

A SPIRITED EPISTEMOLOGY Honoring the Adult Learner as Subject

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A Spirited Epistemology: Honoring the Adult Learner as Subject offers a revolutionary new approach to adult learning. This revolution involves a radical new concept of education as creative, critical action and the teacher as resource person, not “professor.” Through stories of real life educational encounters, we learn some of the principles and practices for such an approach.

The spiritual dimensions of adult education are the human dimensions, and attention to these makes for excellent, effective adult learning. Recognizing the adult learners as Subjects or decision-makers in their own learning involves a moral stance for the teacher, for the curriculum designer and for the learners themselves. It is a revolutionary new way of looking at learning. Epistemology is the study of knowing and the art of learning. We urge teachers to work towards a learning-centered approach to their teaching via such a spirited epistemology, remembering, as St. Augustine said in the fourth century: “No man teaches another anything. All we can do is to prepare the way for the work of the Holy Spirit.”

I learned this important theory of the learner as Subject not from Hegel or Freire, but from the poignant story told by Tanzanian friend Anna, a peasant farmer who decided to become a Christian. Anna loved Thomas, who had been baptized after studying the faith with a Roman Catholic priest in a year-long course. Anna loved Thomas, and was determined to become a Christian. At the end of the year, Anna was told by the very uptight, super-conscientious priest (who had apparently never read Augustine!) that she had failed! He told her that she was not ready for Baptism. Anna’s disappointment was great, and as she told me in Swahili, she dreaded the thought of another year of those dull, question and answer recitation sessions. “Imenichokoza!” “It tired me out each time!” However, Anna loved Thomas, and wanted to marry him as a Christian. She told me she realized something that gave her the courage to begin the second year long course: “Yeye ni binadamu, na mimi ni binadamu pia” “I thought to myself about that priest: he is a human being, and I am a human being, too.” Anna loved Thomas and was prepared to face off with a pompous teacher for another year if that was what it took to win her love. She succeeded, being baptized and married on the same happy weekend.

Anna taught me that people are the Subjects, or decision makers, not only of their own learning, but of their own lives. Carl Jung told his students to be aware that the word Subjects has a capital “S” because “That’s where God is found!”

The revolutionary assumption that the teacher is accountable to the learner, who is the Subject or decision maker in his or her own learning is the linchpin principle on which all the other principles and practices of effective adult education rest.

This chapter will describe how we can celebrate with men and women the fact that they are indeed Subjects of their learning and of their lives. We will examine some assumptions about adult learners and their learning, some principles to guide us, and look at some

practices to implement the theory behind those principles for a spirited epistemology. We will learn through the use and analysis of real life stories.

Achievement Based Objectives of this Chapter

By the time you finish reading this chapter, you will have heard and examined three assumptions about adult learning, defined and described what it means to be Subject, or decision maker in your own learning, heard a number of stories demonstrating the validity of the assumptions and the practicality of this approach, defined a spirited epistemology, reviewed six principles and practices that guide educators in the use of such an approach, defined an axiom and read some axioms for effective adult education, and previewed the next chapter. This is my covenant with you, Subject to Subject.

Assumptions

- ❖ Human beings are designed to be Subjects, or decision makers in their own lives and learning.
- ❖ Each learning event is a moment of spiritual development when people practice being what they are: subjects of their own life and learning. Transformation is not towards the grasp of an external set of information, knowledge or skills, but transformation into one's self, informed by the new knowledge and skills.

As we examine each separate assumption, we can build a framework for particular practices that are congruent with these assumptions. These assumptions are the basis of an approach to adult education that respects the learner as Subject of the learning. Re-spect comes from the Latin words: re: again, and spectare, to look at. Look at the learner again! What a simple task for the educator. Such an attitude in educators is more caught than taught. Jesus showed that he knew this when he responds to the first curious disciples, who asked, "Where do you live?" with "Come and see." All great religious teachers invite us to conscious respect of ourselves, our neighbors and our world. Barbara Kingsolver, in her novel The Bean Trees (1988) offers an exquisite example of such a relationship of respect as the protagonist describes her mother:

There were two things about Mamma. One is she always expected the best out of me. And the other is that then no matter what I did, whatever I came home with, she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good.

Human beings are designed to be Subjects, decision makers of their own lives and learning.

Darryl Burrow, a bright young man from New Orleans who graduated with a Master's degree in education from Harvard University, is the Director of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Jobs Initiative in New Orleans (NOJI). This program works to educate the hard to employ so that they are able to get good jobs and works with resources in the community to develop work opportunities.

Darryl invited Global Learning Partners, Inc. to share this revolutionary approach to adult education with both the community organizers who recruit and teach adults in the community for enhanced work opportunities, and with the faculty of the community college, who are resources to the program.

