

First Things First in Becoming a Teacher of Adults

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Abstract

The exploration of self-awareness as an essential component for understanding ourselves as a teacher of adults is rather absent in the literature. This article focuses on the elements that are foundational within the self-awareness journey—beliefs, values, and attitudes. Understanding these elements establishes the basis for practice implications, such as formulating a personal philosophy or vision for teaching, establishing authenticity and credibility, and determining a teaching perspective.

Introduction

A common myth exists that suggests that if you are a content/discipline expert, then you should know how to teach effectively. That may or may not be true. We all have had those moments in which we have witnessed skillful teaching and learning episodes, as well as moments in the teaching and learning process that we would rather forget. Weimer (2008) skillfully challenges the assumption that teaching in every discipline is unique to those specific disciplines. She states that “there is no guarantee that colleagues in the discipline are pedagogically savvy—that their views of teaching are anything but eclectic, idiosyncratic, and uninformed” (p. 3). Not everyone would agree as to the qualities and characteristics that constitute a good teacher, including those in the adult education discipline.

Becoming a skillful teacher of adults is a daunting task (Galbraith, 2008) . No one teaching model fits all occasions in which teaching and learning takes place. “Simple categorization of the teaching and learning

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transaction is difficult because of the complex and multifaceted orientation of adult learners and the variety of settings in which the transaction occurs” (Galbraith, 2004a, p. 3). Moreover, “Good teaching should be a balance of understanding one’s self as a teacher and knowing how to develop learning encounters that are meaningful and useful in the promotion of personal and professional growth” (p. 4). Therefore, understanding yourself is the core of being a good teacher of adults. “If we don’t know who we are as human beings, it is very difficult to know who we are as teachers” (Cranton, 2001, p. 6). It is the self-awareness aspect of becoming a teacher of adults that is an essential component in the journey toward understanding who you are and how it relates to the other dimensions of teaching and learning, such as the design, organization, and facilitation processes. Self-awareness lays the ground work for developing a vision for teaching, becoming authentic and credible, and understanding your teaching perspective. Self-awareness is basically the foundation on which you build your teaching practice (Galbraith, 2008; Galbraith & Jones, 2007).

This article will examine self-awareness concepts and provide some direction on how to determine what you believe, what you value, and what attitudes you hold toward certain things or people. In addition, we will discuss how your self-awareness journey influences your personal and professional practice. Understanding your beliefs, values, and attitudes should be the first thing that you do in your educative process toward becoming a skillful teacher of adults. “It is therefore the combination of understanding ourselves as human beings and the combination of our beliefs, values, and attitudes that form the basis for a philosophical and personal vision for teaching”(Galbraith, 2004a, p.11). A knowledge of self is imperative in the development of a teacher of adults.

Discovering Your Beliefs, Values, and Attitudes

To begin your self-awareness journey toward understanding yourself, write down nouns and phrases that you think describe your identity as a person. For example, on your list you might have written down such things as father/mother, writer, teacher, sister/brother, coach, or community organizer. The purpose of this initial activity is to help you recognize how you *define* yourself. The second dimension of this activity is to sit back and reflect on how it came to be that you see yourself in these terms. A questioning mind set opens you up to other ways of viewing and thinking about things.

Part of this reflective process requires you to engage in an examination and understanding of your beliefs, values, and attitudes. These are shaped by your experiences in your personal and professional lives.

Beliefs

What are beliefs? Beliefs are what you accept as truth. Not everyone will accept what you accept as truth, but it is still your truth. Culture, in which you grew up, experienced learning, and may still continue to view life, can be an influential factor in what you believe (Heimlich & Norland, 1994). For example, if the majority of your educational experiences involved small group participatory method in the classroom, then you might believe that is the most appropriate method for effective teaching and learning. Yet, we know that there are numerous methods and techniques that assist in meaningful learning experiences (Galbraith, 2004b). You may still believe and stand strong on what you have experienced only because you have not experienced any other methods and techniques in the classroom. Beliefs may not always be based on factual information, which may render them incorrect, inappropriate, and inaccurate (Pratt, 1998).

Several very useful approaches can help you to determine and explore your beliefs, which may in turn influence your perspective on teaching. One approach, which was developed by Apps (1991), is to create a belief analysis. It is a framework within which to organize your beliefs. The belief analysis works like this. First, you develop a list of your beliefs concerning teaching. Next, you examine the listed beliefs for contradictions, reflecting upon the sources of each belief and finally placing a judgment upon the source of the belief. What you have as a result of this analysis is a list of organized, consistent, and accepted beliefs that may be the foundation for your personal vision or philosophy for teaching.

