

## Evaluating Adult Learning as Seasonal Change

by Jane Vella, PhD

[Note: this piece was originally published in 2003. We love it and have asked Jane to update it for 2015 with her new thinking, blog previously titled Impact Studies.]

I love the change of seasons: from winter to spring, from spring to the hot days of summer, from summer to the crisp, blue-sky autumn. There is a renewal here that is deep and utterly natural. There are seasons in one's life, as well. Each change: taking a new job, finding a life partner, going on a significant journey—brings that same seasonal renewal.



Credit: "The Four Seasons" by YeraldReloaded

In evaluating adult learning, we might look to seasonal change as an analogue. Initially, the excitement of folks after a five-day course entitled Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach (now, Foundations of Dialogue Education) is as palpable as the first day of spring, or summer, or fall. Learning has occurred, and it is intoxicating! Transfer—the use of that learning in new situations—at work, at home, in the community—is more challenging. The tedious work of preparation, the tough work of research, the struggle to complete and use the Eight Steps of Design effectively becomes more and more taxing, like the dog days of August bearing out the heat of summer.

Transfer is a discipline. Without it, the joy of learning is a bubble bursting in the first blast of the wind of reality. Transfer is the opportunity for constructive use of the principles and practices, fitting them to your own context like a fine leather glove to your hand. Fitting them means changing them, and that is part of the joy and creativity of transfer.

Impact is a September day with blue skies and cool breezes...it is hoped for and celebrated when it arrives. Impact is the purpose of it all: the change in organizational systems, personal

skill competency, group intimacy and collaboration that makes the whole learning and transfer effort worthwhile. Impact must be celebrated and documented. Tell it like it is! Show us not the money but the significant change for the better that the educational process has wrought.

I propose that impact indicators must be set forth with complete honesty; they must be gathered through comprehensive sampling and through collaborative responses with all participants in the sample. There must be a continuous review of these indicators to prove integration of new skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

We need ongoing Impact Studies that will demonstrate the effectiveness of Dialogue Education, using qualitative and quantitative indicators. As we celebrate and document impact, we will feel a renewal akin to the feeling we have as the seasons change. Mother Nature's own praxis!

The 2015 Edition of this blog offers what I have learned recently:

Indicators of learning are behaviors; indicators of transfer are behaviors; indicators of impact are new systems and behaviors that arise from the new consciousness caused by learning and transfer.... (I must confess I smile at my flowery language of 2003! And I sure was sure, wasn't I? The years answer our prayer for doubt!)

What innovative, creative ways have you used to document indicators of Learning, Transfer and Impact?

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