In our program, we insist on the importance of the site of any learning event, what we call the WHERE of the Seven Steps of Planning: WHO, WHY, WHEN, WHERE, WHAT FOR, WHAT, HOW. As Subject of his own learning, Darryl used this knowledge to creatively set the sites for the two courses. The community college professors would do the course in the downtown community center; the community folks would do the course at the community college learning center.

Such creativity and respect for context is what we celebrate and what we invite when we hold that the learner is Subject, decision maker of what he or she does with what is learned. Being Subject of one's own learning also means that the learners re-construct the theory or skill to fit their context. Hegel did that when he took the work of previous philosophers and prepared his own philosophy. Every artist composes standing on the shoulders of his or her teachers. Learners are invited in this spirited epistemology to "compose" what they are learning so it fits their life and context.

Paulo Freire in his classic Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) described the "banking" system of education, where the teacher drops information into learners and gets that same information back on tests. This is the farthest thing from what we are doing in a spirited epistemology.

Being Subject of one's own learning means hard work, severe discipline, intense effort. Being Subject does not mean taking a subjective view of what is being learned, but learning new theories, and skills to the utmost and then making sure that what has been learned fits one's context. This is what Darryl did with the Seven Steps of Planning in his creative use of the WHERE. We celebrate the fact that in New Orleans they learned theory well and were creative and faithful enough to make that theory new for the New Orleans context.

Each learning event is a moment of spiritual development when people practice being what they are, Subjects

The design of a learning event: a class or a meeting or a training session, affords accountability that the engaged learners will be involved in active recreation of the skill or theory or attitude being studied, as Subjects. Learning tasks, not teaching tasks, are the heart of an accountable design in a spirited epistemology.

At the Governor's Conference on learning in Vermont in May of 1998, I had the pleasure of designing as the keynote address a one hour session where 150 educators worked assiduously with Kurt Lewin's twelve principles of learning (from the adaptation of Lewin's work by Frank and David Johnson in their 1987 text Joining Together). The educators worked in pairs, to read Lewin's principles which were on placards on the wall, and select the ones that spoke most directly to their experience as educators. The ensuing dialogue was profound and enlightening to all. Men and women who had worked with one another for years

discovered unique perspectives, unexpected insights, and wisdom. Their learning was in the doing and the deciding. It was a well-spent hour.

Today I trust that they remember that keynote as a moment of their development as individuals and as people working together to improve education. Every such moment is a spiritual moment simply because we are human, that is, spiritual beings. Their practice of being and acting as Subjects enabled them to share more than the information about Lewin's theories about learning that was on the placards. They shared themselves.

Transformation is not towards an external set of knowledge or skills, but into one's self, informed by the new knowledge and skills.

Every educational event is towards a metanoia, the change of spirit from alienation towards a deeper awareness of oneself. A spirited epistemology holds that all education is directed towards such a transformation.

An Example

My doctor in Raleigh is a brilliant internist, a deeply caring personal physician. I gave her a copy of Learning to Listen Learning to Teach. This hard working physician told me that, as she read it, she realized for the first time that she as a doctor was meant to be an educator. I shared with her a semantic note: the root of the word doctor is the Latin word "docere" which means to teach. "I never knew that!" she replied in amazement.

She learned more than the root of the word. Such knowing is not value added information. It is intrinsic to the epistemological phenomenon: knowing anything is an opportunity for metanoia, which is a deeper realization of one's meaning and purpose.

Another Example

Consider the learning experience of an older adult who comes to a community college to learn how to use a computer. An indolent instructor drones on for two of the six sessions in the course about the history of computers, and the potential of the internet. The adult learners never touch a keyboard during those six hours.

Unconsciously, they learn how stupid they are compared to this information systems self styled hero. They feel more and more intimidated by the global system and by the laptop in front of them.

They "know" how little they know and how unlikely it is that they will ever master this knowledge and skill. They do not come back to the rest of the course, for which they have already paid.

This situation was reported to me as occurring recently here in North Carolina. Without a spirited epistemology, without this moral stance, such educational events occur daily. They are a blasphemy.

When the opportunity for metanoia is missed through indolence or ignorance on the part of instructors, it cannot be regained. When will we as adult educators get angry enough about this abuse to take concerted action? This book is an effort in the right direction.

Principles and Practices for Adult Educators

How can we be sure that we are using a spirited epistemology, inviting men and women to be Subjects of their own learning? Faithful use of the following principles and practices can help to make you accountable to those learners.