The second approach is to use the Van Tilburg/Heimlich Teaching Belief Scale, which can be found in Heimlich and Norland's 1994 book. The scale measures the two dimensions of sensitivity and inclusion. Sensitivity refers to beliefs about the importance of knowing about the learners for the purpose of interaction with the learning community. Inclusion refers to the beliefs about the importance of including the learning community in all phases of the learning experience. The results of the scale will indicate what type of teacher (facilitator, enabler, expert, or provider) you are in relationship to sensitivity and inclusion. More details on each type can be found in the Heimlich and Norland's book. Completing

the scale results in an opportunity to investigate other beliefs about yourself as a teacher.

Values

An integral factor in understanding self is understanding your values. Values “are principles that guide us and give us a sense of direction, that help us decide what is important and provide us with an ethical and moral foundation” (Apps, 1996, p. 63). You may, for example, hold personal and professional values such as honesty, trust, love, openness, empowerment, security, autonomy, power, recognition, learning, and expertise.

The question you want to ask yourself is, “How do I determine what my values are as a teacher of adults?” First, take a piece of paper and list up to 10 cherished values you hold. Cranton (2001) provides two important categories for questioning each value. The first question is, “How did I come to have each value?” Under this question you can address such questions as:

- Do I value this based on experience?
- Do I value this as a part of a vision of how things should be?
- Did I deliberately and autonomously choose this value?
- Do I value what others value? (p. 24)

The next major question is, “Why is each value important to me?” Questions Cranton raises under this are:

- Do I value this because I have always valued it?
- Is this value a part of my vision of the world or the future?
- Is this value important because I have thought it through logically?
- Is this value important because it is a part of my social world? (p. 24)

This exercise assists you in exploring and examining your deeper and more personal values that underline your personal and professional lives.

Another value clarification exercise can be found in the Heimlich and Norland (1994). They provide a Teaching Values Scale that enables you to see if you value content/curriculum, physical environment/resources, teacher/methods, learner community, and individual learners in your practice. If you complete this scale, it is important to recognize that the values you hold are clearly linked to your behavior as a teacher of adults.

Attitudes

“Attitudes are those affective elements that are connected to our like and dislike, positive or negative, and for or against feelings toward a person or thing. Our attitudes are guided by values which are based on a set of beliefs” (Galbraith, 2004a, p. 12). For example, you, as a teacher, *believe* that adult students bring to the educational encounter a diversity of thoughts and experiences that should be used for the purpose of fostering further learning. Because you *value* this diversity of thoughts and experiences, you hold a positive *attitude* toward learners who share these thoughts and experiences within the teaching and learning encounter.

As you did above, you can take a piece of paper and write down 10 things you find within your attitudes toward the process of teaching. Remember, your attitudes can be likes and dislikes, positive or negative, or for or against feelings toward someone or something. What did you discover about your list? The attitudes held influence the direction and action of you as a teacher. They play themselves out in the teaching and learning process.

Implications for Teaching Practice

Beliefs, values, and attitudes form the foundation for important implications toward your teaching practice, such as your personal philosophy or vision for teaching, authenticity and credibility as a teacher, and your teaching perspective. Once these implications are realized, you will recognize that they impact the way you design, implement, and facilitate learning episodes.

Personal Philosophy and Vision for Teaching

A personal philosophy or vision for teaching is important. The numerous ways of teaching suggest that there are varying philosophical or personal visions put forth in the process. There is no one *correct* philosophical orientation when it comes to teaching. When you discover what beliefs, values, and attitudes you hold, you will have the basis for a focused and action-oriented vision or philosophy for your teaching. That is, you take your espoused beliefs, values, and attitudes and turn them into a philosophy-in-action.

An educational philosophy is essential for adult educators in their

efforts toward “understanding what we do in the classroom and why we do it” (Conti, 2007, p. 19). A good personal philosophy “is the primary focal point of understanding good teaching, and everything that occurs in the teaching and learning process stems from that philosophical orientation” (Galbraith, 2004a, p. 13). Your philosophy will become your point of light that will give you direction as a teacher. Developing a personal philosophy or vision provides an organizing vision for your efforts, gives a sense of stability and direction, reduces those feelings of uncertainty, combats political pressure and undesired wishes of institutions that are in conflict with your vision or philosophy, and provides a sense of collective professional identity (Brookfield, 2006). This leads to professional strength among teachers and is pedagogically important as it assists you in knowing how to judge the influence you may have within the educational encounter.

Several approaches can help you determine your personal philosophy or vision for teaching. One approach is to complete the Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory developed by Zinn (2004). This self-administering, self-scoring, and self-interpreting inventory will place you in one of five philosophical orientations: liberal, behaviorist, progressive, humanistic, or radical. You can interpret your scores through such factors as purpose of education, learner, teacher, key words used, methods, and people and practices.

