

A Leisurely Walk through PLATO's History

“Thirty-five Years of PLATO Courses”

by Michael Stevens

In 1987, PLATO offered its first three courses: “Media and Society,” “Current Affairs,” and “Topic of the Week.” Called study-discussion groups, they followed a format that would be familiar to many of today’s members. Led by a coordinator, they relied on member participation, ran two hours in either the morning or afternoon, and lasted six weeks. Each of the three groups was limited to about 15 members, which was sufficient to accommodate PLATO’s 39 members. Titles of subsequent sessions sound similar to those offered now, such as “Energy Today and Tomorrow” and “The New Technology and Human Values.” Little did the founders know that what they started would grow and prosper—in both members and courses.

PLATO almost doubled its membership to 72 by 1990 and increased the number of fall courses by 67%--from 3 to 5. Two years later, in 1992, membership and fall courses had doubled yet again. The 148 members had a choice of 12 courses and many of the subjects are still relevant today. Contemporary issues were covered in courses on Current Events and on Science and Public Policy. Members could choose a course where they could read and discuss writings by American Indian authors. The arts were heavily represented with courses on jazz, opera, biographies, of classical composers, and motion pictures. A writing course allowed members to try their hand at writing reminiscences. There were also courses on philosophy and discussions on the works of Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf.

Fast forward another five years and by 1997 membership had doubled again to 329 and PLATO began experimenting with new formats. The group discussion remained the mainstay, but the curriculum committee reported that it received more ideas for courses than volunteers to lead them. They reported “the challenge is to convince members with good ideas that they are capable of being discussion coordinators.” In this era, new formats were being introduced. Retired UW history professor Norm Risjord offered a popular lecture format course, which became the model for additional offerings. Throughout, PLATO retained its distinctiveness from other learning in retirement groups. It did not pay course coordinators but “depended entirely upon volunteers largely from within the organization.” George Calden, one of the charter members, put it well when he said PLATO is “*a do-it-yourself, grass roots university for retired people.*”

PLATO’s membership doubled again to 685 in 2007 and grew to almost 1,300 in 2017. Courses numbers continued to rise. Between 2012 and 2019 annual course offerings rose from 76 to 105, with the fall session typically being the busiest, with between 40 and 50 offerings.

And then there was the pandemic, where everything changed. In spring of 2020, 46 in-person courses were suspended mid-session as the nation shut down, but remarkably seven of them continued meeting virtually. Even after the courses’ formal end, some of the groups continued to

hold informal meetings online without a break. Due to hard work and fast planning by PLATO members, technological solutions were found, training sessions were held for coordinators and members, and a group of determined members found ways to offer 36 online courses in the fall with a total of 81 for the 2020-21 year. The hundreds who took the courses had their own learning curve and mastered learning in an online environment.

With the pandemic continuing in 2021-22, the number of fall courses grew to a total of 88 for the fiscal year. As restrictions on in-person meetings and host locations cautiously reopened in the fall of 2021, a few course coordinators offered in-person courses. During the spring of 2022 with the omicron variant of COVID still circulating, PLATO members had a choice of 22 virtual and 17 in-person courses. In addition, 4 of those in-person courses were experimenting with a hybrid model. PLATO learned that it could serve more members by offering courses in varied formats. Coordinators who offered fall courses in-person before they left to winter in the south found that they now could present a virtual winter/spring course. Members with health and mobility issues found that they had ways to stay involved. PLATO and its members had become very good at making lemonade out of lemons,

Much has changed over the past 35 years, but the volunteer spirit has remained at PLATO's core. The resilience, generosity, and ingenuity of PLATO members continues to make it a vibrant place where the "Love of Learning Never Gets Old."

Part of an occasional series on PLATO history.