

Regional academics' perceptions of the love of learning and its importance for their students

Joy Penman

Centre for Regional Engagement, University of South Australia

and

Bronwyn Ellis

Spencer Gulf Rural Health School, University of South Australia and

University of Adelaide

Whatever the course, mode of delivery or type of institution, most characteristics of good teaching remain the same. The teacher's ability to convey personal enthusiasm for learning is crucial in arousing and sustaining students' interest and curiosity in their discipline and beyond. This love of learning can be liberating and empowering as the students discover and construct their own knowledge. However, there is limited research addressing the development of a love of learning in the Australian context. This article draws on a small study – a survey of regional campus academics' perceptions of the love of learning and its importance, and how they sought to foster its development in their students. The

interviewed academics affirmed the importance of a love of learning, but had varied ideas concerning what this meant and how to inspire it in students. A range of approaches to developing this quality is suggested.

Introduction

With changing emphases in higher education pedagogy – flexible/ blended delivery, problem-based learning, student-centred learning, service learning and other developments – along with a more diverse student body than in times past, higher education teachers need great flexibility and adaptability. They have had to come to grips with the requirements and opportunities provided by new demands, new technologies and new priorities. The teaching role has been transformed so that there is a much greater focus on the learning that it enables. There is also the matter of what is taught – much more than just course content. Many universities aim for their graduates to acquire a number of generic qualities so that they will be effective professionals and ethical citizens, able to work autonomously or in groups to solve problems, and be prepared to be lifelong learners. For example, the University of South Australia has developed a list of seven 'graduate qualities', with indicators to show that each has been achieved; assessment tasks help to ensure the development of these qualities (University of South Australia 2009). Some of the values and attitudes that university staff hope that their students will learn are perhaps 'caught' rather than taught, one of these being a love of learning. As a recent Australian higher education review discussion paper states, and with which we concur:

Higher education can transform the lives of individuals and through them their communities and the nation by engendering the love of learning for its own sake and the passion for intellectual discovery. (Australian Government 2008: 1)

The 'love of learning', a concept that can be used by people in many different ways, can be liberating, as learners feel 'a power and capacity to understand, discover, and grasp truth' (Nilsen 2004: 3), these being capabilities previously not imagined for discovering knowledge for themselves. However, research addressing this topic is limited.

Love of learning

Learning has different connotations for different people. Some view it as acquiring information and skills (a positivist view), while others see it in terms of making meaning (a constructivist view). These ideas influence both teaching and learning, for example whether approaches to learning will be deep or surface or achieving (Paterson & Evans 1995, Biggs 1999, Prosser & Trigwell 1999, Ramsden 2003). Drawing on a number of educational researchers and theorists, Moore, Willis and Crotty (1996) have discussed this dichotomy in connection with a study of perceptions of student learning. In using this phrase 'love of learning', we recognise that it may encompass both views of learning. Moreover, it includes not only the idea of wanting to learn, but degrees of joy and enthusiasm attached to this desire.

For millennia, humankind has found delight in learning. For Socrates, as shown in Plato's dialogues, it was 'a perpetual ecstasy' (Sax 2006: 1). A modern philosopher likewise described the joys that learning gave him over the course of his life (Adler n.d.). The psalmist delighted in meditating 'day and night' on God's law (Ps. 1: 2, Revised Standard Version). The idea of 'learning for learning's sake', or knowledge being an end in itself, was expressed in 1851 by Newman in *The idea of a university* (Newman 1851/1962). He showed that this idea was by no means new, citing Cicero's belief (first century BC) that knowledge is the thing that attracts us once physical needs are met:

... as soon as we escape from the pressure of necessary cares, forthwith we desire to see, to hear and to learn; and consider the

knowledge of what is hidden or is wonderful a condition of our happiness. (cited in Newman 1851/1962: 79)

This was echoed more recently by Maslow's theory of motivation, with the need to know and understand, and for freedom of enquiry and expression, motivating people once their basic existence and relationship needs (Cicero's 'necessary cares') have been fulfilled (Huczynski & Buchanan 2001, Reeve 2001).

Taking up Newman's ideas, Sax (2006: 2) suggests that currently we should have as our ideal that 'All academic work should always be inspired by love of learning', this 'devotion to learning' being a necessary if not a sufficient reason for engaging in such work. Universities, he holds, can be responsible for cultivating 'the desire to learn', just as countries seek to foster patriotism in their citizens (Sax 2006: 3).

