

Adult Learners and the Dialogue Process: Thinking, and Learning, Together

My Life Perspective: Why I Care

I feel that I have always had an interesting relationship with the spoken word. I know that I am considered to be a quiet person in many cases and have felt in the past at times the need to defend myself because of that. Even now, it is difficult to write these words expressing that I'm aware of this quality about myself, since I'm not completely comfortable with the implications of being quiet. I feel that in some ways, my past educational experiences have failed me by offering only one choice for learning, which was to sit back and accept what was offered by teachers and others. Although these included wonderful people, I've always felt a sense of loss about the way that my natural curiosities, questioning, and awe of learning was disregarded so that a greater quantity of facts might fit inside.

Through this brief initial exposure to the Dialogue process, I'm hopeful about the emergence of what may be a new way to know myself and a new way to use my own voice, both as a way to learn myself and as a way to encourage others to find a renewed joy of learning outside of their own school experiences. Out of those ideas that I have valued most, learning is an ongoing and driving force in my life, and I found a way to enhance my life journey by reinventing what it means to learn, which also means to try to deconstruct the traditional notions of education with which I was raised and taught. Through my participation in the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I have also started to develop a new focus on the path of my life's work. In particular, I'm concerned with the way that adults continue to learn and make choices about their own education as a lifelong process, after the years in which they have completed formal schooling. The use of the term "adult education" has tended to include professional skills training and learning for personal enhancement, and I believe that the field as a whole should be considered on a wider scale and become more directly associated with the learning that prepares adults to create social change, beyond those more individualistic endeavors. In order for this to happen, I believe that the way that adult education occurs must involve a greater appreciation for what it means to learn in groups – to find collective meaning, to incorporate multiple diverse points of view, to support empathy for the perspectives of others, and to help establish distributed ownership of social issues. I hope to find that such an experience may allow each person to participate and utilize his or her own unique talents and qualities in a way that complements those of others rather than merely addresses the individual's achievement.

I am starting to observe that Dialogue could be highly valuable within adult learning, and I will discuss some ways that principles and practice of Dialogue might become a more integrated part of the adult learning environment. Further, these principles and practices are greatly meaningful to me as they relate to my own relationships. I consider not only the relationships that I can form that pertain to my life's work in adult learning, but also in the way that my relationships help me to establish my connectedness and wholeness with others. I will also discuss the way that the Dialogue process has started to alert me to the potential of growth in these relationships.

The Principles of Dialogue and Learning Together

I believe that what is meant by “adult learning” may actually take a number of forms, and some (or many?) of these may not fit into the standards and framework of the traditional notion of the “classroom”. Instead, I believe that adult learning is a more holistic system of change, inquiry, and reflection that creates new understanding and may take place within institutional settings as well as within more informal and alternative settings. Some of the core principles of Dialogue seem to be directly relevant to the way that these processes take place within groups when issues of social change are being addressed. A few such principles are suspension, listening and respect, for example, which are highly relevant to a group of adult learners engaged together.

Using Dialogue in any adult learning setting may enrich the process because of the way that Dialogue intrinsically brings these principles to the surface. Also, because the problem statements formed around social issues tend to be ill-defined and lacking a single solution or path to the solution, recognizing these principles may have a profound influence. Suspension of judgment can help learners to abandon their certainty about cause and affect and about the intentions of other people, which otherwise may form a barrier to their acceptance of new ideas. It seems that the idea of suspension is important in the use of methodological believing, which means to accept the strange or new ideas at face value (at least temporarily) in order to allow the mind to discover new possibilities and visions. Even in adult education settings where skill-based learning is taking place and learning achievement occurs when procedural knowledge becomes automatic, it might be important at times to suspend judgment that the given procedure is the one and only way to accomplish something.

