

A Leisurely Walk through PLATO's History

Remembering Norman Risjord

by Michael Stevens

This is the first in a series of occasional columns about PLATO's history. Over the coming months, I plan to focus on interesting people and events in our history.

Norman Risjord died in Madison last week, so it's fitting to start this series on PLATO history with Norm. During his more than two-decade participation in PLATO, he taught more PLATO members than anyone else in its history, and in doing so, helped build the organization into what it is today.



Norm's involvement with PLATO began after he retired from the University of Wisconsin-Madison history department in 1993. It all started when Norm made a phone call to Curriculum Committee member Fred Ross, asking if PLATO needed someone to teach an American history course. Fred recalls being ecstatic after hanging up the phone. Only days earlier the Curriculum Committee had talked about the need to add a history course. The rest—as they say—is history. For more than two decades, Norm's course, eventually named "A Leisurely Walk Through American History," was one of our best attended offerings. PLATO's records are sketchy for its early years, but from existing records we know that Norm offered his course during at least 40 semesters. The combined, cumulative attendance over the decades ran into the thousands, with attendance running in some semesters between 150 to 200 per class.

Norm played a key role in changing the variety of formats of PLATO courses. When he started teaching, PLATO did not offer lecture-style courses, but only high participation discussion-based classes. Norm had a great gift as a lecturer and the high demand for his course meant that PLATO needed to have more flexibility in its offerings. As a result, PLATO soon began providing courses in a variety of formats.

The growing interest in Norm's course led to other changes. His first class, like many other early PLATO classes, was held in the Sellery Room of the Wisconsin Historical Society, which could comfortably hold about twenty to twenty-five people. As attendance grew, it moved to larger venues—the Madison Senior Center, Capitol Lakes, and finally to Oakwood Village West, where the 200-plus seat auditorium was filled with interested participants.

Fred Ross attributes some of PLATO's membership growth to Norm, who was well known in greater Madison. Wisconsin Public Radio broadcast his UW class lectures from 1967 through 1989, which developed his reknown well beyond the university. One of his former teaching assistants from his UW years reported that on occasion his students would give him a standing ovation—a rare occurrence for any university professor.

I first met Norm in 1972, while I was in graduate school. Norm had joined the UW-Madison History Department only eight years earlier, and he was an important role model to me and others. Although he wrote important scholarly work for an academic audience, he retained a

passion for presenting history to the public in accessible formats through writing textbooks and popular history books as well as lecturing in the US and in Europe and Asia. Norm's interests were wide ranging and his involvement in PLATO spread beyond his own course. He gave presentations in PLATO's Jazz course and offered a course at Oakwood on news and popular music in the 1930s. I recall listening to Norm's lecture on the history of Swing Music. Integrating historic sound recordings with his own commentary, Norm could bring the history of the past alive with vibrancy.

Those who knew Norm admired him both as a person and a teacher. PLATO member Don Reeder, a UW colleague, was a friend for sixty years and called Norm "an admirable individual and a superb teacher. For 60 years or so, he shared facts and rational interpretations of our common experience by means of the written word, the spoken word, and even by example." Don added that in doing so, Norm's insights became part of his students' own knowledge, adding "there is no greater success for a teacher."

Even as Norm's health started to fail, he continued to teach and found enjoyment in sharing his love of history. His teaching was only halted by his deteriorating health during his final year of life. For more than two decades Norm helped build PLATO into an organization "where love of learning never gets old," and in doing so, he touched the lives of many PLATO members.

For online obituaries, see:

<http://www.gundersonfh.com/obituaries/Norman-K-Risjord?obId=4079264#/obituaryInfo>

https://madison.com/news/local/obituaries/risjord-norman-k/article_d0d1f6f0-0a97-5b1c-9f30-3ddae4e70534.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=user-share

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