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Spirituality in Adult Education: From the Voices of Educators and Learners

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Abstract: Three components of spirituality were identified by adult educators and learners: sense of connectedness, search for meaning, and awareness of a transcendent force. Integrating spirituality into practice focused on the belief that spirituality is present in each of us and adult education provides an opportunity to experience it.

Adult educators have incorporated ideas about the spiritual nature of learning for decades (English, Fenwick, & Gillen, 2003). However, in the past few years, adult education scholars, as well as scholars in other fields of study (e.g., Schmandt & Ward, 2000; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999), have addressed spirituality directly. A few recently published books, journal articles, and conference presentations reflect the emergence of spirituality in the adult education literature (Davis, 2003; English, Fenwick, & Gillen, 2003; English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). This work has ranged from suggestions for a framework for the study of spirituality (Fenwick, English, & Parsons, 2001) to descriptions of how spirituality is incorporated into learning situations (Hart & Holton, 1993; Zinn, 1997). Other authors are addressing similar issues in related areas, such as soul (Dirkx, 1997). Fundamental questions about the meaning of spirituality in adult education have been raised by some of these authors, with most conceding the difficulty in defining spirituality but very few offering how adult educators and learners define spirituality. Nearly all of the adult education literature about spirituality includes suggestions for incorporating it in adult education; however, few of these practical guidelines are based on empirical evidence.

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of spirituality in adult education from the perspective of adult instructors and learners. The research was guided by these questions:

- (1) How do adult educators and learners define spirituality?
- (2) How do adult educators and learners describe the integration of spirituality in adult education?

Research Methodology

This research was conducted as a qualitative grounded theory study, using semi-structured interviews because we were interested in understanding the how and why of spirituality in the adult learning setting. We selected a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) with the goal of interviewing 10 adult instructors and 10 adult learners with teaching experience or participation in higher education classes, either for degree or continuing education credit. We were primarily interested in instructors who viewed spirituality as important in their teaching and learners who believed that spirituality had a place in the adult classroom. We conducted semi-structured interviews with individual participants in their or our offices or by telephone. The interviews lasted from 1-1½ hours and were tape-recorded for transcription after the interview. Participants were given pseudonyms, except for Libby Tisdell, who asked that we use her name. We were only able to conduct interviews with four educators and seven learners; consequently, this paper is a preliminary report of our findings. We are continuing to search for additional participants to reach data saturation. Constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998) was used to analyze the data and inductively develop descriptive codes from the transcribed interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Definition of Spirituality

The spiritual experiences related to us by the adult educators and learners in this study were “multi-dimensional” and “cover[ed] a wide-range of scales.” The definitions of spirituality that flowed from these experiences embodied some essential components for both, including a feeling of interconnectedness and a search for meaning and purpose in life. An awareness of a transcendent force was more evident among the educators, although the learners spoke about a dynamic force as a part of their spirituality.

Sense of connectedness. The experience of interconnectedness was described as occurring on multiple levels, connecting with other people, with nature, and with a transcendent force. Adult educators found this connection in Allison’s view that spirituality is “a way of engaging with other people... a sense of communing... the sense of complete and utter hospitality” and in Libby’s conclusion that spirituality is interconnectedness because “it’s sort of being part of the great mystery of life and the great cycle of life...it feels like it’s beyond a human kind of presence.” Beyond connecting with people, Allison, who enjoys pilgrimages in nature, points to interconnections with “the very air and [how] one’s senses become so acute. One can smell and hear things at such a level...[it’s] just such a sense of being part of a humanity that stretched forever and ever.” Caleb, an occasional hunter, also described spirituality as a connectedness with nature in which you feel a sense of peace and comfort.

For adult learners such as Troy, spirituality defines his “relationships with individuals which are for me very important.” Emily expressed her feelings of connectedness as “trying to live a compassionate life...[feeling] like there were good ways to live your life, loving your neighbors, living a loving life.” Sydney thought “there are degrees to which in a spiritual experience you connect with the Other” feeling that spirituality occurs on both an individual level as “a localized self-other, I mean...you can sort of feel the oneness with all of humanity when you see an infant,” and on a greater scale. She continued, saying that

it’s the same kind of thing but with a different scale. I connected with, with a universal energy. I mean I felt an earth energy, an unseen energy that caused me to feel connected – connected to the spot, connected to everything around me as far as I could see, and really connected to the earth, not just the earth, but to everything.

