

My Letter to the World (of Educators)

Jane Vella, April 2018

On June 18, 2015, Pope Francis published a letter (an encyclical entitled *Laudatum Si: Praise Be to You, Lord*). He boldly announced:

This is not a letter to the churches; this is a letter to every single human being in the world today.

Such *hutzbah!* Bold indeed. As he spoke in his letter of our need to “care for our common home” his bold-ness was entirely comprehensible: *This earth is everyone’s home – our common home.*

The Pope gave me an idea and courage. As I read his bold modeling, I realized I wanted to speak out. This is *my* letter (Thank you, Francis!) to the world of educators. As James E. Zull, educator extraordinaire, says

If you have children, you are an educator. You (join) all other educators in schools, businesses, and professions, or in our schools and institutions of higher education. This actually includes most adults.¹

So, I ‘boldly go where few educators dare to go’ and address this letter to the world of parents, grandparents, teachers, professors, trainers in industry, the military, medicine, politics and law. As Zull says: *This actually includes most adults. So, listen up.*

One Technology of Learning

We know more about learning and how it occurs today than ever before in history. I am grateful to be alive today to share the daily returns from a stock market of neuroscientific, biological, epistemological and process research that goes only in one direction: UP! No bulls and bears here: today we are learning apace about learning.

The system I designed from my years of experience teaching in more than forty countries around the world, and from relentless reading and study is simple and accessible. It is now called Dialogue Education™, as we doff our hats to Paulo Freire, David Bohm, John Dewey, David Kolb and Jean Piaget and all those on whose shoulders we stand today. These prescient visionaries saw what the brain was doing long before the fMRI enabled us to see and hear synapses and growing dendrites! Before the fMRI opened our eyes to the wonder within.

Dialogue Education: A Simple System with Four Moving Parts

PART I: Preparation: Learn your learners and design for them

Learn. Before we teach anything, we *must* discover the context and prior experience of the learners. Such a simple task: *listen* to them! *Ask* them an open question! *Take* them out for lunch or even for a cup of coffee. *Listen and observe.* *Invite* their response to the plan of the learning session. *Listen* to them! *Affirm* their experience and their perceptions and their hopes for the learning. Your listening will *inform* the educational content and process.

Such listening will develop a unique relationship between educator and learners. “*Are we partners in this?*” they will ask, in awe. “*Indeed, we are,*” you will respond.

They are the Subjects (decision-makers) of their own learning because that’s how the brain works: connecting new stimuli to the experience and present context of the learner! You have to know their context and experience so that you can present new content in that language, their language.

Design. This Dialogue Education™ system has a simple framework for designing a learning session: The Eight Design Steps: Who? Why? So That? When? Where? What? What for? How?

WHO: the learners, and the leader: informed by data from the LNRA (Learning Needs and Resources Assessment); the number of learners for this course

WHY: the situation that demands this educational event these learners need

SO THAT: behavioral indicators of learning and transfer of learning that the learners will manifest as a result of this course

WHEN: the timeframe for face to face work in the course.

WHERE: the site: all details

WHAT: the content; spelled out as nouns showing cognitive, affective, psychomotor aspects (ideas, feelings, actions)

WHAT FOR: achievement-based objectives (ABO): taking the content and using tough, productive verbs to name what learners will have done with the content in order to learn it. The ABO begins this way: *By the end of this timeframe, all will have...*

HOW: the learning tasks and the materials: shaping those achievement-based objectives into learning tasks which are tasks *for the learner*.

These Eight Steps of Design are a checklist to assure inclusive, comprehensive learning. This preparation part of the system of Dialogue Education takes time, a great deal of time.

PART II: A Principled Approach

Every word, everything you do in preparing the learning sessions and leading them can be guided by these simple principles and practices:

Respect the learners explicitly, gently, inclusively! They are the Subjects (decision-makers) of any educational event. This is the prime principle for learning.

Engage learners in all aspects of the planning and teaching: engage all learners in all aspects: cognitive, affective and psychomotor!

Safety: let all learners know they are safe in your hands whether you are parent, professor or manager. Safety measures calm the amygdala in the brain which inhibits learning when stirred by fear or intimidation.