Observation shows that children usually have a natural curiosity to learn about things, with an abundance of 'Why?' questions. Hunt (2008) elaborates on this phenomenon, suggesting how it may be nurtured. A recent discussion has explored the question: 'Do schools quash students' enthusiasm for learning?' (McLeod 2007). Others note a dwindling of 'curiosity and excitement' as students enter adolescence, with parents and schools often having less time available to cultivate these qualities (Stead & Starmer 2003: 1). Therefore, it appears that by the time people reach university this curiosity has often been lost, and needs rekindling and promoting.

Good teaching comprises a number of constant values, regardless of course or program, mode of delivery, or extent to which technology is used. The most important of these values is a 'passion for learning' according to Stein-Parbury (1999: 3), with others being concern and compassion and respect for students as individuals and as learners. This passion for learning 'reflects the value of interest in and inquiry about the world in general and one's discipline in

specific' (Stein-Parbury 1999: 3). This sense of inquiry or curiosity also relates to one of the other graduate qualities that the university upholds – the ability to pursue lifelong learning (University of South Australia 2009). Whether graduates have this quality depends to a large extent on 'the climate of intellectual inquiry in the institution', what influences that most being 'whether or not the academic staff members themselves manifest a lively curiosity, a passion for their subject and a predisposition towards being continuing lifelong learners themselves' (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary 1994: xiii).

There are a number of reasons for communicating this value to students. For one, there is growing consensus that there is too much emphasis on accessing, gaining and imparting information in current educational systems (Nillsen 2004). While these are important, regurgitating information does not define a mature form of learning. Mature learning comes from within; it comes from 'seeing the immediate and more tangible learning task in a wider context, a context which enlarges the person' (Nillsen 2004: 4). Teachers today feel pressured to cover the content of their courses and try to teach 'everything' about their topics. In putting so much focus on content, which is growing with increasing knowledge and technology, they adopt practices that lead to stifling approaches involving little interaction and creativity. These of course fail to capture the interest and stir the imagination of students (Stein-Parbury 1999), with teachers not able to engage with their students in their learning or journey of discovery. Teachers' love of learning can have the effect of engaging students and promoting optimal learning. At the same time, demonstrating this to students benefits teachers as well by helping them remain up-to-date with advancements in their field.

While some may consider that willpower and determination in study will bear fruit, Simone Weil's opinion is that this is more characteristic of what may be needed in learning manual tasks, whereas 'The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy

of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running' (Weil 1973: 71). Another scholar has commented on this: 'in Weil's perspective, we go to school to ameliorate that attention deficit that is cured not by medication but by a desire to marry our deep gladness with the world's deep hunger' (Boys 2004: 3). A desire to learn has been called 'the greatest tool ... with which to achieve [one's] aspirations' (Lawrence 1998: 3), as is borne out by the accounts of many mature-age students who have come to university later in life.

Whether this love of learning can be taught has been addressed by Nillsen (2004). While doubting that it can be taught explicitly, for love 'cannot be imposed from outside' (p. 3), he maintains that 'it is possible to try and create an awareness in the student so that a love of learning can develop spontaneously' (p. 5). Remaining open to all possibilities for student learning, providing a learning environment which is free of fear and rich with opportunities to demonstrate the passion for learning, and facilitating events and circumstances whereby this occurs are ways of encouraging the love for learning. Other approaches that he mentions include providing time for reflection, the use of analogy and quotations, and continually looking for relationships within and across disciplines, the last-mentioned also having been highlighted by Newman (1962) as the great advantage of a university environment.

An investigation into academics' ideas about the love of learning

Academic staff members from a regional university campus, located in a small city 400 kilometres from its state capital, were invited to contribute their thoughts concerning the love of learning. The selection criteria were that they were currently teaching or had taught previously (for at least two years) in any of the undergraduate programs offered through the campus, and that they were willing to participate in the study. Ten academics contributed, deemed adequate

considering the relatively small number of academic staff at the regional campus. They represented all program areas.

The campus, which is the headquarters for the University's Centre for Regional Engagement, currently has undergraduate degree programs in Business, Nursing and Social Work, an associate degree program (two years) in Engineering, a University Foundation Studies program, and postgraduate programs for students in areas such as health and community development. Staff are also involved in delivering courses to another regional centre in the south-east of the state, and farther afield to external students including a large cohort of Open Universities Australia students. The campus is host to a local University of the Third Age (U3A) group, who provide an on-site example of retired people continuing to learn for the love of it.

