Personal Reflections – July 2, 2004

An Exhilarating Review

In an exhilarating conversation over three days with my friend Valerie Uccellani, I discovered a few things about my own faith in adult learning principles and practices.

Valerie asked: In your view what are the key principles? I named an essential principle: the learner as constructor of meaning, who gives meaning to the content of learning insofar as it relates to and serves her context. We have called that "the learner as Subject of her own learning." This is a principle because it happens, all the time, and all we have to do is recognize it as nature at work. Young people who on their sixteenth birthday, go to school and clean out their locker, then get someone to drive them to the Department of Motor Vehicles where they get their driving license, and then drive triumphantly to the fast food shop where they begin their minimum wage job – are Subjects of their own learning. They are declaring high school not only boring, but in their case, dead. I would be ashamed to tell you how often this happens in North Carolina!

Our task is to design education—for adults and for youth—that sings for them! We can design education that challenges them and moves them to action, to further learning. That's where the other principles and practices come in. Relevance, Immediacy, Engagement, a Learning Needs and Resources Assessment, Aesthetic Design, Sequence, Learning Tasks that offer solid substantive new content and invite learners into dialogue about it.

I said to Valerie: the dialogue is not between teacher and learners, but among learners of whom the teacher is one. We shared our experiences of exit, when learners took over their own learning, and we became an on-hand resource. We spoke of the importance of this approach to learning being a research agenda, and therefore, the importance of documentation and of developing and testing new forms.

I am always delighted at how surprised I am at the power in these principles and practices!

by Jane Vella