

Reflection: Circularity of My World -- My Work, My World

Iris Rich-McQuay, BSW, PID, ED.D.(abd)

1. Abstract:

These reflections discuss the core elements of a transformational learning program for adults returning to a post secondary institution. This reflection also draws upon literature that supports a more holistic approach to the meaning of education and learning. I also include the symbiotic relationship of my own personal "life journey" to the development of curriculum that fosters, promotes, guides and empowers students through a life-changing encounter:

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we are really seeking. I think that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive...(Campbell, 1988, p. 3).

Key Words:

Transformational learning, holistic teaching practise, adult education, experiential learning, student development, self-reflective, holistic curriculum

2. Personal History and Perspective

I have been privileged to teach in Adult Basic Education for over 30 years, within the Faculty of Student Development at a community college/ university college and now full-status university. My personal and professional philosophies, guided by Krishnamurti, have always been concentrated in the necessity of education having its purpose in the cultivation of the whole human being, and that a truly authentic education embraces the harmonious advancement of one's body, mind and spirit.

My teaching passions have included providing learning opportunities for adult learners in the following fields: Essential Living and Job Readiness Skills, Academic Advising and Liaison, Basic Literacy, Adult Basic Education, Young Mothers' Life, Academic and Parenting Skills, and currently, Career Orientation and Personal Empowerment for women (COPE) / Men's Education and Career Alternatives (MECA), programs in Transformational and Holistic Personal Development. These positions and programs have been situated in innovative disciplines of education; consequently, I have developed and honed many skills in proposal writing and presentation, and in program, curriculum and course development. However, more significantly, is the definite, direct correlation between the expertise of my teaching practice and the degree of intensity of reflecting and processing my own "inner work." Through the engagement of personal therapeutic encounters, while furthering my education in counselling, Hakomi psychotherapy, Peruvian shamanism, meditation, yoga, Buddhist mindfulness traditions and currently a Doctorate in Educational Leadership (abd), I have been able to experience directly personal growth and the affect of "transformative learning". I

found solace in my commitment to a journey of self-discovery, in which I refined my professional practice to harmonize with my personal practice and in so doing enhanced my classroom practice, practices and curricula, as well as the learning outcomes of my students.

In *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer (1998) affirms:

When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are, I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my object—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning (p. 2).

3. COPE / MECA Course Description:

COPE / MECA are non-academic programs being offered within a post-secondary institution. “[This] combined class has variously been described as holistic, therapeutic, consciousness raising, exploratory and transformative” (Knowles, 2006, p. 1). The classes are intensive, self reflective, co-operative and experiential, facilitated through a comprehensive curriculum, utilizing all self-dimensions—intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual. My experience and the literature have informed me that the learning process must include all these dimensions. Palmer (1998) states:

... reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness (p. 4).

The two programs share goals that foster personal readiness for enhanced self awareness, personal development, further academic study, gainful employment, healthier relationships and productive living styles which assist in abating and breaking cycles of dependency, low self-confidence and esteem, while raising self-worth, uplifting motivation and volition and igniting personal passions.

The COPE / MECA class functions as a cohort and with the exception of some attrition, due to withdrawals, completes as a whole fourteen weeks later. As cited by Knowles (2006), this continuity fosters “a balance of mind, body, spirit, and emotion” (Feller, 2004, p. 222) for students and serves as “a centralizing or grounding force” (p. 221) thereby creating group and individual stability and, as a cohort, incites feelings of “connection, safety, support, and equality” (p. 221). This atmosphere promotes “developing relationships with like-minded individuals [which are] essential for the transformative process,” Taylor (2000, p. 307) and results in a classroom environment where students feel trusting and confident in self-expression.

In establishing the atmosphere of the classroom and the program, much is dependent upon the facilitators' modelling congruence and authenticity. I am cognizant that the consistency with which I am able to be mindfully present and harmonious embodies mentorship for my students of what it means to be on a path of becoming—of becoming more aligned to their true nature. Henry Miller states that “example moves the

world more than doctrine.” These words are my practice as I cannot ask of my students that which I am not willing to do or to give.

In developing program curriculum, we concentrated on instructional and experiential components that would enhance the culture of the classroom. A philosophy of teaching to the ‘whole person’ is nurtured by initiating rituals and ceremonies such as the daily ‘morning check-ins;’ encouraging the sharing of history and stories through reflective ‘discovery and intention’ narrative journals; affording conscious, contemplative and mindfulness practice; and embracing intellectual discourse, as well as ‘healing circle discussions.’ The core of my teaching is not based only in theory, but in the experiential integration of the mind, body and spirit.

