

Authenticity through reflexivity: connecting teaching philosophy and practice

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Adult educators have strong beliefs. This will surprise no-one, but where do their beliefs come from, and how do they influence future development of their teaching practice? Drawing on my PhD research, I explore the multi-directional relationship between teaching beliefs and practices, considering the influence of past traditions of adult education and personal philosophies of teaching. Through interviews, journaling and a focus group, ten practitioners from Melbourne's Centre for Adult Education explored the sticky questions of how their philosophies developed and how these philosophies interconnect with more recent notions of good practice.

Some research suggests that teaching practice is fundamentally shaped by beliefs that are stable and resistant to change, yet these practitioners revealed a dynamic, multi-directional relationship between teaching beliefs and practices. They were influenced by their own past experiences of learning and some of the broad traditions of adult education, yet arguably of greater interest was

the finding that adult educators' philosophies of teaching were also influenced by their current practice, their interaction with learners, and the challenges of the day-to-day learning context. The words and experiences of these practitioners demonstrate that deliberate engagement with educators' beliefs may enhance authentic development of their teaching practice.

Current directions in government policy for adult education are firmly fixed on skilling a national workforce, and naturally require adult educators' teaching practice to reflect this. What can be expected when this irresistible force meets the potentially immovable object of adult educators' teaching philosophies?

Introduction

The Centre for Adult Education (CAE), like many educational institutions, has experienced great change over the past thirty years. A Melbourne icon since its inception in 1946 the CAE has mirrored and sometimes driven the different understandings of adult education held by the education community and broader society. Early conceptions were concerned with supplementary education, individual fulfilment, community development and democratisation, and led to the catchcry 'lifelong learning', now grown beyond the education sector to become an integral part of contemporary social discourse (Haugen, 2000: 577). Today the CAE continues to be the largest single provider of adult and further education (ACFE) courses in Victoria.

Government funding is now attached primarily to programs that deliver formal qualifications for adults such as the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Vocational Education and Training (VET) traineeships; and programs that develop literacy, numeracy and job readiness skills. Education for the purpose of work is in the

ascendency, and the concept of civic and community benefit for the common good as the core rationale of education and training has taken a back seat. These developments have not proceeded uncontested. Kell (2001) claimed that this shift occurred in the context of nation building towards a preoccupation about efficiency, effectiveness and conformity to the principles of the market, and away from notions of public ownership. The emphasis on collective and democratic notions of the purpose of education has been displaced by exchange relationships between a purchaser and provider where educational futures are guaranteed by ensembles involving capital (2001: 244).

What is the role of teachers in this context? Despite earlier fears (or hopes), new technology will not be replacing adult educators any time soon; in fact their spaces are spreading beyond classrooms to workplaces, business meeting rooms and virtual campuses. 'Good teaching' is recognised by government, traditional education institutions, other Registered Training Organisations and learners as a vital component in adult education, yet calls for changes to the practice of adult educators suggest that a mismatch is perceived. Given the importance of teachers to education, it is worth knowing whether their practices, and the factors that influence their practice, are consistent with the paradigms that shape government education policy. However, while the priorities of government and funding bodies are relatively clear, the educative purposes of adult education teachers are less well known, indeed rarely heard. The extent to which adult educators at the CAE share the educative purposes of government and whether their teaching practice reflects these purposes were unknown.

My research project centred on adult educators at the CAE in Melbourne, and explored with them the underlying philosophies, beliefs, values and practices that influenced their individual teaching practices in this adult education environment. My purpose was to

examine the relationship between these adult educators' personal philosophies of teaching and their teaching practice, exploring the influence of their beliefs, as well as the influence of current, external notions of good teaching. I anticipated that participants sharing diverse understandings through reflective discourse might contribute to a supportive culture of professional growth.

Teaching philosophies as a construct

Within the paradigms of each age and society, philosophy provides a system of beliefs about the things that concern us and a way of exploring that yields meaning. Philosophies can be the result of explicit questioning, where all assumptions, biases and perceptions are rigorously interrogated, or they can be implicit, the result of unexamined but influential experience. Every group, profession or society has rules, mores and conventions. These may define for each entity, and for outsiders, its ideals and purpose; or may work at a subliminal level where behaviour and perspectives are shaped by socialisation, culture and experience. One's personal philosophy has traditionally been understood to refer to a set of beliefs that reside internally as thoughts and feelings, or as a professed set of interrelated beliefs that motivate action. Increasingly it is also understood to incorporate action itself in the external world.

