John Ohliger.

Around the fall of 1993, I began corresponding with John. I presented my first paper on him in the fall of 1995. The paper made him very angry: I had promised him space in it to present his views, but this did not happen, and he demanded that I withdraw it. I went ahead with the presentation, believing that withdrawing it would be unethical too. I began by describing his anger with me and why he was angry. Various members of the audience spoke to me, welcoming me into the club of people with whom John had been variously angry over time. They assured me that it would pass and told me not to worry. Scared to death, I felt an obligation to tell John how the presentation went. We were pretty much okay after that. In 1999, when the Adult Education Research Conference was held at the University of Northern Illinois in DeKalb, John drove to meet me for the first time. I was ecstatic. My fascination—with both his views and his life—persists.

As this book was evolving, John asked me to correct the misperception that he had been a full professor when he left OSU (Cunningham, 1992). Ohliger was at Ohio State from 1967 to 1973. When he left OSU, he was an associate professor in adult education. He had become disillusioned with higher education. In his account of an interview with John for an adult education history project on leaders in the field, Andrew Goldstein related, "When I asked him what followed, he stated that he 'left' Ohio State in 1973

to ‘pursue other options’ [after some disagreement with Ohio State administrators]. . . . The ‘social change,’ as fostered by the university, served, apparently, to stifle him” (Hiemstra & Goldstein, 1990, p. 1). Ohliger did not like institutional change translated as moves toward increased professionalization and more formalized adult learning. He never served as a tenure-track faculty member again. Instead, in addition to his work with Basic Choices, his Madison, Wisconsin, center devoted to the study and practice of radical liberal education for adults, he included visiting professor or guest speaker at numerous universities among his many roles.

Throughout his life, John abhorred what he saw as an increasing use of education to correct behavior that society found deficient. He worried about the increasing gap between people with access to knowledge and those who do not have the same access. He wrote, “No conceivable society can exist without a minimum of required learning, but the requirements should arise from the necessities of the human scale situation, not from rigidly imposed laws, regulations, or social pressures. . . . Don’t get me wrong. I live and breathe education most of my days, but I see it as a sacred and delicate delight only subtly approachable. It is certainly not a sledgehammer solution to our personal and social crises” (Ohliger, 1985, p. 1). For me, these words capture John’s social philosophy of education.

André’s Vignette: Tasting Each Situation with Gusto

My interest in John Ohliger and his work began during my doctoral studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Somehow on my arrival there, I was lucky enough to be assigned to Edgar Friedenberg’s old office, which proved to be an intellectual gold mine. Friedenberg came to prominence as a radical educator in the 1960s. In his book *Coming of Age in America: Growth and Acquiescence* (1965), he interrogated U.S. high school education, claiming it provided youth with an undemocratic experience as it trained them to be compliant citizens who maintained the status quo. Professor Friedenberg had left many books and articles behind when he

retired to live in rural Nova Scotia. As I rummaged around his bookshelves, I found, sitting alongside works by Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, and others, writings by Ivan Illich. I was personally disillusioned with the strangulation of education by conservative forces since the 1980s, and I voraciously read these variously liberal, critical, and radical intellectuals. In particular, the transgressive nature of Illich's writings energized me. Later Michael R. Welton, my supervisor, and Michael Collins, the external examiner of my doctoral dissertation, introduced me to the work of John Ohliger, a radical social educator. I soon discovered that Ohliger knew Illich and had been deeply influenced by him, perhaps particularly in relation to his critique of mandatory continuing education (Ohliger, 1971). I was hooked, and I began to explore the abundant transgressive work of the very prolific Ohliger. I feel that he has been a conscience for our field that all too often gets caught up in clichés and bandwagons designed to ensure its instrumental survival.

When Tonette invited me to work with her on this book, I gained a new opportunity to learn about Ohliger, who was very active in the field of study and practice during the post-World War II period and beyond into the new millennium. The emergence of academic adult education in North America had been the focus of my doctoral dissertation and has remained a focus in my subsequent research (Grace, 1997, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2005).

When Tonette told John that she and I would be working together on the book about him, he did what John always did: he read. First, he read my doctoral dissertation, which began with a lengthy discussion of social theory and its relevance to framing historical studies of adult education. In an e-mail to Tonette, he said that he had worried at first that I was just another critical adult educator prone to write in a language that he had always found difficult and gloomy. However, after he read more of my work, especially pieces focused on the history of the modern practice of adult education, he said that he liked what I had done. I must admit that I was a little nervous approaching someone whom I considered to be

a field icon. I truly admired John's work, and I wanted him to feel that I could do justice to a writing project about him. I spent quite some time drafting my first e-mail to him. He replied quickly, and his response was reassuring. I was getting to know a knowledgeable and generous man with whom I shared a love of field history. I never met John face to face, but I got to know him a little better through our e-mail correspondence. He also put me on his mailing list, which I took as a sign that he had welcomed me into his world.

One day as I worked on this book, I read one of John's pieces in which he memorialized his good friend Sam Brightman. Ohliger (1992) described this pioneer adult education journalist as "unique, incorrigible, invaluable, embarrassing, [a] person of hope, . . . [a] political agnostic, radical, . . . liberal, . . . curmudgeon, funny man, stands up for what he says, totally outrageous, . . . [a] grouchy resister of progress, . . . shrewd, constantly challenging others" (p. 21). He added that Brightman "didn't form his opinions by following some recipe. Instead, he tasted each situation with gusto; then brewed his own trenchant conclusions and mixed in [a] twist of wry, humor that is" (p. 23). I paused and thought that this eclectic characterization could be autobiographical. Indeed John had captured the person he was as much as he had captured his kindred spirit, Sam Brightman.

In the chapters that follow, you will first engage with John's own writing. Then you will engage with contributors to this book who, collectively, will take you through a varied and vivid encounter with the man, the adult educator, the social activist, and the cultural worker. Perhaps at the end of the book, you will agree with me that the above characterization is indeed autobiographical.

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