This chapter offers a revolutionary new approach to adult learning that involves a radical new concept of education as creative, critical action and of the teacher as resource person, not professor. Through stories of real-life educational encounters, the principles and practices for such an approach are presented.

A Spirited Epistemology: Honoring the Adult Learner as Subject

Jane Vella

The spiritual dimensions of adult education are the human dimensions, and attention to these dimensions makes for excellent, effective adult learning. Recognizing adult learners as the Subjects (capitalized, as Carl Jung taught, in order to emphasize the primacy of the learner) of or decision makers in their own learning involves a moral stance for the teacher, for the curriculum designer, and for the learners themselves. This is a revolutionary new way of looking at learning.

Epistemology is the study of knowing and the art of learning. I urge teachers to work toward a learning-centered approach to their teaching via 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.” The epistemology of which I speak applies to all persons, regardless of whether they are Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, or Sikh, or nurture their spirituality outside of traditional religious frameworks. It is an epistemology grounded in humanity.

I learned this important theory of the learner as Subject not from any philosopher or theorist but from a poignant story told by my 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 was determined to become a Christian. At the end of the course, Anna was told by the very uptight, superconscientious 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!) she said. However, Anna loved Thomas and wanted to marry him as a Christian. She soon realized something that gave her the courage to begin the course for a second year. She said, “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.) She was prepared to face off with a pompous teacher for another year if that was what it would take to win her love. Anna succeeded, and was 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 also in their lives.

The revolutionary assumption that the teacher is accountable to the learner is the linchpin principle on which all the other principles and practices of effective adult education rest. This chapter describes how we, as adult educators, can celebrate with men and women the fact that they are indeed Subjects of their learning and of their lives. When you finish reading the chapter, you will have heard and examined three assumptions about adult learning; defined and described what it means to be a 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 adult 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

1. Human beings are designed to be Subjects, or decision makers, in their own lives and learning.
2. Each learning event is a moment of spiritual development in which people practice being what they are—Subjects of their own lives and learning.
3. Transformation is not grasping an external set of information, knowledge, or skills, but rather a change into one’s new self, informed by the new knowledge and skills.

These assumptions are the basis of an approach to adult education that respects the learner as Subject of the learning. Respect 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 is more caught than taught. Jesus showed that he knew this when in response to the first curious disciples, who asked, “Where do you live?” he replied, “Come and see.” All great spiritual teachers invite us to have a conscious respect for ourselves, our neighbors, and our world.

As I examine each separate assumption, I build a framework for particular practices that are congruent with these assumptions.
ASSUMPTION 1. *Human beings are designed to be Subjects, or decision makers, in their own lives and learning.*

Darryl Burrow, a bright young man from New Orleans, is director of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Jobs Initiative in New Orleans. This program educates the hard-to-employ so that they are able to get good jobs and work with resources in the community to develop work opportunities. Darryl invited Global Learning Partners, Inc., to share their revolutionary approach to adult education both with the community organizers who recruit for the program and teach adults participating in the program, and with the faculty of the community college, who are resources to the program.

Global Learning Partners insists 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,* and *How.* As Subject of his own learning, Darryl used his knowledge of this requirement to arrange creatively the sites for the two courses. The community college professors would take the course in the downtown community center, and the community organizers would take it at the community college learning center. Such creativity and respect for context is what we celebrate and what we invite when we believe that the learner is Subject of what he or she does with what is learned.

Being Subject of one’s own learning also means that one reconstructs a theory or skill to fit one’s own context. This is what philosophers do when they take the work of previous philosophers and prepare their own philosophy. Each artist composes standing on the shoulders of his or her teachers. When a spirited epistemology is used, learners are invited to “compose” what they are learning so that it fits their life and context.

Paulo Freire (1970) describes the *banking* system of education, whereby the teacher deposits information and gets back from learners that same information on tests. This is the farthest thing from what we do when we use a spirited epistemology. Being Subject of one’s own learning means hard work, severe discipline, and 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. Those who took part in the program celebrate that in New Orleans they learned the theory well and were creative and faithful enough to make that theory work in the New Orleans context.