Developing the suspension of judgment as a habit of mind may be one way to give oneself the ability to reconsider new approaches to problem-solving over time. The principle of listening seems crucial as well, as this suggests that learners might be able to open their minds to new messages and meaning, even when “old” words are being spoken. For example, when addressing social issues, it might be expected for a group of learners to hear about the historical context of the issue and how previous solutions have succeeded or failed. By embracing the kind of deeper listening that occurs in Dialogue, perhaps it is possible to uncover hidden meaning, even when hearing a story or explanation that seems to have been heard many times before.

Finally, the principle of respect is crucial in adult learning settings. If a fundamental principle of learning is to understand, then respect means to know that each person's point of view can originate from a place of deep need and trust that each person speaks out of a place of sincere intentions. Learning means to have a greater understanding oneself but also to respect the understanding that is held by another individually, even when it differs greatly from one's own.

The Elements of Transformation Toward Learning Together

As I consider my own involvement in supporting a renewed culture of adult learning, I plan to use the Dialogue process (whether teacher, student, administrator, or facilitator) toward supporting learning that is more rewarding and enjoyable. My hope is that adults begin to accept “learning

together” as a completely natural way to approach their ongoing education and seek out and even demand learning opportunities in which this is the norm. During my experience in the Dialogue course, I have found a new perspective on why I value the potential of adult learning and have developed a set of core “Elements of Transformation” that I believe will catalyze the transformation of adult learning to become a culture of learning together (thereby further leading toward learning that supports social change). Core principles mentioned above such as respect, suspension, listening, and voicing underlie all of them. These elements are described in Appendix A, along with some specific suggestions about how Dialogue offers some special “gifts” that may directly relate to them. At this time, I view these as a just a starting point, and I consider it to be my mission to use my participation in the Critical and Creative Thinking program to evolve them further.

Using Dialogue Directly in Adult Learning

In the spirit of holding Dialogue sessions in practical settings related to adult learner, there are numerous possibilities. First, Dialogue may be used in the planning of learning, which may involve not only formal adult education administrators but also instructors and learners as well. Using Dialogue is one way to allow the learners to be equally involved with the planning of the curriculum, scheduling, and other logistics of forming the learning opportunities, along with those formally charged with organizing the learning. It gives all involved a voice in the process and helps to make sure that whatever learning is taking place has accounted for a broad range of needs and perspectives. Dialogue might even be structured around specific topics such as the “Elements of Transformation” that I have mentioned previously. Additionally, the Dialogue process can be used to reflect upon previous learning situations. A critical component is that there need not be an “expert facilitator” present to explain or “teach” about the Dialogue explicitly all of the time; instead, adult learners, even those who are “naïve” about the process would still benefit from the Dialogue experience and be able to take meaning from in at their own pace over a period of time.

Dialogue and My Journey of Relationship

Finally, I have started to appreciate the way that Dialogue highlights new openings for me to develop my own relationships with others in more enriching ways. Certainly, this can take place within my relationships with other adult learners with respect to the points listed above, relative to my “professional” interest in adult learning and the way that I plan to continue engaging with the Critical and Creative Thinking program and my colleagues in my search for the new culture of adult learning. There are a few specific ways that Dialogue has extremely personal and meaning relevance to the perceptions that I carry about myself and others, and for me, capturing these ideas can form a keystone of my future relationships.

First of all, the idea of revealing myself is extremely important to me. As I mentioned, I have often been quiet in the interest of listening to others first before I respond in a way that relates to others. Dialogue is helping me to establish a new foundation of courage about revealing myself first to others – a way of “jumping into the void” of having no idea what another person is about before I expose my own true self. This represents a high degree of risk, and I feel that this is the personal issue

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that is the most difficult for me. I believe that facing this challenge more directly will enhance my relationships by finding deeper connections, and I regret that I might have missed such connections in the past with others and have "lost touch" too many times as a result.

Another key revelation of Dialogue is the way that silence allows for new meaning to be created. In my case, I believe that I need the silence to be able to occur in my own mind – the silence of my inner critic, and the silence of inner voices giving me conflicting messages. I find it difficult to allow my mind to be completely at rest, and during the Dialogue process, the unique experience takes place that my mind does seem to be at rest, and there are surprisingly few competing messages that I am trying to discern during this time. The silence during this time is completely unlike conventional silence that I (occasionally) experience when there is a temporary absence of sound in more worldly settings.