Dialogue

The heart of a spirited epistemology is respect for dialogue. Everything in your design moves to dialogue as a plant moves towards the sunlight. Dialogue is the guiding principle. However, this means the teacher accepts a new role as resource person, not expert; as guide not professor; as mentor, not instructor; as educator, not facilitator. Paulo Freire's famous phrase: "Only the student can name the moment of the death of the professor", stands editing here. When I design for dialogue, for accountable learning, I can name the moment of the death of the professor in me. Just as we might eschew the term facilitator since we know that education is never facile, so we honor the difficulty involved in the changing role of the professor that is called for when we design for dialogue.

Dialogue does not mean that the educator comes in empty handed. The substantive content he or she brings is not watered down in a design for dialogue. A spirited epistemology simply means we design to listen to the adult learners' experiences and knowledge base, and build on that with what is new.

When I teach the Seven Steps of Planning, I know that all of the adults I am teaching have done some kind of planning. They already have a model. With respect for that experience and knowledge, I ask them a simple open question and set a simple learning task:

Examine these seven cards with the Seven Steps of Planning: WHO: participants and leaders, WHY: the situation, WHEN: the time frame' WHERE: the site, WHAT: content: skills, knowledge, attitudes, WHAT FOR: achievement based objectives, HOW: learning tasks and materials. At your table group put them in the order you all see appropriate for designing an adult education event. We'll then go around and examine the order set out on each table.

Such a learning task does a number of exciting things: people work together, argue, challenge one another. They bring in all their previous knowledge of planning and tell one another story after story to defend their choice of sequence. They laugh and tease one another as they move from table to table to discover other interpretations. They learn, as Subjects, the Seven Steps of Planning by not taking the theory, but by making it.

Imagine such a learning task in any adult education course: a medical school course in anatomy, a law school course in torts, a community education event on political organizing, a cooking class!

Dialogue must be designed. Effective dialogue is firmly founded on the competence of the educator and the substantive quality of what he or she is teaching. The first step in respect is that the educator does her homework.

All learning involves cognitive, affective and psychomotor elements. When you design learning tasks for adult learners to do in order to learn what you are teaching, you always include cognitive, affective and psychomotor elements.

In that keynote address in Vermont, the pairs of educators had this learning task: In pairs, walk around and read the twelve principles of Kurt Lewin. Select two that speak most directly to you in your work as an educator, and tell one another why you chose those two. We'll hear a sample.

This involved obvious psychomotor activity, a gallery walk. It involved the affective in the selection and application of some of Lewin's theories to their work, and it involved cognitive work in reading, analyzing, applying all twelve principles.

Respect

This principle guides not only the design of learning and of learning tasks, but also every aspect of our encounter with adult learners. We can only respect adult learners when we know something of their context and situation. The practice of doing a learning needs and resources assessment with learners prior to a session is a correlative of this principle of respect.

I recently did a weekend professional development course with a group of teachers from the Professional Studies Department of Tusculum College in Tennessee. The brochure inviting their participation described what the short course would teach, and included a short survey for them to complete and fax to me. I discovered that we had professors from Eastern Tennessee State University as well as from Tusculum College, a professional trainer from a local industry, two recent graduates of Tusculum and a college Vice President.

I could feel the course materials and purpose shifting as I read the list. Then the faxes came in with their response to three simple questions: 1. Describe your present work. 2. What are the most common problems you have in designing or teaching adult education sessions? 3. You've seen the program, what are your expectations of the weekend? I learned enough from their responses to these questions to adjust the content and the process just enough to meet their needs.

My ability to refer to their themes from the survey showed them how I respected them and their context. The slight changes in program were noted explicitly so they knew I had read and indeed, studied their short surveys.

A learning task is a task for the learner, usually an open question put to learners with the resources they need to respond. It is the practice of accountability and responsibility and team work all in one, as learners engage with new content: theories, skills, attitudes to complete a learning task together.

The respect for learners lies in the design of the learning task: is it well sequenced in relation to all the rest of the course? Is the task well timed for completion by a small group? Is the product that results immediately useful to the participants? Is the content substantive research or significant skills so that learners are challenged to push the envelope?

Malcolm Knowles (1970) shared some basic concepts that guide adult learning: respect, immediacy, relevance and the fact that adult can use 20% of what they hear, 40% of what they hear and see and 80% of what they do. These are all incorporated in an effective learning task which invites learners to do something with what they are learning.

The verbs in a learning task show the intensity of the work: describe, list, read, circle priority items, analyze, synthesize into a single sentence, make a time line, select, design, compose... These are what the learners do, not what the teacher does. A spirited epistemology is based on what John Dewey taught years ago: the learning is in the deciding and in the doing. Can you see how the learning task is an opportunity for learners to practice being Subjects of their own learning?

Accountability

A spirited epistemology holds that the teacher, through the learning design, is accountable to the learner. This is an exciting new twist. Adult learners often come to their first courses, in a literacy center or a graduate school, full of fearful questions: Can I do it? Can I make it? Can I learn this difficult content? Can I understand the materials? Such fear paralyzes the potential of the adult learner.