Active and attentive listening skills are powerful tools to evoking the soul. Daily check-ins facilitate experiential practice. Implementing a ‘speaking stone’ as the customary habit to offer or show respect for one another and by responding to a provocative daily question, students are encouraged to reveal their genuine feelings and opinions, prudently exposing each student to the rewards of self-disclosure. Sidorkin (cited in Furman, 2002) points out that “democratic deliberation is based in dialogue theory [...] the actual process of dialogue resembles a Native American talking circle, in which each speaker is heard without interruption or contention and given as much time as needed to speak” (p. 68). Stephen Brookfield states:

... the paying of attention is what [is meant] by mindfulness. It involves being aware of the whole conversation—of who has spoken and who has not—and of doing what one can do to ensure that the discussion doesn’t get bogged down in the consideration of issues that are of concern only to a very small minority of participants. In general, mindfulness is a crucial component of any really good discussion (1999, p. 11).

As the days of the class advance, the levels of trust and confidence in the group increases; however, the more consequential outcomes are the students’ enhanced attributes of listening, the gift of being heard and the enriched ability to articulate feelings and thoughts.

In developing curriculum that calls attention to self-reflection, cooperative, experiential and dialogical components, the “lifeworld” culture is strengthened, facilitating students’ confidence to engage in communication that is genuine, respectful and free of judgments. Critical thinking techniques are introduced giving students self-assurance in the understanding of their own thinking processes. The cohort model provides encouragement and validation for each other’s progress with discursive skills, and as “learning is a social process, in the end; discussion remains an indispensable part of democratic education” (Brookfield, 1999, p. 20).

In reflection upon my teaching practice and practices, I recognize that the bridging of my own *human* journey, to the COPE / MECA academic curriculum induces students’ spirits to embrace learning, thereby connecting the theoretical to the *whole being; head to heart*.

Traditionally, cognitive ability has been seen as the key factor in learning. But increased research into intellectual-emotional connections in the human brain

shows that the affective domain is the gateway to the cognitive. Self-esteem is one of the most crucial aspects of the affect (Van Ness, 1995, p. 7).

I am positive teaching is all about rousing students to the lifelong search for a truth, which finally is a search for themselves.

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood [...] As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks - we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation and service joins self and service, which is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need (Palmer, 2000, p.16).

As I continue to be conscious and audacious in accepting the challenge of connecting my own essence within a holistic, academic curriculum, the animus of my students will continue to flourish and unfold implementing all dimensions of self *including* the intellect.

Ah! Your very being is the perfect teacher. Recognizing your nature, take this to heart. For all those who have not realized this, arouse compassion. to help them find this pure and holy space (Welwood, 2000, p. xx).

4. Inspirations:

In my facilitating of experiential, reflective and critically discursive programs to adult learners, I have observed countless occurrences of transformational learning and have become filled with wonder as to the mystery of this phenomenon. I am intrigued and curious as to the how, when, why and what that provokes these learning occurrences to happen. With desire to gain further understanding and insights into this phenomenon, I am currently engaged in doctoral research, conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into the "lived experience" of student s of COPE/MECA.

Author's contact Information

Iris Rich-McQuay BSW, PID, ED.D.(abd)

Thompson Rivers University

900 McGill Rd PO Bx 3010, Kamloops, B.C. V2C 5N3

Faculty – Lecturer/Instructor, Counselling Department, Faculty of Student Development

Office: 250-371-5533, email: irich@tru.ca

References

- Brookfield, S. (2000). Transformative learning as ideology critique. In J. Mezirow Associates (Ed.), *Learning as transformation – Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Campbell, J. (1988). *The power of myth*. New York: Doubleday

- Feller, A., Jensen, A., Marie, D., et al. (2004). Quadrinity online: Toward a fuller expression of transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2(3), 219-230.
- Furman, G. (Ed.). (2002). *School as community: From promise to practice*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Knowles, D. (2006). Unpublished paper assigned for MAIS 602. Athabasca University.
- Miller, H. Retrieved Nov 3, 2008, from <http://quotationsbook.com/quote/12962>
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, E. (2000). Analyzing research on transformative learning theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Ed.), *Learning as Transformation – Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Van Ness, R. (1995). *Raising self-esteem of learners*. Bloomington: Phi Kappa
- Welwood, J. (2000). *Toward a psychology of awakening: Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the path of personal and spiritual transformation*. Shambhala.