O'Connor and Scanlon claimed that a professional philosophy 'forms a significant part of an individual's professional self and enables one to negotiate the moral and ethical implications of one's daily work' (2005: 1). Research about beliefs sheds light on the factors that contribute to the development of teaching beliefs, the different categories of teaching beliefs, and their openness to change. The literature suggests that beliefs about teaching develop early since most people experience formal learning and observe teaching through schooling. Individual philosophies of teaching seem likely to be stable,

and only change slowly, more as a result of an individual's experience, rather than in response to external and imposed change.

The literature about adult educators' personal philosophies of teaching suggests that although they are unique, and subject to individual development, philosophies are also constructed within social contexts and are exposed to the shifts in prevailing social and political purposes accorded to educators' work. From a historical perspective, personal philosophies of teaching are also developed within a relatively stable framework of discourses and theories about adult education, reflecting particular pedagogical assumptions and traditions that are often longstanding and slow to change. Thus, Elias and Merriam (1995) described five philosophical traditions that are generally understood to underpin adult education: liberal, progressive, behaviouristic, humanistic and radical traditions. According to Bradshaw (1995) all educational traditions carry within them visions of individual and social goods, and good practice is that that realises those goods. Diversity of teaching philosophies is consistent with a plurality of notions of good teaching, yet the literature warns of a narrowing of official understandings of good teaching. The interrelationship between the individual teaching philosophy and teaching practice, its social construction, and its influence are clearly demonstrated through the literature. These considerations suggest that philosophies of teaching should be taken into account in professional development and other methods of developing teaching practice. The connection between these concepts in the world of adult education was where my research interest lay. I was interested in the personal philosophies of teaching of adult educators, in particular the internal and external aspects of these philosophies. In addition I explored their relationship with the broader philosophies of adult education that may define and influence the practice of adult education in today's settings.

What is the relationship between adult educators' philosophies of teaching and their teaching practice? Some research suggests that teaching practice is fundamentally connected to adult educators' personal philosophies of teaching, shaped by beliefs that are stable constructs and resistant to change. However, the particular influence of adult educators' teaching philosophies remains largely unknown. What can be expected when adult educators' teaching philosophies and official notions of good teaching practice meet on the ground? In this context the connection between philosophy and practice would appear to be central, yet it remains largely unexplored.

In a narrowing education debate where training for employment holds sway, the literature suggests that some teaching philosophies will be out of step with the dominant paradigm. In these situations, how are we to understand the influence of teaching philosophies on teaching practice? There is little evidence of policy makers engaging with educators to understand their beliefs better. However, research suggests that professional development that fails to take into account teachers' philosophies of teaching is doomed to disappointing results. With this in mind I argue that it is appropriate to use personal philosophies as a construct through which to explore the decisions that teachers make in their teaching practice, and as a potential construct for enriching professional development. The research questions that framed this study emerged from the literature review, specifically:

- What are the different philosophies that adult educators at the CAE use to conceptualise their educative work?
- How do these philosophies develop?
- What is the relationship between these teaching philosophies and teaching practice?
- How do these philosophies interrelate with official notions of 'good teaching'?

- What are the implications for current and future developments for teaching practice?

Methodology

Because the literature revealed that the voices of adult educators are seldom heard, the prime focus of this study was to make space for some of these voices to emerge. The nature of the research questions aligns primarily with an interpretive qualitative methodology, which favours the internal reality of subjective experience for each adult educator participant. As a consequence I used individual interviews, individual practice journaling and focus group interviewing in order to give prominence to individual teachers' voices. Individual interview questions were open ended and the findings were reported making detailed use of the participants' own words in order to see how the world of teaching adults is experienced from the perspective of each participant. I used action research methodology, in which the participants see themselves as autonomous and responsible people acting in a world of human relationships, in my decision to use participant journaling of their teaching practice as an opportunity for participants to reflect on their interview responses and their teaching practice. In doing this I anticipated that sharing diverse educational understandings through reflective discourse might contribute to building a supportive culture of professional growth.

Teaching philosophies

On first reading, it appears that the philosophies that these CAE adult educators use to conceptualise their educative work are, for the most part, individual collections of idiosyncratic beliefs, devoid of a common philosophical framework. Some participants feel that their lack of polished and articulate philosophies is shameful; a tacit acknowledgement of the clarion call in the literature to know one's teaching philosophy as an essential facet of belonging to the profession. For other participants, however, an elegant declaration

of one's philosophy is of minimal importance: beliefs sincerely and consistently held are what counts.