Aims and approach

The aims of this study were to:

- clarify the notion of love of learning held by these rural academics
- determine the value they ascribed to love of learning
- examine how they sought to inculcate love of learning through their teaching, and
- explore how academics could be assisted in encouraging the love of learning amongst students.

A descriptive-interpretative approach to research was used to answer the questions on whether rural academics do in fact encourage love of learning and how they inculcate this in their students. This approach enabled an exploration of meanings associated with 'love of learning' and the identification of individualised methods of seeking to inculcate it.

Qualitative data were gathered by means of either short interviews or as written responses to four questions, depending on the respondents' preferences and time availability. In the case of interviews, which

were intended to be conversational, a semi-structured approach was taken, so as to guide the discussion and ensure that the same questions were explored with all participants. The purpose of the study, potential outcomes and actual involvement were explained to the academics who agreed to participate. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants provided written consent for the use of their comments in this paper, on the understanding that their names would not be used and that they would not be identified in any way in the reporting. Research data from interviews were documented, with participants having the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the notes taken and make alterations as necessary.

The following questions were used to trigger discussion of the participants' experience:

- What is your notion of 'love of learning'?
- Is it important to inculcate this in our students?
- Why is it important? (Or, if it is not important, why not?)
- From your experience as an academic, how do you inculcate this in your students?

Participants' perceptions

Participants were able to express their views, thoughts, attitudes, feelings and experiences of the love of learning and share how they endeavoured to increase students' desire to learn at greater depth. Interpretive analysis of the responses to the questions follows.

What is your notion of 'love of learning'?

There were differing notions offered by the participants, ranging from references to the 'pleasure' involved to its unceasing nature, which provided 'pieces of the jigsaw puzzle' to complete the picture of what is meant by 'love of learning'. Several referred specifically to their own love of learning. 'The passion one has for new knowledge and understandings' was one participant's response, while two

others similarly mentioned 'getting pleasure' from studying and exploring the new, whether areas of knowledge or skills. It brought 'intrinsic rewards', being 'learning for its own sake' and with 'no other motivation'. One stressed that it involved going beyond what had to be learned as part of a study course. Continually learning as a part of one's lifestyle was mentioned by three participants, referring to their own situation, and so it was 'endless', involved maintaining a sense of curiosity, and had the potential to bring a measure of wisdom. It also involved empowerment, acquiring the knowledge that enabled better decision-making. Motivation for learning came from within the self, and involved seeing connections and a purpose and use for this learning, said another, diverging a little from the 'for its own sake' stance. Another similarly recognised that there was also satisfaction in finishing a course or a qualification, a point also alluded to by two other participants. Here is one participant's response, which highlighted the idea of the dynamic, exciting quality of learning:

My notion of love of learning is I like to see the lights come on in people's brains. I think it is not only stimulating learning but they can see more questions to answer and they get excited with the topic but also learning because it achieves something.

Is it important to inculcate this in our students?

The majority of the ten participants (seven) were quite definite about the importance of encouraging a love of learning in their students, using expressions such as 'very much so' and 'absolutely', and remarking that 'this needs developing'. One stated:

As teachers, we do not only impart content. We do more than that. We try to build capacity and empower students to learn for themselves.

Others recognised that some students had a love of learning that should be encouraged, but admitted that many students sought extrinsic rewards: 'gaining a prerequisite for another course, earning

a degree parchment as a pathway to a job, etc.', or 'a bigger pay packet'.

I think there is a continuum: some may enjoy the sense of achievement that they get from gaining good grades rather than the actual learning of new material.

One remarked on the workload of students, with 'so much to do that they haven't got time to exercise a love of learning'. On the other hand, this participant expected to see 'at least a strong interest in their subject' in honours students.

Why is it important? (or Why is it not important?)

The importance of encouraging a love of learning was seen in terms of personal, career and societal benefits. With regard to personal benefits, it was seen as part of 'personal growth', 'important for the development of the person', generally 'useful' and 'an enjoyable part of life'. Developing habits of learning and enthusiasm for it would assist them to 'become resourceful, independent, lifelong learners', which would be 'a need for all of them' in all aspects of their lives, and 'important for their professional practice'. In order 'to best serve their client, they need to continue to learn' was one comment from the human services area:

I think this is very important as the learning does not stop once they have their degrees, it is a lifelong process. So to encourage students to have a love of learning is very important for their development as professionals.