Sequence and reinforcement: Move the learning process in a carefully sequenced manner: from simple to more complex, from easy to more difficult, from small to large. And, reinforce that movement consistently with iteration and creative repetition.

Small groups of peers carry weight because learners listen to their peers. They learn from one another because their context and experience is often close. In the small group one can feel safe to try on a new idea or skill; in the small group one can be challenged when she is inconsistent or downright wrong. Learning tasks are done in small groups: we know today the best small group to begin with is a *pair*.

Cognitive/Affective/Psychomotor (CAP). This principle names the three elements in learning: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor: ideas, feelings, actions. Every effective learning experience somehow incorporates all three elements.

Open questions invite dialogue. When you ask an open question (to which there is no single answer), push back against your chair and sit quietly. Listen. Learners are learning, as they connect your question to their experience and context, to their present knowledge. The open question is *prime!*

The Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA) is the first step in design. Listen to the learners and continue to listen as the course or class or workshop unfolds. The LNRA never ends.

Lavish affirmation is again both a principle and a practice: authentic, generous praise puts the sensitive amygdala at rest and enables the learner to deal with tough new concepts, attitudes or skills with confidence.

Lavish – can be seen here as an adjective or as a verb. Abundant affirmation makes for effective learning.

Role clarity is essential in an educational setting: who does what, and when? Boundaries are real. For example, the teacher has the responsibility to design the course. Data from the Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA) *informs* her decisions; it does not *form* them.

Praxis - action with reflection - is shaped by the open question, which invites learners to think about the content in terms of their experience and context. This is not faithful practice, but *praxis*: a three-fold element: do it, consider what you did and then re-do it.

Accountability. We are accountable to learners to teach all we have covenanted to teach in the learning design. We are accountable to *all* for all: absolute inclusion!

PART III: The Process – Learning Tasks

A learning task is an open question put to a small group who have all the resources they need to respond

A learning task is a task for the learner: it shows him what he is to *do* with the given content in order to learn it. A learning task is designed with *verbs* that demand action and reflection, and a product for evaluation.

A learning task has four simple parts:

Inductive work that connects new content to the learner’s context; This is sometimes called *anchoring*.

Input that presents new content as ideas, attitudes or skills. This is sometimes called *adding*.

Implementation that invites learners to do something with the new content, and sometimes called the *acting/applying*.

Integration that moves the new content into their context and sometimes called the *away*.

Here is an example of a learning task.

Learning Task #1: Principles and Practices

1A In pairs, name one thing you do as you teach that *you know* helps learners learn... We'll hear all you share. (INDUCTIVE /ANCHOR: reflecting learners' experience)

1B Read over the list of principles and practices above, circling those that could be useful to you in your work or life. We'll hear what you circled. (INPUT/ADD: new content)

1C In new pairs, each select one of those principles/practices that will be immediately useful in your life/work and tell one thing you will do to incorporate it. We'll hear a sample. (IMPLEMENTATION/ACT: practice)

ID Each, draw a picture, or write a descriptive paragraph of a scene from your work site to show you as you use that principle/practice with your clients. (INTEGRATION/AWAY: summary of immediate practice)

Notice that the learning task has a title. Notice the verbs in a learning task are actions for the *learners* to do.

PART IV: Proof of Learning: Evaluation Indicators

Going back to the Design Step: SO THAT, you have seen of behaviors of learners that indicate *they know they know* the content you have taught. These are *indicators of learning*, immediately evident in the session.

Behavioral indicators of transfer are what learners do when they get back to their own context, or lives. They can send pictures or descriptive paragraphs of their actions.

Indicators of impact show changes in systems, families, organizations, neighborhoods that have occurred as a function of the new consciousness that emerges from new behaviors. Impact is usually a long-range result.

This is the Berardinelli Theory of Impact which is found in the text *How Do they Know They Know (1998)*.²

This is my letter to the world of educators.

1. Zull, James E. *From Brain to Mind* Sterling, VA Stylus (2011) p. 4

2. Berardinelli, Paula, James Burrows, Jane Vella, *How Do They Know They Know*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass (1998)