Lastly, I am fascinated with the idea that there is a true wholeness to the world which maintains a permanent and pure connection between people and all things of the universe. Much like in quantum physics, where a measurement is not truly independent but actually is only possible relative to the observer, observation in the Dialogue process is the same. I cannot simply observe others as independent entities; because I am observing, I influence what I am trying to measure – I am part of the whole of what is happening. This wholeness means that the constant unfolding and folding of potentials of the world are not simply "happening" – I join with all other people and all other energies and forces in an ultimate form of creativity.

Appendix A: The Elements of Transformation in Adult Learning

Element of Transformation #1: *Creating the Safe Environment*

My Assumptions:

Adult learners, through their previous experiences with formal education, may have experienced moments where giving a wrong answer was punitive rather than an opportunity for learning. Further, adult learners may have experienced situations in which didactic teaching was a one-way path of communication from “teacher” to “student”, and this may have led to a perception that sharing one’s own experiences or relating subject matter to more personal needs was undesirable, even distracting, to the learning of others. It seems that adult learners may be less comfortable in learning situations than they normally would be, since there may be a negative association between learning and revealing oneself honestly.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

In Dialogue, we are encouraged to “check in” and “check out” around the process itself. These seem highly relevant to creating a safe environment, since it provides freedom for people to present themselves “in context” - they are allowed to express the unique attitudes that they bring to the group on a given day, and this can alleviate the feeling of “I’m the only one who feels this way, so I should avoid participating too much.” The Dialogue process also encourages us to expose our reasoning for our opinions in a transparent way. I believe that this is normally extremely difficult to do - when we expose our reasoning, we immediately become aware that others will notice that our reasoning is based on incomplete or flawed information. Of course, it is impossible to base our reasoning on complete and perfect information most of the time, so we create an “impossible dilemma” when we know that our exposed reasoning may be discounted even before we explain it. It is also worth stating again that core principles of respect, suspension, listening, and voicing help to create a safe environment; this safety is the freedom from “harm” that occurs when we are disregarded even though we may be confident about our own validity. Additionally, in Dialogue, the notions of “right” and “wrong” are left aside, and this also contributes to the safe environment, since this allows that those participating do not always need to learn the same thing at the same time.

Element of Transformation #2: *Reinventing the Classroom*

My Assumptions:

The idea of a "classroom" is relatively fixed and well-defined in the mind of an adult learner who has experienced many. This may lead to expectations about where and when learning may take place and how it may be structured. If a particular environment does not "feel" like a classroom, some opportunity for learning there may be missed or perhaps not used for its full potential.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

Through Dialogue, we are encouraged to move around and position ourselves as equals and be able to attend to each other through direct eye contact. In our Dialogue course experience, I found that I eventually stopped thinking that we were even in a "classroom". I might attribute this to the way that Dialogue actually endows the responsibility for learning on the people involved, not on the facts being presented or even on the demonstrations being shown. This seems to open up learning to any situation involving a gathering of people, regardless of room arrangement, the impositions of institutional structure, props, lesson plans, and curriculum. Further, Dialogue rejects all traditional notions of grading, assessment, and even problem-solving that reflects what often happens in a traditional classroom. Dialogue transfers the classroom into a "container" - it doesn't exist until the participants build it together, and the container flexes, shifts, and changes capacity to accommodate whatever learning that might be developed at a particular time. Finally, I see a great need for a "Learning Laboratory" which could use Dialogue to encourage a truly experimental atmosphere regarding adult learning. Not only could the Dialogue itself be experimental in the way that different frameworks are applied, but also it could be used as a way of drawing out possibilities for new ways of structuring learning and as a way of reflecting upon new ways of structuring learning after they have been tried.