Without it 'there will be no improvement for imparting knowledge'. It was important for continuity of professional knowledge:

I consider it a type of handover and I want them to carry on the care and adjust it to their own needs and those of others.

These qualities would enable them to 'extend their influence' and 'benefit society as they will become the leaders of the future'.

Love of learning would counteract some of the less interesting aspects of some courses:

Because service learning is boring if there is no love/motivation for them to know the knowledge. I think it's definitely necessary for students to motivate themselves to learn. To look broader and seek information from a variety of resources including themselves as a resource for learning. Without the development of the person (love of learning), it is difficult for students to see the need to learn because they are separated from the knowledge.

Those disagreeing that it was important to inculcate love of learning in their students (though not saying that love of learning itself was unimportant) took the stance that it was unrealistic to expect to inculcate love of learning. These three participants thought that most students were there 'simply to do the work necessary to get a qualification to get them into a profession', as one expressed it, and lacked the time to do more than the essentials of their course.

From your experience as an academic, how do you inculcate this in your students?

One way of fostering love of learning and the recognition that learning was a continuing need was to emphasise to students that what they encounter in their courses is 'just the beginning', that they should recognise the 'need for extra learning' and realise that there is 'so much more to know'. This needed to be reinforced with lecturers' own experiences regarding the gap between what they had learned at university and what they still needed to learn later in their profession, thus 'showing the benefits' of learning.

While lecturers could not teach everything, they could help students to identify the gaps, and provide 'the tools for research and the skills in writing', teaching students 'the skill and know-how to find the answers'. Research tools would include knowing how to access the resources necessary for acquiring information – 'such things as books,

sites, journals', and learning 'analysis and problem-solving skills' and 'how to be resourceful'. These are related to the development of some of the University's 'graduate qualities'

Lecturers' enthusiasm and motivation were mentioned by several respondents; they acted 'as a role model' by being examples of a love for learning, 'showing passion for learning' and also talking about its importance, though this was secondary to demonstrating it. One commented:

What the lecturer is doing needs to be interesting and exciting so that students experience this and students will be influenced. If you have love for it, it will come through.

For another, motivation relating to the topics and towards passing this on to students was 'communicated to students and that enthusiasm then makes them want to learn and be part of the discussions'.

According to participants, links made between theory and practice were enhanced by remaining 'professionally alive'. These 'valid and useful' connections to real-life situations, relating what was being learned to 'practice experience', put the theory into context. Discussion of case scenarios helped in applying their 'tool kit' of theories and frameworks, and reinforced the need for gathering additional information to meet individual clients' needs. Newsletters and other links with professional bodies enhanced learning for the students, and showed the 'importance of networks and continuing professional development':

I use an experiential approach, as it is a good way to explain difficult concepts and to look at how others dealt with those issues plus impart and obtain further ideas. I think of the parable of the sower – some went on to thorny ground, some on stony ground and some into good soil. I hope our students are good soil and I try to provide good seed.

It was also important to provide students with 'opportunities for them to feel the rewards' of learning, and to work with them:

... being proud of them if they found the knowledge (acknowledge their efforts and direct them to another view ...). Stimulating them to seek out those links between what they know, their learning, other subjects (courses), and inquire into what don't know.

Even a participant who claimed not to have succeeded in inculcating a love of learning made comments that indicated ways of promoting this:

Of the many students I taught in my time (at two different campuses, one metropolitan and one regional), very few exhibited a level of enthusiasm that I would equate with a love of learning. I enjoyed interacting with such students and helped them study in depth things that other students didn't care about. I didn't feel I could claim any credit for them being like that – they just had that tendency and I fostered it.

The same participant emphasised the importance of making 'teaching relevant to the needs of their profession', even if that meant 'teaching some things that were just plain boring, no matter how you presented the material':

Basically, my first priority was the syllabus, which determined what had to be taught, and then I accentuated the bits I saw as most relevant, and tried to make them as interesting as possible.

Another was also unsure about success in presenting 'the ideal of pursuing knowledge irrespective of career outcomes', and yet greatly appreciated hearing students 'say that they had really developed a love of learning, and how their university study had broadened their outlook and transformed the way they saw themselves and their potential':

I remember once feeling really pleased when an engineering student told me that he was going to transfer and study English

literature because that was what he really wanted to do. While I would hope that many engineering students are studying in that field because they really want to, it was encouraging to hear some aims that weren't purely career-related.

