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## **An Adult Educator from Kalamazoo**

An Autobiographical Sketch

By Roger Hiemstra

(see my [Pictorial Life Review](#))

### **The Formative Years**

I was born in 1938 in Plainwell, Michigan, a town north of Kalamazoo. Both of my parents were born in the area and raised on family farms. Stopping school after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my father earned a living off the farm hauling milk from farmers to a dairy. At 20 he met my mother, aged 18, picking up milk at her father's farm and they were married the next year.

Aspects of agriculture were an important part of life from birth through my first 25 years. Dad hauled milk, delivered livestock to markets for other farmers, and farmed, too, during those years. We lived on a small farm near Kalamazoo. I and two brothers and three sisters (one sister was actually a cousin who lived with us from age eight after her parents died) often believed he kept a few cows and other animals to generate enough work to keep us busy and out of trouble. Mom was mainly a stay at home mother, other than occasional house cleaning and wall papering she did for neighbors. She planted a large garden each year, another ploy to keep us kids occupied, and to supplement our food needs as money was often in short supply.

Because she was home every day and I was the first born, Mom read to me often. She was a high school graduate and helped me become an early reader with a voracious appetite for learning. I also did very well in school. Attending a one room country school through the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was lucky to have teachers committed to helping kids achieve as much as they could.

From the 7<sup>th</sup> grade on I rode a bus to Otsego, eight miles to the north. As a mill town of 2000 people on the Kalamazoo River, employment in the paper industry was a common occupation. Adjusting to a bigger school took awhile, but my elementary school successes helped me maintain good grades all the way through high school. I graduated in 1956, 5<sup>th</sup> out of a class of 102, and one of only a handful who began college that next fall.

As mentioned earlier, agriculture was an important part of my formative years. This included participation in the local 4-H club where activities with dairy

animals and gardening were the norm. Involvement with 4-H and various related leadership experiences were important to my development. Such opportunities, involvement with a few sports in high school, and participating in music activities resulted in an 18 year old ready for college.

### **The Launching Years**

Because financial support from my parents was not possible, I began college at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. I lived at home and had a part-time busboy job at a hotel. Having excelled at algebra and geometry in high school, I began by declaring a major in math but soon discovered that it was a tough area. I limped through my freshman year with average grades and I certainly had no clear occupation goals in mind.

I had begun going “steady” my senior year with a neighbor girl. We continued dating throughout my freshman year at Western, and then when she graduated from high school that spring, she decided to move to California to be near her older sister. I decided to move to California, too. We both began attending Pasadena City College. Having few finances, I had various part-time jobs. Needing to work several hours each week, I struggled to keep up with my studies. I continued having difficulties with math and soon dropped it as a major. In essence, I was floundering and still had no real career goals. The girl of my life and I soon discovered that we had differing life goals and stopped dating late that first fall. I finished my sophomore year and achieved the Associate Arts degree, but graduated in May, 1958, with only average grades.

Knowing I needed to work for awhile to derive some clear goals, I found a job with the Douglas Aircraft Company in Santa Monica and moved there soon after graduation. I worked initially with data processing activities for a division that was focusing on military missiles. Relatively quickly, I was promoted to being a computer operator. I also began learning how to program computers thus starting a long love affair with computers.

I only worked there about 6 months and became homesick for Michigan and family. I moved back to Kalamazoo in time for Christmas and soon obtained a job with the Brunswick Company working in an entry level management position dealing with customer complaints. After several months I got the itch to return to college and began at Michigan State University in the fall of 1959 as an undeclared major.

I did not do well there academically and still had no clear occupational goals. In the early spring of 1960 I read about the Naval Aviation Cadet program. I had never thought too seriously about becoming a pilot, but the idea of flying and becoming a naval officer was appealing in figuring out what to do with my life.

Thus, I went through the application and testing procedures, was accepted, and began the program in Pensacola, Florida, April, 1960.

I enjoyed the basic training and soloed in a couple of different planes. I especially enjoyed learning various acrobatic flying techniques. Unfortunately, as I was nearing the end of my initial training period, I began having headaches after staring at the instruments for very long. After going through a series of tests, it was determined that I needed glasses to correct my vision to 20/20. I was disappointed to subsequently learn that then the Navy was not accepting pilots who needed glasses. One option was to continue training as a navigator, also an officer training program, and finish out a five year commitment on active duty. I chose another option, converting to a non-officer status with only a two year commitment on active duty.