In the same vein as Zinn’s inventory, Conti (2007) has developed the Philosophies Held by Instructors of Lifelong-Learners (PHIL) instrument. It “was designed to identify a respondent’s preference” toward one of five major schools of philosophical thought (p. 22). The PHIL schools of thought are idealism (liberal), realism (behaviorist), pragmatism (progressive), existentialism (humanistic), and reconstructionism (radical). Conti states that,

PHIL consists of four items that are organized in a flow-chart design. Each item begins with a sentence stem that leads to two options. Each option leads the respondent to proceed to another page with an additional item on it or which provides information about the respondent’s correct group placement. Once the group placement is identified, the respondent is directed to the page with the descriptions of the various educational philosophies.(p. 32)

The wonderful thing about this instrument is that it can be completed in approximately 1 to 3 minutes.

Another approach is to identify a philosophy and adopt it as your own (which you probably already have done) and then build on your framework

within the selected philosophical general tenets that you find desirable and useful. A nice overview of various philosophies can be found in Elias and Merriam's (2005) book, *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education*, which you may find very helpful in accomplishing this approach.

A third approach is to reflect on your beliefs, values, and attitudes as they relate to teaching and learning. Then, according to Dean (2002), you can take this inductive approach to philosophy building and compare existing philosophies as you engage in a quest of congruence. Basically, you are taking what you discovered in your self-awareness journey and attempting to see if a certain philosophy contains those particular elements.

Once you discover those self-awareness components (beliefs, values, and attitudes) as well as identify a philosophical orientation that works for you, you will become a more reflective and insightful teacher. As a result, you will grow both personally and professionally and be able to separate what others think you should be as a teacher from what you really are as a teacher. Once you engage in self-awareness activities, it allows you to understand yourself better and moves you toward being more authentic and credible as a teacher.

Authenticity and Credibility

Being a teacher is a “highly individual endeavor, and each instructor should work according to what personally feels most comfortable” (Sperber, 2005, p. B20). Adult learners recognize early if you are attempting to engage in a style of teaching that is not truly yours. You cannot act like a stand-up comedian, for example, and feel comfortable in that process if it is not in your demeanor. However, you may use humor in the classroom if it comes at a time when the situation or comments made by students spark a story or reflective feedback moment. Nothing is planned ahead of time. In other words, you have to find the comfort zone and teaching style that fits your personality. Students have an awareness. They are wise enough to recognize if you are not authentic and credible in your teaching approach.

Having students view you as authentic and credible is grounded in the process of building trust between you and them. Being “the teacher” does not come with an automatic precept of trust. You have to earn trust! Becoming an authentic teacher happens when students feel they can trust that your espoused perspectives are aligned with your actions; adult learners see authentic teachers as real flesh-and-blood human beings with

passions, frailties, and emotions (Brookfield, 2006). In support of that perspective, authentic teachers are those who hold an awareness of who they are as individual human beings and can express that in their professional work (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Cranton, 2001; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Galbraith & Jones, 2006).

Credibility is paved in believability and trustworthiness. Credible teachers have the ability to present themselves as people with something to offer students (Brookfield, 2006). Once you have credibility with your students, they will view you as having the knowledge, skill, experience, expertise, and insight that exceeds theirs. You will be accepted as someone who can help them understand some of the ebbs and flows in their intellectual journey.

It is essential to seek some sort of balance and comfort zone for credibility and authenticity so you can lay a foundation for a trusting teaching and learning encounter. The courage to wrestle with your beliefs, values, attitudes, philosophical orientation, and the elements of what makes you more authentic and credible may suggest that you have the beginnings of becoming a good teacher of adults.

A Teaching Perspective

Each of us has a particular way of viewing teaching and learning. The way you carry out your role and activities as a teacher is your teaching style. To get you into the mind-set of thinking in terms of teaching style, take a few minutes and answer these five prompts as suggested by Filene (2005):

- I bring to teaching a belief that _____.
- In the classroom I see myself as _____.
- I believe students are _____.
- I seek to foster in students _____.
- I think learning is _____.

What this activity provides is a preliminary means of explaining what you think your style is, what your mode of inquiry is, and what you value. However, that is not the same as a teaching perspective. Your beliefs, values, and attitudes are important because they lay the foundation for your teaching perspective.

Pratt (2002) contends that a perspective on teaching is an interrelated set of beliefs and intentions which give *meaning and justification* for your actions. Perspectives are neither good nor bad according to Pratt. Instead,

they are “simply philosophical orientations to knowledge, learning, and the role and responsibility of being a teacher” (p. 14) and provide a lens through which you view teaching and learning. How your beliefs, intentions, and actions play out will assist in determining your perspective on teaching. It is not uncommon to find yourself thinking that you associate with more than one perspective.