Connections with the broad philosophies of adult education that have shaped and reflected public and academic debates about adult education over time also seem largely absent at first glance. However, following Pratt's (2002) advice to look below the surface, the influence of a number of adult education philosophies become evident. While no participants used Elias and Merriam's terms to describe their teaching philosophies, yet in many ways they were consistent with progressive and humanistic adult education traditions. There were many examples of common belief strands, particularly those concerning the purposes of education for adults, how adults learn and roles for teachers. Education was seen as a worthwhile thing in itself, as well as for the broad enrichment it offered individual learners and society. Responding to learners holistically and recognising the integral contribution they bring to the learning exchange were common beliefs with particular ramifications for their roles as teachers. In addition, all participants saw themselves as learners, open to new understandings in the learning exchange, and evolving their practice in response to learner needs.

There is general support in the literature for the notion that knowing one's teaching philosophy is desirable, and the benefits of this knowledge are well explored. The participants in this study also explored their own rationale for their teaching beliefs, often uncovering connections and recognising disjunctures, and revealing the particular normative beliefs that shaped their epistemic and procedural beliefs. While these were not articulated as fully developed philosophies, they were certainly suggestive of the internal consistency and congruence that Pajares (1992) identified as crucial to making sense of adult educators' beliefs.

Other sections of the literature suggest that beliefs that underpin teaching philosophies develop early in life. Such beliefs were

difficult to ascertain in this study as few participants saw early life experiences, including experiences of schooling, as influential. Likewise, beliefs reflecting the participants' world view were not proffered as influential in the development of their teaching philosophies, although this may be attributed to the difficulty in recognising and articulating the influences that form underlying paradigms. Some participants recognised formal pedagogical knowledge as influential. However, in the main, its influence had become diluted over time, whereas formal epistemic knowledge remained a stronger influence. Foley (2000) claimed that adult educators are interested in formal theory only if it illuminates their practice and helps them act more effectively. Taylor (2000) concluded that most adult educators probably learn to teach adults while on the job and gain little in the development of new beliefs from graduate programs in adult education.

Most significantly, participants nominated their adult experiences, sometimes as an adult learner, and especially as a teacher of adults, as the primary influences on their teaching philosophies. Their experiences of teaching, in particular their interactions with students and colleagues, strongly shaped and informed their beliefs about learning, sometimes challenging long-held epistemic assumptions, and encouraging them to develop new understandings of what it means to be an adult educator. They presented these past teaching experiences as a continuing source of influence on their current teaching philosophies, very much in the here and now.

Connecting teaching philosophy and practice

Amid the different contributions to the literature that explore the central relationship between the internal framework of beliefs and external teaching behaviours, congruency between personal beliefs and practice leading to authenticity is deemed desirable. The general agreement in the literature—that the connections between beliefs,

whether consciously or unconsciously held, can provide insights into the decision making and action that are part of the daily work of adult educators—is supported by the findings of this study:

So knowing it on paper is one thing but putting it into practice is quite challenging and being OK with that, living with that discomfort, and I think that's where your philosophy affects your reality, whether we are conscious of it or not. I think the more conscious of it, the more effective our teaching can be. (Frances)

Underpinned by claims in the literature that an individual's philosophy of teaching is significant because of its relationship to teaching practice, this is a key area of interest in this study. The findings demonstrate that this strong relationship is at the heart of the way these adult educators make meaning in their practice:

I guess if you believe in empowerment then you've got to treat people in such a way as a learner that they are empowered. So that means not too much hand holding, support, but not hand holding, and challenging them to do things they normally wouldn't. (Oliver)

This relationship was expressed in diverse ways, from finding philosophy to be indistinguishable from practice, to a mutually informing relationship, to a deeply conflicted and uncomfortable tension when philosophy and practice are perceived to be at odds. This tension also inspired creative ways for teachers to incorporate their own beliefs into the mandated programs: 'I've managed to mould my philosophy into the course. That's because I have firm beliefs; it's not because I'm doing what I'm told' (Jess).

However, the nature of this relationship remains complex. The main findings raise questions rather than answer them about the degree of influence between philosophy and practice; which beliefs are prominent in decision making; the effect of tension between incongruent teaching philosophy and teaching practice; and the influence of unconsciously held beliefs. What can be said is that any

attempt to influence practice must not be indifferent to this deep and complex relationship.