Thus, in the early fall of 1960 I became an enlisted man with the grade rate of E-2 and was assigned to the USS Randolph, an aircraft carrier stationed out of Norfolk, Virginia. After arriving there and they learned that I had attended college and could type, I became a yeoman doing secretarial and clerical work in one of the many ship's offices. We generally were two weeks out at sea on maneuvers in the Atlantic and two weeks back in port. I was promoted to a rate of E-3 in March of 1961.

It was an interesting tour of duty. As a country we still were nervous about Russian interventions in the Atlantic Ocean and we were becoming engaged in the space race. During the time I was at sea we constantly practiced against attacks by Russian naval vessels, sat in Cuba's Guantanamo Bay as part of a task force ready to support the Bay of Pigs invasion on April 17, 1961 (that support was called off the night before), sat off the Dominican Republic coast for a week after the May 30, 1961, assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo, picked up astronaut Gus Grissom after his sub orbital trip on July 21, 1961, collided with a Liberian oil tanker "Atlantic Viscountess" and fought resulting fires on October 16, 1961, and picked up Enos the chimpanzee who was launched into two full orbits on November 29, 1961.

Even though it involved exciting times, I knew that a naval career was not for me. I applied for and received an early discharge to attend college and reinstatement at Michigan State that December. After the discharge activities I was happy to begin life's next chapter.

### **Looking at Adult Education as a Profession**

I reentered Michigan State in the winter of 1962. During my final months in the Navy I had been thinking about what to do professionally. I realized how important my agricultural connections and association with the Cooperative Extension's 4-H programs had been and began considering a County Extension

Agent career. Thus, I described this desire to an academic advisor the first time I was back on campus. He helped me map out a course of study and I declared as an agricultural economics major with a study emphasis in rural sociology. I also obtained a part-time job on campus as a computer programmer and operator.

Having a clear career goal and the accumulation of life experiences during the previous six years had matured me in many ways. Finally, I knew what I wanted to do and be. Therefore, I found that going to classes was a real joy. I also landed a summer job in 1963 as a 4-H agent in Kent County, Michigan. That very positive experience cemented my career decision. I obtained such a high grade point average during the last two years that my overall average, even with those dismal first attempts, wound up a solid B+.

I graduated with a B.S. in agricultural economics in May, 1964, and began an earnest search for a County Extension position during that following summer while continuing to work with the computer job. I was invited to an interview at Iowa State University in the late summer, subsequently accepted a position there, and after an initial training period started as an Extension Agent in Kossuth County in the northern part of the state with a focus on 4-H.

I certainly enjoyed my experiences there, had excellent colleagues with whom to work, and began to add some innovative 4-H programs. Although I gained satisfaction from working with youth, I found my most enjoyable times involved working with the volunteer adult leaders. I seemed to have a knack for setting adults at ease and helping them pick up new skills they could then use with their 4-H club members. This success became noticed by people in the State Extension Office and within a year I was being asked to design volunteer leader training materials for use throughout the state.

I decided to begin a Master's degree at Iowa State in the fall of 1966 with a major in Extension Education, the forerunner there of what later became Adult Education. I also obtained a part-time position in the State 4-H Office developing training materials for volunteer 4-H leaders. My awareness of what adult education as a profession really was expanded during that first term. Having several excellent professors helped to expand my awareness of adult education as both a career and a profession. I obtained a 4.0 GPA during the year long masters degree and wrote a thesis on the roles, attitudes, and desired characteristics of 4-H volunteer leaders. My thesis chair encouraged me to apply for a Mott Foundation Fellowship and entrance into the PhD program in Adult Education at the University of Michigan. He thought that with a doctoral degree I could return to Iowa and obtain a good position at the State Extension level.

I completed the application, was accepted into the doctoral program, and awarded a good fellowship. However, about the same time all of this was happening I met Janet Wemer at a recreation training workshop. It truly was love at first sight

(at least on my part—it took some convincing for her to feel the same way) and knowing that I wanted to make this a permanent deal; I was not sure about a move back to Michigan. Fortunately, University of Michigan’s Professor Howard McClusky, who turned out to be my main mentor and a fantastic role model, saw something in me and my application and called me one night from Ann Arbor. After a long conversation he convinced me that the program at Michigan would be in my best interest.