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Element of Transformation #3: *Making Learning Fun and Experimental*

My Assumptions:

Adult learners have mainly experienced education that was laborious and required great effort, time, and compromise of attention to personal interests and needs. Further, many adult learners continuing their education have done so in the interest of professional development or else have found it to be expensive, and so they need to take it seriously to make sure that they are not "wasting" their money and making their learning create value for them. Education may be perceived by adults as a tradeoff between relatively low short-term financial cost and high long-term financial gain.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

Dialogue does not require a lot of external resources or artifacts, as long as the people are engaged. Because Dialogue may not be so goal-oriented in strict ways that define other traditional classroom learning, there are a number of great freedoms created in the process. A freedom to fail, a freedom to experiment, and a freedom to play are all possible. Further, Dialogue encourages people to be genuine, which is a source of great humor, which can then further create the connection and closeness between people. In my recent training in performing improvisational theater, a core concept was to learn to bring genuine personal experience onto the stage in a performance, since this would be the most likely to generate humor and discovery of simple, ironic, and funny truths common to all. I would further suggest that Dialogue may provide the foundation for a true "Learning Laboratory", where adult learners can try different forms of Dialogue itself but also use Dialogue to develop interactive learning experiments in exciting ways.

**Element of Transformation #4: *Blurring the Traditional Roles
Of Educational Practice***

My Assumptions:

In traditional educational settings, there are “teachers” and “students”, as well as “administrators”, and a number of other roles. Through the consistent and systematic structuring of these settings that consistently remind people about their “place” in the group, it becomes too easy for adults to revert to aligning themselves with a role and therefore limit their behavior in the learning setting according to the role.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

I believe that the fragmentation of education into distinct roles actually forms a barrier to best learning, and that especially in adult learning situations, the boundaries between these roles need to become blurred and that a fluidity of movement between roles in a given learning setting needs to be encouraged. The Dialogue process provides one model for how this might work. As presented by William Isaacs in “Dialogue and The Art of Thinking Together”, Kantor’s 4-player system describes how the idea of a role may be functional while also granting freedom to the participants. Just as a Dialogue session may find one person being a mover, bystander, opposer, and follower within the session, an adult learning experience may draw upon this with the traditional classroom roles of a teacher, student, assistant, etc. Particularly when involving adults in a learning process, each may contribute as a teacher by voicing their own advocacy and inquiry, and the chosen “teacher” demonstrates respect by stepping back as a lecturer, even humbling himself or herself to become a student.

**Element of Transformation #5: *Developing Empathy Within
Diverse or Oppositional Groups***

My Assumptions:

Because adult learners may have experienced situations in which traditional lecturing took place, they may have, at times, lacked the opportunity to get to know fellow learners more personally and appreciate how and why they developed their point of view, which itself may not have been much recognized or appreciated in didactic learning.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

The Dialogue process avoids a strict agenda and also allows focus to rest with a given speaker, who could be anyone present during the session. Most critically, the Dialogue allows people to use their true voice and reveal themselves, which gives a speaker a chance to state an idea that is most representative of the self and also gives the listeners a chance to extract meaning that connects the speaker with themselves. The slower pace of Dialogue, compared to discussion or debate, allows for reflection "in between" the statements. This allows the listeners to process the last statement rather than react, which means that they may have a much greater chance at finding empathy with the speaker - at actually discovering for themselves how the speaker and the listener are connected within a whole. Because Dialogue challenges the fragmentation that has been defined by culture, media sources, and our own biases, it becomes much easier to notice similarities and relationships between people than differences. Also, Dialogue can allow people with highly different views to actually express them together in a way that allows all to learn. "Learning together" means that differing views and oppositional intentions may actually alert people to their own thinking and gain a better idea of how to develop it further while also incorporating the thinking of others that may be foreign. Further, in traditional learning, we become engaged in the subject matter first, and then we need to make a great effort to develop respect and personal knowledge for those who have revealed their differences compared to us. Dialogue allows for these to happen in the other order, such that we may view others first as people and then be able to perceive the diversity of knowledge as a strength of the group rather than a force to twist it apart.