Several participants found that this research process itself helped them gain insights into the decision making and action that are part of their daily work. Initial interviews brought their philosophies into the foreground. Journaling provided an extended opportunity to reflect on their practice, challenging them to explore the connections and disjunctures between their philosophies and their daily teaching practice in an ongoing way: 'My philosophy about education in general seemed to come through. It [journaling] made it clearer for me' (Oliver).

Just being able to talk about it, like we have today, and the short time I've been keeping the journal has been really valuable. So reflecting on teaching practice which we don't really do, we don't have time for. And we don't meet as a team of teachers very often to talk about teaching practice. It might be good to meet with a wider group to do that. (Jess)

Teaching philosophies and official notions of good practice

The academic literature argues that no single view of good teaching should dominate. Different philosophical perspectives in the adult education field wax and wane, often interrelating as well as competing, and it is not surprising that expectations of the sector are diverse rather than uniform (Figgis, 2009: 17). The notion of good teaching is embedded within each particular educational philosophy, primarily aligned with the educational purpose, and demonstrated through decisions and actions concerning content, methodology and learners in the learning exchange.

Notions of good teaching are also embedded within each personal philosophy of teaching. Since most participants' philosophies were more consistent with humanistic and progressive traditions, their notions of good teaching were along these lines. Participants' notions

of good teaching practice also aligned strongly with descriptions of their own teaching philosophies and practice, while they acknowledged that they were open to learning new ways and that they 'don't get it right all of the time' (Jess). These features of good teaching were not discrete; rather they were understood to have strong interconnections and implications that formed an overall purpose that made sense to each participant. Expressed in various ways, they suggested a plurality of understandings rather than a particular orthodoxy, always grounded in the local context of 'what works'. The primary features of good practice were associated with content expertise; positive relationships with learners based on knowing and respecting them as individuals; recognising the learning needs and contributions of the students in their specific situations; and continuing to improve one's teaching practice.

Beyond academic debate and individual notions of good teaching practice, however, government priorities ensure that one paradigm of good teaching, complete with inherent educational philosophy, will dominate at any given time. Policy, financial and human resourcing, and research are tilted towards this philosophy while others receive less attention. The government's current dominant paradigm reflects a largely behaviourist educational philosophy, 'based on the assumption that there is a direct relationship between workplace performance and human competency' (James, 2001: 303):

VET is delivered through CBT characterised by pre-specified training and assessment outcomes together with their expression in competency-based standards on which training programs are based. Industry involvement in this process is also a feature, thus aligning educational goals with industry requirements. (James, 2001: 301)

Many participants in this study resisted notions of good practice that they perceived to belong to this dominant paradigm. They were often required to teach in ways inconsistent with their own beliefs or purposes, leading to anger, frustration and resistance; and some

reported feeling marginalised: ‘To me it’s a nonsense; my ability to allow students time is constrained considerably, fun disappears, we are teaching for assessment, we are not teaching for learning’ (Kathleen).

As predicted in the literature, most participants did not see themselves as a contributing part of the larger debate influencing current adult education policy directions, but rather as at the dead end of the chain of command: ‘It was regarded by managers as almost frivolous to want to think about the educational rationale’ (Cindi). ‘There’s not enough emphasis on what’s best practice. I don’t think we’re on the same page; we don’t talk about it enough, even with each other. I feel teachers are largely ignored’ (Oliver).

Participants experienced the constraints of the regulatory frameworks and felt discouraged from engaging in debate or discussion that examined more nuanced notions of good teaching. This view was further entrenched by the official acceptance of Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as a sufficient qualification to deliver VET programs. Such perceptions lessened the likelihood of participants recognising any connections between their own philosophies and official notions of good teaching practice. Nevertheless, many notions of good practice espoused by participants were also consistent with recent government-sponsored reports outlining the types of knowledge and skills required of VET teachers within a CBT framework. Figgis (2009) reported trends in contemporary good practice, some of which draw from humanist and progressive notions of good teaching, and that the spread of such practice draws from VET practice rather than regulatory frameworks or lists of desired knowledge and capabilities. This suggests an underappreciated connection that can be further enhanced.

Implications for current and future developments for teaching practice

All participants saw continuing development of their teaching practice as part of their professional duty, indeed integral to their teaching philosophies. However there was widespread dissatisfaction with their current or recent experiences of professional development, which were largely perceived as controlling and irrelevant to their teaching practice. In contrast, many participants reported that they found their involvement in this project valuable in working with teaching colleagues, in developing their practice and in reviving past practices of journal keeping. Through their participation they demonstrated that exploration of one's personal philosophies of teaching and learning may contribute to further examination and development of one's teaching practice, and that doing this actively with one's peers can be an effective mode of professional development.