Search for meaning. Also a constant throughout the definitions of spirituality was the search for the meaning and purpose of life. Allison, an adult educator, claimed that involved in “spirituality [are] fundamental beliefs about how the world works. You can’t talk about spirituality without also talking about your sense of being, your sense of nature, your sense of what comes after life and time and mortality.” In describing a recent workshop experience, Henry viewed it as spiritual because “it was, it was raising issues of meaning . . . it had that sort of existential quality to it that calls into question existing frames of meaning and the ways in which we have been making sense of our lives in the past.” So, “there’s a kind of existential longing, a searching for something.”

Megan, an adult learner, sees spirituality as “anything that helps me ... understand more about who I am or who I want to be or how to be better at what I am.” For Aidan, spirituality has an essential role in his quest for understanding in that “it has to do with answering – trying to find some peace with the questions of where do you come from? What are you doing here? Where are you going?” Ryan described “those moments that you start to recognize that you are

a tiny piece” and the search for “something that you basically begin to integrate in your existence.”

Awareness of a transcendent force. All adult educators in our sample found spirituality is an awareness of a transcendent force or energy that is beyond self. Henry, an adult education professor, raised this aspect of spirituality as he talked about meaning-making, concluding that making meaning in our lives is not possible without the presence of some kind of, of transcendence sense as well . . . there’s a force that’s beyond my individual waking consciousness that’s at work here, . . . of standing in awe, of being in the presence of mystery, of wonder.

Allison found the transcendent not only beyond people, but also within people, telling us about a discussion she had with several friends afterward what they all agreed was a spiritual experience, noting that we said,

what was that that was happening, we just felt this thing moving through us that was beyond us . . .” there was a sense of touching a transcendent energy and having that transcendent energy liberated within us and within what we were doing.

Libby holds a similar view, feeling that spirituality is an awareness that honors a “[life force that] . . . is happening through everything all the time,” though she admits we are not always conscious of it.

Spirituality existed for the learners as a dynamic force that acted in and through their lives. Megan saw that “acting out of that connectedness or relating out of that connectedness to the world, even animals, I mean everything . . . you’ve got to have . . . some attributes to go with that for relating.” Troy attributed changes in his life to the dynamic force of spirituality, seeing “a difference between what happened before that particular event and what happened afterwards . . . taking the broad truth and . . . trying to make a difference in my own life.”

Integrating Spirituality in Adult Education. Though addressing the subject from different perspectives, there was congruence between the educators and learners about the place of spirituality in adult education and the purpose for incorporating it into practice. The commonality lay in the belief that spirituality resides in the individual and that a personal grounding in this dimension affects the experience in the classroom. There were, however, differences in how these beliefs influenced practice.

Rationale for addressing spirituality in adult education. Responding to the question about how they integrate spirituality in their teaching, these educators provided a rationale for considering spirituality in adult education. Libby advocates that spirituality is important because “it is always there,” meaning that learners and educators bring spirituality to a learning experience whether it’s acknowledged or not. Caleb explained that he integrates spirituality in his teaching because his worldview is spiritually based and complements the importance of making “lateral” connections with learners, referring to instructors attempting to meet learners on the same level rather than a hierarchical or vertical educator-learner relationship.

Henry and Allison have a similar view about the importance of spirituality for adult education though they express their views differently. Allison sees “teaching [the work that we do] as a spiritual act . . . as fundamentally a relationship.” This view underpins the connectedness theme that emerged in the definitions of spirituality offered by almost all of our participants. Henry advocated integrating spirituality in adult education because

when we’re working with the learners, . . . who are fundamentally sort of bound up with this sort of spiritual matrix . . . and the kinds of things that we do in adult education, by and

large, are questions that are not that far removed from these kinds of what I would call perennial questions or possibly essential...questions about the meaning of life.

Goals for integrating spirituality in adult education. In addition to expressing a rationale for spirituality in adult education, our educators also identified the goals for incorporating it into adult learning experiences. Libby explained that she doesn't "always talk about this [spirituality] in the classes I do," but she does incorporate "things around music, image, and symbol and things like this that are to me, some people map to as spiritual because it gets at unconscious stuff that we are not fully aware [of]." Her goal is to help learners tap into their unconscious, using their sensory capabilities in the learning experience.

Consistent with the rationale that educators and learners are enveloped in a spiritual matrix about which all adults wonder, Henry's goal in considering spirituality in his teaching "is [to] help people become aware of the matrix in which they are embedded. And the way in which that matrix implicitly, by and large, implicitly shapes and gives meaning and sense to their lives and consciousness." For Allison there are two major goals that can be accomplished by integrating spirituality in teaching adults. The first is creating the "a space of compassion, a space of communion." The second goal of incorporating spirituality in adult learning experiences is the "notion of edification, of building up the other."