Love of learning could be promoted in multiple aspects of university teaching:

Through my teaching, through the experiences I share, through the activities we do in tutorials and through assessment.

Discussion and implications

Though participants revealed both positivist and constructivist ways of looking at learning, and a range of notions of love of learning and many approaches to inculcating this were uncovered, its importance and beneficial effects were highlighted by this study. The possession of this quality impacts on personal, professional, and societal growth and development, as affirmed by the participants, who indicated factors likely to enhance this love, such as environmental and relational factors, along with positive attitudes, values and behaviour of teachers and students.

Can we be more deliberate in encouraging a love of learning? A good first step is for the educator to provide an environment that transmits or communicates this love of learning to the student. Learning and love for learning has an element of fun/curiosity, which is not forced. Incorporating humour and laughter and an informal atmosphere can help ensure that the study environment is 'fear-free', something that Nillsen (2004: 1–2) identified as significant, one where students on their way to understanding are not afraid to give answers that may not be correct. A classroom climate characterised by anxiety leads to surface learning: 'Anxiety distracts students: the point is to avoid the threat, not to engage the task deeply' (Biggs 1999: 70). Hence building up good teacher–student relationships is pivotal, with teachers as facilitators and fellow learners in a partnership with students,

modelling their own enthusiasm for learning, and heightening interaction and engagement.

The concern expressed by several participants to convey to students the relevance of what was being learned to their future professional context reflects the necessity identified by Nilsen (2004) for 'seeing the immediate and more tangible learning task in a wider context ... which gives a long term point to learning new skills' (p.4), giving rise to a 'mature love of learning' (p.4). The 'sense of both strengths and weaknesses in one's knowledge and within oneself' (p.6), also part of this mature love, was also referred to by participants in emphasising to students that there is always more to learn.

Finding ways to foster love of learning in students can become part of what Boyer called the 'scholarship of teaching' (Boyer 1990). Such 'teaching both educates and entices future scholars' (Boyer 1990: 23), and great university teachers 'stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over ... inspired teaching keeps the flame of scholarship alive' (Boyer 1990: 24). From our interpretation of their responses and also our knowledge of the participants, we can conclude that all of them exhibit this desire to continue learning. It is imperative for all higher education teachers to reflect on their own teaching philosophies and practices, so that they truly engage with their students.

An awareness of the fact that students will have varying preferences for ways of engaging with new content, peers and teachers is crucial; space needs to be created to accommodate these preferred approaches (Kolb & Kolb 2005). By incorporating a range of learning contexts and appealing to as many senses as possible, a lecturer will be more likely to ensure a quality learning experience for all, with a greater number of students continuing enthusiastically with their learning journey. Likewise, it is important to be aware of the range of experiences that the students bring to a course, including life

experience and 'prior experience of learning and teaching' so that links can be made and built upon (Prosser & Trigwell 1999: 175).

When evaluating teaching, a teacher's ability to inspire a love of learning in university students should be considered. However, it is debatable whether it is possible to measure the success of this. Certainly, as part of the 'scholarship of teaching', academics should reflect upon the extent to which their students have developed or increased in enthusiasm for the subject and for continuing to learn beyond it. The true influence of the academic may be seen only in hindsight years later. To determine whether lecturers' strategies are having the desired effect, students' perceptions should also be explored.

Some of the very basic ideas for nurturing young children's natural interest in learning also have application for older students, such as allowing time for thinking, and providing opportunities for first-hand experience in a stress-free setting (Hunt 2008). The students have a role to play, too, in motivating themselves, changing negative attitudes, moving away from simply focusing on a qualification, and being willing to commit to lifelong learning (Candy 2000).

The university and community environment as well should be conducive to developing love of learning. A regional campus with smaller classes has advantages for greater interaction and access to the facilities that are available, while it may have some disadvantages in limited resources and access to a range of experts. While it is easy to think that the World Wide Web has broken down all barriers, equity issues must still be borne in mind, as there are students unable to afford some of the latest technology.

Not only have academics involved in the delivery of courses had to adjust to changes in higher education, others who play a part in teaching higher education students have also been affected. For, as well as course lecturers and tutors, the term 'higher education

teachers' can be seen as embracing a broader range of professionals – staff involved in academic skills development, careers counsellors, library staff, clinical preceptors and other supervisors of placements and practica (for example, school teachers, in the case of teacher education students), information technology staff (at least those who interact with students), community role models, and fellow students in collaborative learning contexts. These other 'higher education teachers' may also make a significant contribution to the development of a love of learning.

