

The Power of Dialogue in Adult Learning

Jane Vella

The theme for this issue of *Reflective Practice*, “How do adults learn?,” has been the theme and passion of my life. I think I was born a teacher. In my second year of college, I joined the Maryknoll Sisters, which committed me to a vocation of education. In 1956 I went to Tanzania and spent the next twenty-five years teaching in various settings, including the University of Dar es Salaam. I taught both young people at the university and adults living in rural areas, which was then called “popular education,” a concept introduced to me by Paulo Freire. I saw a hunger for learning, not just for information. How was that hunger to be satisfied? People wanted to be able to *do* what they were being taught, not just to hear about it. They wanted to know that they knew.

During my years in Tanzania, I became friends with Paulo Freire, the legendary advocate for the democratization of learning in South America. From his Latin American perspective, Paulo showed how the teacher can serve best in dialogue with adult learners so that they can use their freedom to choose and make decisions as subjects of their own learning.¹ I was also influenced greatly by Malcolm Knowles, who was also asking with passion the question “How do adults learn?” Knowles offered his theory of andragogy, which is that adults bring years of experience to the teaching/learn-

Jane Vella is founder of Global Learning Partners, Inc., a nonprofit organization committed to the transformative power of learning through dialogue.
Email: janekvella@gmail.com.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

* © Copyright 2016 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*
All Rights Reserved

ing situation and are able to make decisions about how they will use new knowledge, skills, and attitudes in their unique context.² I wanted to know more. How do adults learn?

In 1977 I left the Maryknoll community and returned to the United States to begin doctoral work in adult education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Along the way I was influenced by Kurt Lewin,³ who stressed the usefulness of dialogue in small groups to test learners' personal constructs of the new content, and by David Kolb, whose four-step experiential learning model moved sensory input through an experience of cogitation and decision-making towards new action.⁴ His model presciently anticipated the more recent discoveries from neuroscience that James E. Zull describes so well in his book *The Art of Changing the Brain*.⁵ My doctoral dissertation at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst was entitled *Community Education for Self-Reliant Development (1978)*. It described and analyzed efforts at community organizing for learning in rural Tanzania. It showed the seeds of a new emerging system of education.

All this experience, research, and key relationships came together to build a preliminary response to the question, How do adults learn? They learn best when they are in dialogue, when they are engaged, when they are the subjects (that is, the decision-makers) of their own education and not just objects, and when their cultural and personal context is understood. A system was emerging that showed and used the power of dialogue. It actually builds naturally on the theme of volume 35 of *Reflective Practice*, "The Narrative Perspective." A story invites dialogue, expects interpretation, and refers to the experience of the listener. A story shows deep respect for the listener as subject (decision-maker) of the meaning of the learning.

As I began my teaching career at North Carolina State University, I used this system and taught it. My personal experience working with adults, combined with my years of research, confirmed in my mind the power of dialogue. This moved me to teach other teachers about what I was learning. So, "Dialogue Education" emerged as a system for learning how to design courses and teach effectively. I taught that there seemed to be four phases: (1) preparatory work with learners that includes discovering their context, (2), use of a set of principles and practices, (3), a process that ensures dialogue, and (4) explicit behavioral evaluation indicators of the manifested learning.

I soon realized that I needed to get outside of and beyond the university setting. In 1981, I left my position at North Carolina State University in

Raleigh and formed my own company, called the Jubilee Popular Education Center, which was dedicated to this new model of learning and to the teaching of the principles and practices of Dialogue Education. Later the Center was renamed Global Learning Partners, Inc., to emphasize the global reach of its work. I believe that Dialogue Education is applicable to a wide variety of adult learning contexts and levels. It stands in contrast to “monologue education,” which is characterized by lectures and PowerPoint presentations and is the more typical kind of pedagogy students receive in universities and workers receive in training situations.

THE ESSENTIALS OF DIALOGUE EDUCATION

Preparation

There are two parts to the preparation for Dialogue Education.

1. **A Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA)**, which is used to discover the context of adult learners. This can be a simple survey, or it can be an occasion—a party! a visit to the learners’ workplace! Any opportunity to see learners in context and to listen to them is valuable. An LNRA does not *form* the content of the teaching. What is learned by the teacher through an LNRA *informs* the content he or she decides to teach. To be effective teachers, we first must listen to our learners.

2. **Eight design steps.** Based on the results of the LNRA, we begin to design the learning event or program. The responses to the eight design questions that follow create the structure of the learning event.

Who: the participants, the number of participants, what was learned in the LNRA about their context, the teacher(s)

Why: the situation: why this session is taking place

So that: the behavioral indicators of learning expected to address the situation

When: the time frame of the session

Where: the site

What: the content, which is cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (ideas, feelings, skills)

What for: the achievement-based objectives (“By the end of the named time period, all participants will have . . .”)

How: learning tasks and materials

Preparation to teach using this system takes a great deal of time and effort. The more specific our responses are to these design questions, the

more effective is the learning for the adult learners. How do adults learn? I have learned that assiduous preparation by the teacher is one answer to that question.

Principles and Practices

These twelve principles and practices are foundational when we use dialogue in adult learning situations.

Respect. We show respect in many different ways. When learners feel respected, they show respect for others. The LNRA is an example of respect. We show that we respect the present knowledge and the context of the learners.

Engagement. Learning is an active process. Learners must be engaged with their mind, emotions, and muscles.

Ideas, feelings, actions. Learning involves cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic elements, or ideas, feelings, and actions. When all three are working together, learning is at its best.