ASSUMPTION 2. *Each learning event is a moment of spiritual development in which people practice being what they are—Subjects of their own lives and learning.*

Learning tasks, not teaching tasks, are the heart of an accountable design in a spirited epistemology. The design of a learning event, a class or meeting, or a training session can afford opportunity for engaged learners
to be involved in active re-creation 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.

For the Governor’s Conference on Learning in Vermont in May 1998, I had the pleasure of designing, as the keynote address, a one-hour session in which 150 educators worked assiduously on Johnson and Johnson’s (1987) adaptation of Kurt Lewin’s (1951) twelve principles of learning. The educators worked in pairs. They read Lewin’s principles, which were on placards on the wall, and selected the ones that spoke most directly to their experience as educators. The ensuing dialogue was profound and enlightening. 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.

I hope that today they remember that keynote address as a moment in 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. The practice of being and acting as Subjects enabled the participants to share more than the information about Lewin’s theories of learning that was on the placards. They also shared themselves.

**ASSUMPTION 3.** *Transformation is not grasping an external set of information, knowledge, or skills, but changing into one’s self, informed by the new knowledge and skills.*

Every educational event is movement toward a *metanoia,* the passage of spirit from alienation into a deeper awareness of oneself. A spirited epistemology is based on the belief that all education is directed toward such a transformation.

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* (Vella, 1994). This hardworking physician told me that as she read the book she realized for the first time that as a doctor she 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. That day, she learned more than the root of a 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.

Here’s 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 course’s six sessions 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 self-styled information systems hero. They feel more and more intimidated by the global system and by the
laptop computer in front of them. They know how little they know and how unlikely it is that they will ever master this knowledge and these skills. They do not come back to the rest of the course, for which they have already paid.

Precisely this situation occurred recently here in North Carolina. Without a spirited epistemology, without a 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 issue of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 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 these learners.

**Dialogue.** The heart of a spirited epistemology is respect for dialogue. Everything in your design moves toward dialogue as a plant moves toward the sunlight. Dialogue is the guiding principle. This means, however, that a teacher accepts a new role as resource person, not as expert; as guide, not as professor; as mentor, not as instructor; as educator, not as facilitator. Freire’s famous phrase, “Only the student can name the moment of the death of the professor,” which he said in a conversation on our back porch in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1962, 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* because 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. A spirited epistemology simply means we design in such a way as to listen to the adult learners’ experiences and knowledge base, and to build on that which is known with what is new.

When I teach the Seven Steps of Planning, I realize that all of the adults I am teaching have done some kind of planning. They already have a model. In respect for that experience and knowledge, I ask them to do a simple learning task. I ask the participants at each table to examine seven cards on which are written 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

I then ask each group to put the cards in an appropriate order for designing an adult education event. We then go around the room and examine the order set out at each table.

Such a learning task does a number of exciting things: It gets people working together, arguing, and challenging one another. Everyone brings to the task all of their previous knowledge of planning, and they 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, discovering other interpretations. They learn, as Subjects, the Seven Steps of Planning not by applying 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 cooking class, a community education event on political organizing.

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 or his homework.

All learning involves cognitive, affective, and psychomotor elements. When you design learning tasks for adult learners in order to learn what you are teaching, you always include cognitive, affective, and psychomotor elements. For example, in that keynote address in Vermont mentioned earlier in the chapter, I gave the educators the following learning task: In pairs, walk around and read Lewin’s twelve principles recorded on the placards. Select two principles 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 task involved obvious psychomotor activity—a gallery walk. It involved the affective in the selection and application of some of Lewin’s (1951) theories to the participants’ work, and it involved cognitive work in reading, analyzing, and applying all twelve principles.

**Respect.** This principle guides not only the design of learning and of learning tasks, but also every aspect of educators’ encounters with adult learners. We can respect adult learners only when we know something of their context and situation. The practice of doing a learning needs 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 the course and included a short survey for them to complete and fax to me. The
prospective participants included 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 responses 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 have seen the program description. What are your expectations of the weekend?