To manifest accountability, we use a learning covenant: the achievement based objectives that are the backbone of a design show exactly what will be taught and learned, and what the learners will do to show themselves that they know what has been taught. We use as the title of our book on evaluation: How Do They Know They Know? The operative word is 'They'. Look at the achievement based objectives on page one of this chapter. That was my covenant with you. How has that helped you to learn as you read?

Achievement based objectives turn on the assumption that adult learners want to learn, and are willing to do the work involved. They focus the learning event. They become learning tasks in a sound design.

They assure the learner of the educator's accountability, to complete the covenant. They make the words "spirited epistemology" become flesh in a time frame, with a tangible product that gives a proof of the learning that took place.

A spirited epistemology is not only an attitude. It is a process and materials and actions. It involves a mutuality of respect and joy in learning. When, on the other hand, a teacher is teaching magnificently, using another epistemology, he or she is not accountable to the learners. Learning is a spirited partnership, or it is domination.

We cannot overcome the domination system that has prevailed in education for centuries without humor and wit. Walter Wink (1991) tells a story of South African women "teaching" Boer soldiers how precious the homes of these women were, and how powerful these

defenseless homesteaders actually were. Before the end of apartheid, the Boer army was sent to ravage villages where there were no men (they were all in the mines or cities). At one village the women decided to use what they knew of the background of these Boer soldiers who were all dutiful Dutch Calvinists. The women met the army at the gate of their village with no clothes on. The army retreated as fast as they could, with their eyes closed. This is a spirited epistemology: nonviolent and efficacious.

We do need to learn to use our wit, our humor, our ingenuity to design for dialogue and accountability, for effective learning.

Inviting a Moral Stance from the Adult Learner

A new relationship between teacher and learner is demanded by this epistemology. That relation is of partners in learning, who work together to advance the learning of each. My friend and colleague, Dr. Sarah Gravett in South Africa, describes this relationship thus: Based on Bakhtin's theory which implies teacher, learner and knowledge in a dynamic reciprocal unity, dialogic teaching is proposed as transformative exchange, where teachers and learners are involved in a co-learning and co-teaching process, thereby cultivating the development of an authentic community of learners, characterized by sharing and support, along with cognitive challenge.

Demands and support

This kind of relationship and this sort of spirited epistemology calls for a new preparation for educators, and a way of bringing those presently engaged in education to a new way of designing curricula, designing courses and teaching. The seminal work of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Bakhtin, Rogers and Knowles is moving us forward. The publications of Jossey Bass and other radical publishers nudge the revolution in education. The desperation of students leaving school in droves at 16 to get minimum wage jobs, and buy a second hand car on credit urges us to develop a new system of relevant education. The pleas of industry, government, health services for creative, critically thinking new employees to staff learning organizations, makes this effort vital. (Senge, 1990)

The Future of Such an Approach

Donald Oliver in his groundbreaking study Education, Modernity, and Fractured Meaning. Toward a Process Theory of Teaching and Learning (1989) distinguishes between technical and ontological knowing. Technical knowing is information or a set of directions for developing a skill. Memorizing a time line of events leading to the Vietnam war is technical knowing. Practicing how to send electronic mail and store it is technical knowing. Analyzing those events as to cause: media, statesmen, politicians, military, local culture and religion: that is ontological knowing. Ontology, as you know, is the study of being. Ontological knowing has to do with our being human, being men and being women, being society. Considering the potential of e-mail, testing mass deliveries and analyzing the effect – that's ontological knowing. Both types of knowing are necessary and both need a spirited epistemology. The reverence lies here in the distinction. How can my work with an adult learner in a literacy course become ontological knowing for him?

How do I design a staff meeting so that the learning involved is not only technical, but also ontological? This is what we are aiming at in inviting a spirited epistemology.

It is time for this spiritual revolution. How we educate one another, and our children is a symbol of our society. At the turn of the century, John Dewey recognized that education was designed to prepare men and women for factory jobs on an assembly line, or for soldiering. A spirited epistemology is not designed to do that. The twenty-first century invites men and women in industry, in the military, in agriculture or government, in the church or the media, in health care or in international development to be creative, critical thinkers, who know their suggestions will be heard. Democracy is a real option now. Unless we teach one another as spiritual, human beings, we will continue to feed a Domination System that will be our death. A spirited epistemology is not only appropriate in adult education, but in any educational effort.

This is our choice. This is our moral stance. The following chapters in this sourcebook offer distinct and specific ways to implement such a choice in a number of settings. We move forward in hope knowing that we know how to use a spirited epistemology, because we just did so.

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