Safety. When learners feel safe, they are able to accept and work through the challenge that is inevitably met in a significant learning event.

Open questions. Open questions invite dialogue. These questions do not have set answers but stir up thinking and reflection and relevance to one's context. A closed question, such as "What is the capital of Vermont?," invites a set response: Montpelier. An open question, such as, "Look at this map. Why do you think they chose Montpelier as the capital of Vermont?," can move the learner towards a thoughtful response.

Relevance and immediacy. The content being taught must be designed to be relevant to the context and life of the learner. When this happens, there is a sense of the immediate usefulness of the learning.

Sequence and reinforcement. We move from simple to complex, from short to long, from easy to more difficult learning tasks. That is sequence. We invite learners to do learning tasks in new ways over and over to ensure effective learning. That is reinforcement.

Accountability. Our design for a learning session is informed by the data discovered in the LNRA. We are accountable to the learners to teach all that is included in the design.

Lavish affirmation. Our recognition of the efforts of learners is a practice that enables and enhances their learning.

Learning tasks. A learning task is an open question put to a small group with all the resources needed for their response.

Small groups. Learning tasks are completed in a small group, a team of learners.

Role clarity. Being clear about who does what in the small group and in the class ensures effective learning.

I have found that these principles and practices are themselves systemic; when you use one, you find yourself using all the others.

Process of Learning

The use of dialogue is structured by *learning tasks*. A learning task is an open question put to a small group who has all the resources they need to respond, and it has four parts:

Inductive work. Inductive work *anchors* the new content in the learners' context, relating it to their experience.

Input. Input *adds* the new content in a variety of ways, through a lecture, a story, a PowerPoint presentation, a reading, etc. Content is recog-

Example of a Learning Task USING THE EIGHT DESIGN STEPS

1. Read over the section in this article on the eight design steps. Name one way this system differs from your usual reflective practice of planning a session, course, class, or encounter with a client. Circle one aspect of these eight design steps that might be useful to you in your context. [inductive work]

2. Read and mark the eight design steps. What are your questions about them? Decide which of these eight steps you might omit when working in your context. Name another step you would include that is not in this set of eight. [input]

3. Select an upcoming learning session you are planning. Complete each of the eight design steps for that session, naming one item for each step. [implementation]

4. Write an email to a colleague describing your experience with this eight design step system and explain why you would (or would not) use something from it in designing your next session. [integration]

nized as cognitive, affective, *and* psychomotor. Content is well-researched and substantive, selected to serve the named situation.

Implementation. Implementation gives learners a chance to *act*, to do something with the new content.

Integration. Integration offers learners the opportunity to project the transfer of their new learning to their context. They take it *away!*

The four parts of a learning task are related to Kolb's Learning Cycle and to the working of the brain as described by Zull in his text *The Art of Changing the Brain*. The verbs used in learning tasks are important elements in ensuring specificity and productivity. Verbs such as *learn*, *discuss*, and *consider* are too general and therefore less useful than the more specific verbs used in the sample learning task in the sidebar.

Since the learning task is a task for the learners, what do you see as the role of the teacher while the learning task is being completed?

Evaluation

Evaluation is found in practice, in the manifestation of what was learned in action. It involves proof in practice through the behavioral indicators of learning, transfer, and impact. Paula Berardinelli offers a theory of impact that names three levels of evaluation: the *learning* that takes place in the event or session; the *transfer* that takes place when learners use new knowledge, skills, or attitudes in their context; and the *impact* that occurs when new systems arise based on the new consciousness that such learning and transfer behaviors have raised.⁶ I have come to the awareness recently that all effective adult learning is manifested in *behaviors*. My esteemed teachers Freire, Kolb, Zull, Knowles, and Lewin might very well agree.

USING THIS THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

I believe that Dialogue Education, its principles and practices, is applicable to a wide variety of educational contexts. Yet, it is particularly applicable to the context of readers of *Reflective Practice*, who are supervising and teaching theological students. Theological education in its broadest sense is a comprehensive learning process involving the learning of concepts, skills, and attitudes. It is a learning process that inevitably involves the whole self—mind, body, and spirit, or what I call “ideas, feelings, and actions.” Learning is not just the acquisition of information; rather, it is the integration

of information, experience, personal history, and behaviors. In this way, the system of Dialogue Education can facilitate transformative learning.

Dialogue Education takes the self of the learner very seriously. We treat the learner as a subject, with respect, and attempt to understand his or her cultural and personal context. The learner is an active participant in the learning process, bringing to the learning event all of her or his life experience to converse with the teacher in a genuine dialogue. The learner takes action based on his or her learning. Learning is not complete without praxis (action-reflection-new action). The principles and practices of Dialogue Education seem to fit well into our global society and into the multicultural nature of theological education in the twenty-first century.

If you wish to learn more about Dialogue Education, please consult the website of my organization, www.globallearningpartners.com, or one of my books.⁷ I would be delighted to hear how you use the principles and practices of Dialogue Education in your work as a supervisor, mentor, trainer, or teacher of future religious leaders. It will be a great joy to share with you our common reflection on the vital theme question, “How do adults learn?”

NOTES

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000).
2. Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge Books, 1980).
3. Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
4. David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Press, 2015).
5. James E. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2002).
6. Jane Vella, Paula Berardinelli, and Jim Burrow, *How Do They Know They Know? Evaluating Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
7. Jane Vella, *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); Jane Vella, *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education into Action* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008).