In essence, everything came together and I arrived in Flint, Michigan, in August, 1967, to begin my Mott Foundation internship activities. I drove to Ann Arbor three to four times weekly, too, that year for a full course load. I enjoyed most of my professors there, but especially came to appreciate Howard McClusky as a masterful teacher. Initially, I still planned to return to Iowa after the degree if a state level Cooperative Extension position was available. However, after only a few weeks of exposure to Howard and seeing his grace, dignity, and skill as a professor, I began to think that the professoriate was a better career route for me. I was enjoying all my research related courses and experiences, too, so a “fit” seemed to be developing.

Janet came to visit me that first December and I asked her to marry me. She accepted and we began making plans for a June, 1968, wedding in Iowa soon after she graduated. Several great intern experiences in Flint with their community school programs, a new appreciation for the relationship between adult education and a community’s development potential, much enjoyment with my graduate experiences, and a growing admiration for the impact Howard had on the adult education profession throughout the U.S. helped the time until June pass quickly.

After the wedding we settled into a married student apartment in Ann Arbor. Janet got a job teaching home economics at the nearby Willow Run High School in Ypsilanti and I started a graduate assistantship in the Adult Education Department. I continued to enjoy my graduate experiences and began the process of developing a dissertation proposal.

The next fall, 1969, Janet started a Master’s degree in Child and Family Studies at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti and also did considerable substitute teaching throughout that school year. I undertook a part-time job as the Ann Arbor Program Coordinator for the University Center for Adult Education located at Wayne State University in Detroit. The Center offered non-credit university level courses in various locations. This was a wonderful experience in a university’s continuing education program. I also continued as a part-time graduate assistant with the Adult Education Department.

As I had completed my graduate courses, all available spare time that academic year was devoted to the dissertation. As I neared the spring term of 1970 Howard helped round out my higher education experience in preparation for

becoming a professor. He arranged for me to have a paid teaching experience with him. We co-taught a graduate course on the future of adult education. This opportunity to become acquainted with a new subject, prepare for and present on the topic, read student papers, and go through the process of determining grades was so important. Here was an experience with Howard for which I was eternally grateful and I later provided many similar opportunities to my own students desiring professorial roles.

I began the search for a teaching position during the early spring of 1970 by applying to several universities. Two institutions, the University of Nebraska and Texas A & M, asked me to come for an interview. I eventually accepted an offer to begin in the fall as an Assistant Professor of Adult Education at the University of Nebraska. I finished the dissertation during the summer and we moved to Lincoln in late August.

### **A Professor at Last!**

I spent six very fulfilling years at the University of Nebraska. During that time Janet worked for awhile with the Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service and then taught sewing to adults in evening courses. We bought our first home, our two children, Nancy and David, were born, and we became actively involved in the Unitarian church.

Research and subsequent scholarship came fairly easy for me. After a couple of successes in having articles published my first year, an editor from Professional Educators Publications asked me to write a couple of books (see Hiemstra, 2005, for a [complete resume](#)). My scholarly successes were part of the reasons I was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure and full Professor during my six years at the university.

Although I was finding success with scholarship, I was not pleased with myself as a teacher. That initial teaching experience with Howard certainly helped, but after a few semesters I realized that I could become much better. Two things happened in 1972 that helped me change my approach to teaching and the primary focus of my research. I heard Allen Tough give a conference presentation on his work with adults' learning projects (Tough, 1971). Then Malcolm Knowles came to our campus and talked about his work with andragogy (Knowles, 1970). I subsequently read both books and began using an andragogical approach as an instructor and initiated what has been more than three decades of research on self-directed learning.

In the spring of 1976 I applied for and obtained a position at Iowa State University as Department Chair of Adult Education. Although it was tough to leave Lincoln, we were glad to be back in Ames. I had four good years there honing my

teaching and scholarly skills, and obtaining invaluable experiences as an administrator.

We did not have intentions of leaving Iowa as most of Janet's family lived nearby. However, in the spring of 1980 I was asked to apply for a research position at Syracuse University. One of the graduate students there who served as a support person during my interview was Ralph Brockett. This initial opportunity for us to meet was the start of many collegial years together. I obtained the position and we moved to Syracuse in August where I began as a research professor and Chair of the Adult Education Department.

