ASPBAE@Crossroads: Reflections at the Festival of Learning to celebrate ASPBAE’S 50 Years

ASPBAE’s first half century is indeed worth celebrating. Not many regional civil society organisations and networks have seen their 50th birthday. The vibrancy, dynamism and commitment in the basement of Hotel Santika (Yogyakarta) was indeed noteworthy and infectious. I felt the warm glow of camaraderie and common purpose yesterday.

In the Indian tradition, 50 years is a transition point. After completing the stages of youth and adulthood, individuals are expected to move to ‘vanaprasth’ stage—a stage of being where you support others to go through their journey of life. There is not much written about life cycles of civil society organisations and networks. Therefore, ASPBAE’s ‘half-life’ is not to be assessed merely in terms of number of years of its existence, but also the nature of its contributions. Having looked back at the past 50 years, where does ASPBAE move in the next 50? Are we at a crossroads?

ASPBAE’s crossroads are defined on three intersecting planes today.

First, the re-assertion of centrality of adult education and lifelong learning for all in the digital age is critical ahead. Structured educational provisions are changing their nature and design, but still remain (like MOOCs) externally controlled and driven learning spaces. One of the core principles of adult education has been learner-centric, learner-driven and learner-controlled formats and opportunities. Cyber structures have even greater mind-controlling power than the traditional face-to-face ‘brainwashing’.

Second, there is a much wider choice of learning provisions today than before. Private for-profit providers of adult education—of both poor and excellent quality—are as active, if not more, as public and non-profit ones. Each type of provider seems to remain in its own orbit. Is it possible that ASPBAE could act as a convenor of various types of adult education providers to shape the future of adult education in different contexts? It may thereby ‘infect’ others with its own perspective and philosophy of adult education and life-long learning.

Third, the practice of adult education on the ground has to come to terms with rapidly changing realities. The new UNFPA report on youth suggests that countries of Asia-Pacific have nearly 1 billion young people in the 10-24 years age group. Their aspirations, needs and competencies have to be taken into account today on an urgent basis. Practitioners of adult education at local levels may need support in ‘connecting’ with this vast group of learners.

I have been thinking about these choices as ASPBAE moves ahead; the turns it takes at this crossroads will not only shape its own character over the next 50 years, but also the meanings and metaphors of adult education in Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Dr. Rajesh Tandon

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