Learners see the challenge for adult educators as one of helping learners find meaning and assisting them in achieving their purpose in a non-direct and non-directive way. George feels that "allowing the learner to, to be validated in that fact that a learner can know something, and he doesn't have to receive everything from the expert . . . frees the learner to be more open." Emily values the assistance of adult educators in her effort to live "a happier life and a better life for other people" . . . "so when meaning coincides with that [learning], then that could be I suppose spiritual, but when I say meaning, I'm not thinking about a technical expertise, I'm really looking for a deeper meaning than that." For Sydney "the spiritual quest is the ultimate in adult learning. . . I think [the quest is] understanding one's place in the world and what is this all about and what am I doing and how do I live within the world."

Instructional techniques for integrating spirituality in adult education. In addition to the rationale and goals for incorporating spirituality in adult education, we also wanted to know how educators actually integrate spirituality in their teaching. The educators thought it was important to use methods that establish an appropriate environment for addressing spirituality, but some educators and learners suggest techniques that fit with the "day-to-dayness" of the adult learning experience.

Libby tries: to create an environment, in fact I do this in all my classes even in like research classes where I have, you know, plant and water and a candle and different kinds of symbols of air, different depending on my mood, sometimes it's bubbles, you know, sometimes it's like a feather, it could be wind chimes, but what I'm trying to is to suggest that we only know about life through our sensory experience.

The variety of symbols and techniques used by Libby is consistent with her belief that we all "construct knowledge" in multiple ways.

Caleb echoes Libby's interest in creating an environment for evoking spirituality and thinks the appropriate environment is one that is "comfortable." His technique for fostering a comfortable environment is to emphasize calm at the outset of a learning experience. In keeping with his goal of establishing a "lateral" relationship with learners, he uses "self-deprecating humour" which "allows people to understand that you are comfortable laying yourself open and

being available to – you don't take yourself so seriously, and if you don't take yourself too seriously, then people trust you and think they can connect with you.”

Creating a classroom environment that allowed individuals to discover their own spirituality was a critical factor for these learners. For Ryan it was important that “I began to expect that we were all going to respect each others' differing opinions...they might be challenged, but you always felt valued, you always felt respected.” Megan told us about a classroom she experienced in which [she] “could feel comfortable and reasonably equal and not stupid for asking questions.”

Henry and Allison propose that spirituality should be incorporated in the everydayness of the learning experience. To Henry “It's using the readings, it's using the questions that are coming up, the discussions that are present in class, the interactions.” For Allison this means taking advantage of the “small moments...when I can really focus on a student and when I think about and focus on finding the sacred in what's going on between us and sometimes when I let...go of the agenda.”

Using education to bring about spiritual experiences raised some concerns for learners. In speaking about some of the techniques found in the literature on spiritual learning, Emily's reaction was that

it sounds like some wonderful [things] and this is powerful stuff, but the more I thought about it, . . . I feel a little danger as well because I think there is a lot of opportunity for manipulation . . . you know I've been with the theater so I know what powerful emotions can be evoked when you mix the right sound with the right story.

Regardless of the techniques educators employ, these learners noted that integrating spirituality into adult education is up to the individual, as expressed by Troy who said, “it becomes spiritual learning if I decide to incorporate that into my personality.” Megan commented that [the instructor] “may not have thought of herself as doing something spiritual or creating a spiritual atmosphere. I think that has to be within the individual.” Sydney echoes the view expressed by other learners and the educators that places both the responsibility and the possibility of spiritual learning on the individual, in saying

I believe that opportunities exist in adult education for spiritual learning. . . . I also believe that spiritual learning is highly personal and if one desires to learn . . . the relationship must unfold intuitively between teacher and learner . . . and what each provides to the other is exactly what is needed for that day and time. This cannot be prescribed in a classroom setting, although it may well occur there.

Discussion and Implications

Although individual participants use different words to convey their definition, the components of spirituality that are evident in their definitions mirror those, though not all, found in adult education and other fields of study: connectedness, meaning in life, and a transcendent energy or force (Schmandt & Ward, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). This observation indicates the emergence of empirical evidence that adult educators' and learners' understanding of spirituality is congruent and suggests the potential for dispelling concerns about addressing spirituality in adult education because it is such an ambiguous concept. Adult educators and learners are in agreement that the goal of integrating spirituality in adult education is to create an environment that provides an opportunity for learners to address questions about meaning and purpose in life. Instructional techniques that establish a hospitable environment, group interaction, and critical thinking are suggested by this goal; however, such techniques are perceived to be more effective when employed as a part of the natural process in adult learning.

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