Strong implications for future development can be drawn from all of the preceding research questions. First, participants are open to developing their practice further when they perceive authentic need and opportunity. Second, while the relationship between philosophy and practice remains complex, enough is understood to recognise that engagement with teachers' philosophies and beliefs is essential in authentic professional development and participation in debates about teaching practice. These implications suggest the need for more targeted time and support for workplace professional development, and a move away from top-down modes of change implementation. Beyond this, a more nuanced approach is required, one that recognises a multiplicity of philosophies of teaching and notions of good teaching, rather than the simple but ultimately self-defeating approach of a single paradigm. The findings of this study have strong implications for future development of teaching practice, perhaps more than anticipated by the literature. The clearest implication is

that participants' teaching philosophies may well be stable, but they are not frozen in time. Indeed teaching philosophy appears to be an evolving interplay of beliefs and practices of teaching, influenced by adult experiences of learning and teaching, and supported by a philosophical disposition to see oneself as an eternal learner.

The participants found the processes of exploring their personal philosophies of teaching to be valuable in several ways relevant to their professional development. When coupled with reflective journaling this encouraged new insights and, for some, led to further development of their teaching practice. In addition, some recognised the power of constructing new understandings through purposeful conversation with their teaching colleagues. These open the way for more structured peer learning projects and active experimentation within the local context through participatory action research.

The implications for those who work with educators to develop their practice are also encouraging. The individual and diverse nature of teaching philosophies and the tenacity with which they are held present a formidable challenge. However, this also presents an opportunity to engage with teachers in supportive and democratic, rather than directive, ways. As predicted in the literature, imposed notions of good teaching practice are likely to be presented as simplistic and misplaced. However, longer term engagement that values a plurality of understandings and fosters a deeper level of exploration is likely to be welcomed. Based on assumptions that teachers have voices, strengths and resources for their own empowerment, group-led and negotiated approaches, such as action research, and peer coaching and mentoring, can successfully nurture good teaching in adult education contexts.

Further research

Implications and opportunities also exist for future research. The limited scope of this project means I have necessarily paid less

attention to some related areas of knowledge, while the findings expose gaps in other areas. Qualitative research, which has formed the backbone of this project, continues to be the most suitable approach in extending this area of study. However, particular research methodologies, some of which are akin to the professional development models suggested above, are also indicated.

The complex relationship between teaching beliefs, and the connections between philosophies and teaching practice, are far from clear, and would benefit from deeper, more robust probing, continuing the qualitative approach of this study. In particular, these same participants could be invited to examine more closely their beliefs that appear to be contradictory, and to discuss which beliefs they give priority in different problem-solving practice contexts. Their perceptions that official notions of good teaching have no connection with their own notions of good teaching could also be investigated more directly. Further investigation of teaching practice beyond self-reports would also qualify conclusions drawn about this relationship. Data collection could involve video and digital recording of different aspects of teaching practice, especially interactions between educators and learners, and between educators.

The focus within this project was largely on the individual adult educator. However, the literature review and the findings of this study suggest that philosophies and practices of teaching are socially constructed. I also recommend further research that focuses on group rather than individual construction of teaching philosophies. If undertaken using group research methods such as focus groups, this would also address some of the concerns of participants that they need more group opportunities to examine their practice.

Given the participants' disposition to change and actual reporting of change to their practice during this project, participatory action research would appear to be a suitable methodology that could sustain a longer time frame of research. Within this approach,

deeper levels of belief examination, and investigation of actual teaching practice, as discussed above, would be supported by a more concrete focus on developing new approaches to practice problems as identified by participants. The potential of collaborative journal writing and reflection in terms of professional development of practice could also be further investigated within this research methodology.

The enthusiasm of participants before and during this project suggests that the divide between researchers and adult educators is permeable. Participatory action research presents an apt framework through which adult educators might construct knowledge and contribute to debates about good teaching practice in more active ways, and gain experience as researchers. In these ways they could begin to redress the disconnectedness from the adult education world that many participants reported. Beyond these research participants, similar methodologies could also be adopted on a larger scale, to test the generalisability of these findings to cohorts of adult educators in other CAE teaching departments, and other ACE sites. Success in this larger-scale research need not be limited to generalisability, however, as participatory action research methodologies are also likely to generate solutions to local teaching practice problems, especially when associated with longer time frames.

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