A task I undertook immediately was to rebuild a program that had diminished in numbers of students and faculty. I conceived and developed a weekend scholar program that began in 1982 and ran for several years with master's degree programs offered in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, and Watertown. This and other efforts resulted in many new students at both the masters and doctoral levels, and several new faculty members. Among the new professors was Ralph Brockett. I had served as Ralph's advisor and dissertation chair. His joining the faculty for two years enabled us to begin some joint scholarship activities and develop several publications over the years. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991, 2004) and Hiemstra and Brockett (1994) are among them.

One of the resources that attracted me to Syracuse University was a large English language adult education archival collection. In 1985 I developed a multi-million dollar proposal for enhanced use of the archives through computer technology that was funded by the Kellogg Foundation. Over seven years a large group of faculty, staff members, and graduate students carried out various activities related to the archives, Web technology, and a promotion of adult education historical research (Hiemstra, 2005).

Unfortunately, the university experienced financial difficulties in the late 80s and early 90s. Several academic units were closed, the Adult Education Department among them. This resulted in the faculty leaving over a several year process, except me because I had tenure. My role was to facilitate as many of the matriculated students as possible as they rushed to complete their graduate degrees. In 1993 I was assigned to the Instructional Development, Design, and Evaluation Department where I taught for three years. In 1996 I accepted an early retirement program offered to various faculty by the university and left with a faculty emeritus status.

In 1997 I accepted a part-time faculty position at Elmira College, Elmira, New York, as Professor and Program Chair of Adult Education. I carried out various administrative and instructional activities and established an online version of the Masters Degree program. This was a great culminating experience to my faculty career as I was able to work with many wonderful faculty and students. I completed my involvement with the College during the summer of 2005.

Since then I have served as an adjunct professor at several institutions of higher education: Empire State College, the University of Tennessee, Florida Atlantic University, and LeMoyne College (I finally retired in May, 2014, after 45 years of graduate teaching). I taught both face to face and online courses for these institutions.

## **Reflections**

Janet and I have lived in Syracuse longer than any other place. We have sunk our roots deep in this community. She taught for a few years at Cazenovia College, worked on a research project at Syracuse University, and had a ten year career as a conference planner for Laubach Literacy. Our children completed most of their public school education here and now are launched in life after good college degrees. Nancy is now the second Dr. Hiemstra; she is also a college professor and teaches at Stony Brook University where she is a prolific scholar. She and her family (Sean is Executive Editor for News, WNYC, New York City – they have two children, Kian age 6 and Saskia age 2) live in Long Island. Dave is Oracle R12 Senior Systems Analyst, Order Capture and Integrations at Ingersoll Rand. He and his family (Rachel is Vice President of Products at Crafts.com – they have one child, Riley age three) live in Louisville northwest of Denver. We have both kept active in the May Memorial Unitarian Universalist church in Syracuse.

The time in Syracuse, our years together in other communities, my life growing up in Michigan, and my journey to becoming an adult educator have been fulfilling. I continue to keep busy volunteering, writing, and traveling and plan to do so for the years to come. As I look back on all of this, here are those professional highlights that stand out in my mind:

- I have served as a teacher and advisor to hundreds of adult education graduate students and it has been very satisfying.
- I have carried out an ambitious research and scholarship program over the past four and one-half decades that has resulted in a number of publications and much gratification. The latest is a book published in 2013 for which I was co-editor and chapter author: Hiemstra, R., & Carré, P. *International Perspectives on Adult Learning*. Charlotte, NC: IAP.
- I have been fortunate to have had several interesting international experiences in Canada, Columbia, England, France, Indonesia, Ireland, Jamaica, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Tanzania.
- I have received three honors that have meant a great deal, including a teaching award from Elmira College, induction into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame, and the Malcolm Knowles Memorial Self-Directed Learning Award.

- I have developed and maintain a huge web page that serves as a resource for adult educators around the world (Hiemstra, 2014a) and manage a blog that currently is focusing on the aging me (Hiemstra, 2014b).

Like many people, I came to the adult education field via a circuitous route. Yet, it has been a most rewarding career. Being able to help adults learn is very worthwhile and serving as a professor means that I have helped many others develop skills to also serve adults. For a farm kid who grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the journey has been excellent and I look forward to traveling many more paths.

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