In these endeavours, university administration can support teachers by making available relevant professional development activities to improve the quality of teaching and learning, making helpful resources available to encourage informal networking among all engaged in higher education teaching, and by funding academic developer positions.

The study had a number of possible limitations. To begin with, participants were not asked to define 'learning'; however, the ways in which they have referred to 'love of learning' gives some indication of whether they have a positivist rather than a constructivist stance or vice versa. Another limitation was that the questions were based on the assumption that the love of learning can be taught. In fact, it would have been appropriate to include a question on whether participants thought that this was possible. Another gap was that no evaluation has been included to determine the success of the participants' strategies in inculcating love of learning. Likewise, there is no measure of the extent or frequency of their use of these strategies. Another study comparing the responses of metropolitan academics with those of the current study participants would enrich our understanding. Students' perceptions with regard to the development of a love of learning have not been surveyed as part of the study. These limitations suggest scope for further research.

Conclusion

This study has extended our understanding of notions of love of learning, drawing from the views of the regional academics involved. Love of learning as a concept is alive and well, conjuring up ideas of pleasure, satisfaction, endless quest for knowledge and understanding, empowerment and connection. It is important to encourage others to pursue it, as it has personal, professional and societal benefits.

While there are varying ideas and approaches to developing this quality among students, the following holds true for most of our participants, showing that love of learning is embedded in good learning and teaching principles, values and practices:

There can be no good learning or teaching without a sense of excitement, without an awareness that we are all, students, teachers and academic developers, on a path of continuous discovery. (Prosser & Trigwell 1999: 175)

Multiple strategies for encouraging love of learning mentioned by participants in this study include: talking specifically about it, increasing motivation by communicating enthusiasm, acting as a role model, drawing from one's own experience, explaining that learning is a journey, and providing tools and skills for research and further learning.

The potential benefits of this study include: increasing awareness and knowledge of how to inspire awareness of the inner capacities of students so as to encourage a love of learning; understanding how this transpires through interaction or engagement amongst all concerned: students, staff, and others contributing to higher education; identifying ways by which academics may be supported to inculcate love of learning; and understanding factors that may enhance or deter the love of learning.

It is hoped that other university academics may learn from the participants' strategies, or at least receive affirmation for their own successful teaching approaches.

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About the authors

Joy Penman is a lecturer in the Nursing and Rural Health Unit, Whyalla Campus, teaching both science and nursing courses. Joy is currently undertaking her doctoral studies in palliative care and spirituality. Her other research interests include rural and remote nursing issues, university–community links, and student learning. She is passionate about community engagement and involves her students in this.

Bronwyn Ellis is an adjunct research associate in the Spencer Gulf Rural Health School. As well as her involvement in various research and writing activities, she works as a temporary relieving teacher in Whyalla schools. Her research interests include rural and regional education issues, equity and access in higher education, lifelong learning, and cross-cultural issues.

Contact details

Ms Joy Penman, Centre for Regional Engagement, University of South Australia, 111 Nicolson Avenue, Whyalla Norrie, SA 5608

Tel: +61 8 8302 6068 Fax: +61 8 8302 6014

E-mail: joy.penman@unisa.edu.au

Ms Bronwyn Ellis, Spencer Gulf Rural Health School, University of South Australia and University of Adelaide, c/- 111 Nicolson Avenue, Whyalla Norrie, SA 5608

Tel: + 61 8 8645 4005 Fax: + 61 8 8302 8156

E-mail: bronwyn.ellis@unisa.edu.au

~~Facilitating transformative learning: a framework for practice~~

Judi Apte

~~EOS (Education and Organisational Strategies) Management P/L~~

~~This paper explores some of the challenges that are involved in facilitating transformative learning. It presents a framework for practice that considers transformative learning from the perspective of the facilitator. These ideas were developed through a doctoral study in which adult educators were interviewed about their experiences in facilitating transformative learning. The framework comprises four components: confirming and interrupting current frames of reference, working with triggers for transformative learning, acknowledging a time of retreat or dormancy, and developing the new perspective. Using the four components of this framework for practice, I outline a series of questions for reflection. Through detailed reflection on aspects of program design and the interactions in the learning group, we can further our knowledge about the transformative aspects of our programs.~~