Pratt and Associates (1998) provide thoughtful insights into understanding perspectives on teaching. An excellent tool that will help you identify your dominant perspective is The Teaching Perspectives Inventory (available at www.teachingperspectives.com) which was developed by Pratt. The inventory generates five teaching perspectives. You will discover that one of the five teaching perspectives is in agreement with your own practice.

The first perspective is grounded in a behaviorist approach to teaching. Pratt calls this the *Transmission Perspective*, which is grounded in a relationship between content and process. The purpose of teaching from this perspective is to move knowledge or skills from a content expert, the teacher or textbook, to the learner. Ideal learners in this setting would be those who know exactly why they are there and what they want to do with the skills learned. If you subscribe to this perspective as a teacher, you would spend a great deal of time preparing and mastering the content. Because of the emphasis is on the instructional design process, you will specify what your students will learn by writing the objectives and having the assignments structured to meet those objectives.

The *Developmental Perspective* is another one of the five perspectives. This perspective is very much grounded in the constructionist orientation. Pratt (2002) suggests that the “goal is to change the way learners think rather than increase their store of knowledge” (p. 8). The *Development Perspective* goal is to challenge learners to think critically, to solve problems, and to understand for themselves what the material means. A primary focus is to confront learners with new information that does not fit their prior knowledge base. So when learners are confronted with new information that does not fit, it causes a moment of disequilibrium until they can either dismiss the new information or revise their cognitive process. If you hold this perspective, you would as a teacher of adults explore learners’ current conceptions of content and then challenge those conceptions to help learners move to more sophisticated levels of thinking and reasoning. Asking meaningful questions, proposing problems, utilizing case studies, engaging in discussions, and providing insightful examples are

the major techniques that help propel learners from their previous ways of thinking and reasoning to new and more sophisticated forms of thinking.

A third perspective is the *Nurturing Perspective* and is grounded in the belief that learning is most affected by a learner's self-concept and self-efficacy. It suggests that a learner's high confidence level contributes to the ability to learn new material and makes it useful and relevant to life. This perspective is held by teachers of adults who view themselves as facilitators of learning and not just as transmitters of information. Such teachers help students feel good about themselves as self-sufficient learners, celebrate their achievements, as well as support and challenge them in their educational journey. However, nurturing teachers also understand that mastery of content is considered secondary to the way in which mastery is achieved.

The next perspective on teaching is the *Apprenticeship Perspective*. Johnson and Pratt (1998) suggest that learning is facilitated when the learner works on authentic tasks in real settings of practice. As a teacher, you work with the learners' zone of development, that is, you know what learners can do on their own and what they can do with guided assistance. In addition, as you help learners work on meaningful and relevant tasks of practice, you will go through some traditional stages associated with this perspective such as observation, modelling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching. The primary goal should be to have learners reach a point of autonomy and independence.

The *Social Reform Perspective* is the final perspective on teaching. This perspective is based upon an explicitly stated ideal or set of principles that are, in turn, linked to a vision of a better social order (Nesbit, 1998). As a teacher who conforms to this perspective, you would make three assumptions: that the ideals held are necessary for a better society; that the ideals are appropriate for all; and that the ultimate goal of teaching is to bring about social change, not simply individual learning. The teacher of adults would utilize powerful metaphors that "help learners bridge between prior knowledge and new concepts, and work hard to respect and promote the dignity and self-efficacy" of the learners (pp. 12-13). As Pratt (2002) suggests, those who hold a Social Reform Perspective are few and far between but "those who do are very likely to have a lasting impression on their learners" (p. 13).

It is imperative to remember that perspectives on teaching represent a set of beliefs as opposed to a set of teaching behaviors. Take some time and explore what your dominant perspective is and how that fits into your

beliefs, intentions, and actions as a teacher. It will help in improving your philosophical and practical aspects of your teaching.

Conclusion

Self-awareness is an essential component in becoming a skillful teacher of adults. To begin this journey toward self-awareness, it is suggested that it is imperative to investigate your beliefs, values, and attitudes. In doing so, you discover what you accept as truth, as well as principles that guide you and give you a sense of direction. In addition you will discover those affective elements that make a connection to your likes and dislikes (both positive and negative) and to your feelings toward a person or thing (both for and against). These three elements form the basis for important implications for your teaching practice. Self-awareness is the foundation for your philosophical orientation or vision for teaching, a mechanism for enhancing authenticity and credibility of yourself as a teacher with your adult learners, and a guide for your teaching perspective.

An insightful self-awareness journey can be rewarding. However, it takes a dedicated focus, as well as an investment in time, energy, and commitment to realize its full potential and value to you as a teacher of adults. Self-awareness understandings can enhance your practice in ways that will improve the teaching and learning encounter.

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