I learned from the responses that I needed to adjust the content and the process just enough to meet the participants’ needs.

On the first day, I referred to their problems and expectations, which showed that I respected the participants’ and their context. I explicitly noted the slight changes I had made to the program; this was further proof that I had read and indeed studied their responses.

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

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

Knowles (1980) shared some basic concepts that guide adult learning: respect, immediacy, relevance, and the fact that adults use 20 percent of what they hear, 40 percent of what they both hear and see, and 80 percent of what they do. These are all incorporated in an effective learning task that invites learners to do something with what they are learning.

The verbs in a learning task explain 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 verbs describe what the learners do, not what the teacher does. A spirited epistemology is based on what Dewey (1938) taught years ago: 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 is based on the belief 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 demonstrate accountability, use a learning covenant. The achievement-based objectives of such a covenant are the backbone of a design that shows exactly what will be taught and learned, and what the learners will do to show themselves that they know what has been taught. In the title of a book I coauthored on evaluation, *How Do They Know They Know?* (Vella, Berardinelli, and Burrow, 1998), the operative word is *they*. Go back and look at the objectives I presented early in this chapter. This was my covenant with you. Has it helped you to learn about a spirited epistemology as you read?

Achievement-based objectives are grounded in the assumption that adult learners want to learn and are willing to do the work involved. Such objectives 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 proof of the learning that took place.

A spirited epistemology is not only an attitude. It is also a process, materials, and actions. It involves mutuality of respect and joy in learning. When a teacher is using another epistemology, he or she is not accountable to the learners. Learning is either a spirited partnership or 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” White South African soldiers how precious the women’s homes were and how powerful these defenseless homesteaders actually were. Before the end of apartheid, the army was sent to ravage villages where there were no men (they were all in the mines or in cities). At one village the women decided to use what they knew of the background of these White South African soldiers, who were all dutiful Dutch Calvinists. The women met the army at the gate of their village undressed. The army retreated as fast as they could, with their eyes closed. This is use of a spirited epistemology: nonviolent and efficacious.

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

**Inviting a Moral Stance from the Adult Learner.** This epistemology demands a new relationship between teacher and learner—a relationship of partners in learning, who work together to advance the learning of each partner. My friend and colleague Sarah Gravett (Gravett and Henning, 1998), in South Africa, describes this relationship thus: Based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) theory—which implies that teacher, learner, and knowledge are in a dynamic, reciprocal unity—dialogic teaching is proposed as transformative exchange, in which 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 Dewey (1938), Freire (1970), Bakhtin (1981), Rogers (1961), and Knowles (1980) continue to move us forward and nudge the revolution in education. The desperation of students leaving school in droves at sixteen to get minimum-wage jobs and buy a secondhand car on credit urges us to develop a new system of relevant education. The pleas of industry, government, and health services for creative, critical thinkers makes this effort vital (Senge, 1990).

The Future of Such an Approach

Donald Oliver (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 and store electronic mail is technical knowing. Ontological knowing is analyzing world events to determine cause—media, statesmen, politicians, the military, local culture, or religion. Ontology is the study of being. Ontological knowing has to do with being human, being men and being women, being society. Considering the potential of e-mail, testing mass deliveries and analyzing their effect is ontological knowing. Both types of knowing are necessary and both need a spirited epistemology. Reverence here lies in the distinction between the two. How can my work with an adult learner in a literacy course become ontological knowing? 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 by 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 beginning of the twentieth century, Dewey recognized that education was designed to prepare women and men for factory jobs on an assembly line or for soldiering. A spirited epistemology is not designed for that purpose. 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 feel certain that 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 appropriate not only in adult education but in any educational effort.

This is our choice. This is our moral stance. In the chapter that follows, Linda Vogel builds on this chapter by focusing on adult educators and what it means for them to reckon with their spiritual lives. The following chapters in this volume 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.
References


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