Element of Transformation #6: *Discussing the Undiscussable*

My Assumptions:

Adult learners may have found that in learning, it can be difficult to challenge the system. Additionally, they may have been conditioned to accept that difficult topics are better left undiscussed for fear of “rocking the boat” or “complicating matters more than necessary”. As a result, critical issues in learning may be missed completely, and others may be oblivious to how the group learning needs are being met as they focus on only their own thoughts.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

In Dialogue, the respect and listening that takes place can help encourage adult learners to make controversial statements open to the public group. Because Dialogue does not force answers or responses, making statements about difficult topics or areas of concern need not create a pressure point on the other learners. Instead, such statements may be “left on the table” for a later time and be allowed to remain available and yet do not demand to be solved or placated by a specific individual.

**Element of Transformation #7: *Celebrating Inquiry: Knowing Less
in Order to Know More***

My Assumptions:

Adult learners may have learned through previous traditional schooling that questioning creates conflict - it may challenge authority, it may disrupt the stream of "knowledge" that is being directed at learners, it may reveal ignorance. As a result, adult learners may actually avoid inquiry with the perception that questioning may lower the respect that others hold for them, further widening the gap between people.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

Dialogue actually seeks to reduce the gap between people and create connections by allowing people to have permission to not know the answer. Not only does Dialogue allow the speaker to say, "I don't know", but also it encourages people to find deeper meaning. Through inquiry, a learner is able to be grateful that knowledge or understanding has developed beyond the previous level and yet also be curious about the level of understanding that is not yet perceived. Also, the inquiry in Dialogue seems different than pure questioning, which often "leads" a listener to respond in a way that matches the questioner's predetermined intentions. The inquiry used in Dialogue seems to allow future speakers to be more spontaneous with how they expand or respond to previous inquiry. In the process of learning together, this seems particularly useful because uncertainty can encourage learners to remain engaged and therefore explore the unknown with their partners rather than later on, in isolation. In an adult learning situation, the use of silence in Dialogue allows one to become more familiar with one's own lack of understanding and provides the time needed to simply reflect.

Element of Transformation #8: *Finding Common Ground*

My Assumptions:

It takes some effort for adult learners to find how they relate to each other, since adults, more so than children, may feel that they have very specific intentions, life situations, and motivations that are unlikely to be matched by fellow learners. Particularly in North American culture, the individualistic nature of work and life can become a foundation for competition, which may stimulate improvement to products and services but may also isolate people from each other and allow interpersonal suspicions to develop. The process of learning together means that adults need to allow natural connections to come to the surface and find their common intentions so that the individual ways that they learn or gain understanding may actually complement each other when addressing broader issues of social importance.

Gifts Delivered Through the Dialogue Process:

Dialogue greatly assists with the way that adult learners can create authenticity, which to me means that what a person says, what a person thinks, and what a person does are aligned consistently with each other. Through respect for self and others in the Dialogue process, the "authentic" learner has a support system for revealing thoughts that are most prominent in the mind and then actually taking action that reinforces the implications of those thoughts. An ongoing Dialogue process allows a person to make thoughts public, creating realism to them and allowing them to start to take form as tangible behavior. In adult learning, this connection is crucial, since it seems that the learning process must lead to some real change to become useful, and this means translating new thinking into action and then allowing the results of the action to feed back into future Dialogue. Further, Dialogue as it relates to the principles of quantum physics can be a window to the salience of wholeness - the idea that people are connected naturally. We only need to recognize the connections that are already present and salient between ourselves and others, and we need to view those connections as relationships that are highly valuable and meaningful. In the Newtonian world, the object, or person, is the fundamental unit of interest, and relationships are the ways of creating a path between them. In the ideas of quantum physics that are expressed through Dialogue, the relationship is the fundamental unit of interest, meaning that the objects, or people, that lie at each end of the relationship are defined by the relationship and not by their own static properties.