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An Exploration of Holistic and Soulful Perspectives on Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: A Dialogue in Indigenous Western Australia

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Abstract: This research, an autoethnography of an adult educator’s journey in Indigenous Western Australia, explored how ‘meaningful dialogue’ transformed’ perspectives on adult education and lifelong learning. Four specific concepts evolved from the data: the power of story; an equality of difference; the significance of space; and the experience of oneness.

It is our moral and ethical responsibility to develop programs that inspire individuals as to their worth, their potential, and most importantly, their inherent goodness. If we cease to embrace this ideology, we will find ourselves asking the very question that Dewey did in 1944, “Who, then, shall conduct education so that humanity may improve...?” (p. 95)

Figure 1. Labyrinth¹

Prologue: Preparing for the Journey



The labyrinth is my metaphor for learning and knowing. To experience the labyrinth is to know “wonder” and to know wonder is to “sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal” (Heschel, 1991, p. 3). The unfolding labyrinthine pathway was integral to my own process as I prepared for dialogues with Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult educators and adult learners in Western Australia. This research unfolded like a labyrinthine pathway. Artress (1995) described this “Threefold Mystical Path” as:

Purgation (to let go); Illumination (soulful insights gained); and Union (the experience of oneness). I experienced the labyrinth in 1995 and again in the year 2000. To walk the labyrinth was a spiritual journey, not always comfortable or predictable. Within the safe and sacred spaces, the invisible roots connecting adult education, Indigenous culture and spirituality became visible.

Introduction

In this study, through dialogue with Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues, all working within Indigenous educational settings in Western Australia, alternate perspectives on adult education and lifelong learning were explored. I sought an enriched perspective, a vision that extended beyond the development of programs primarily aimed at addressing the vocational needs of adult learners. The data confirmed that lifelong learning moments experienced “along the way,” were indeed valid forms of knowledge acquisition. Knowledge acquired was attributed to: 1) sharing stories of significant learning moments; 2) safe space; 3) honouring differences; and 4) an experience of “oneness,” feeling connected to a community where all individuals were recognized and valued as being integral to the “whole.”

An imbalance of political power continues to contribute to an inequity in global affairs. For this reason, it is critical that inclusive and diverse adult education perspectives and practices be recognized, perspectives and practices that are testimony to the development of a critically reflective social consciousness and to what Flecha (2000) referred to as, an “equality of difference” (p. 1). Contemporary practices in adult education reflect a competency-based,

¹ The Chartres Labyrinth in France was embedded in the floor of the Chartres Cathedral between the years 1194 and 1220. It continues to be one of the few labyrinths left intact. Dr. Lauren Artress, with the help of others, reproduced this labyrinth for the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, California. Figure 1 has been reprinted with permission of Dr. Artress.

industry driven agenda. This is linked to the heavy reliance on industry for funding and support. This approach only serves to reinforce the darker side of capitalism, its individualistic – industrial obsession with power, profit and productivity. Indeed, vocational preparation programs aimed at providing adult learners with the required skills to secure employment are necessary. When adult educators limit the scope of programs to an employment-focused, competency-based approach, however, we significantly restrict the potential of these initiatives. Adult education deserves a vision that extends beyond that which has been created within a vocational vortex Bateson (1994) maintained that “learning along the way” is rarely recognized as a valid and reputable form of knowledge acquisition. This contributes to adult learners being perceived as deficient, empty vessels in need of supply. A plethora of quick fix, flavour-of-the-month programs have typically been a short-sighted response to a long-term need.

Purpose – Significance of the Study

This study explored, through dialogue, holistic and soulful perspectives on adult education and lifelong learning. I also wished to research how my perspective and practice as an adult educator might be expanded by stepping beyond my own culture of comfort and familiarity. This research explored a multiplicity of truths and perspectives. In three separate trips between 1999 and 2002, I was privileged to meet many colleagues who shared my passion for adult education. I was invited back to Western Australia in March 2003 to continue the dialogues.

Design

This study was aligned to a labyrinthine pathway. *Purgation* was my preparation. Perspectives were *illuminated* through dialogue. *Union*, oneness, was attained when an equality of difference was realized.

Method and Methodology

I chose dialogue and autoethnography as my method and methodology. I believed that both were intuitive, sensitive and aligned to the beliefs and traditions of Indigenous cultures. Through dialogue, stories were shared and lifelong learning moments were illuminated. Insights gained gave new meaning to these experiences.

Dialogue and autoethnography. I wanted to explore the power of unstructured dialogue. In keeping with this intention, I chose to free myself from the need to articulate a succinct research question. I recalled the words from a poem, “Stand still and the forest will find you” (H. Lawley, personal communication, June, 1998). These words invited me to “purge” any pre-constructed questions and to “stand still” with my silence. Bohm (1996) supported my process, encouraging me to free (rid) myself from any sense of urgency and necessity. I intuitively trusted that it would be within silence that important themes, rather than questions, would emerge. Bohm contrasted dialogue with discussion and maintained that like “percussion” and “concussion,” “[discussion] really means to break things up and emphasizes the idea of analysis” (pp. 6-7). Dialogue, on the other hand, is about wholeness and is free of judgement and direct questioning. Dialogue welcomes diversity and does not seek a singular world view. Dialogue creates a space where “authentic trust and openness emerge” (Bohm, p. x). Bohm maintained that dialogue carried the potential to equalize power, to transform perspectives and to build relationships.

My experience is written as an autoethnography, a first-person narrative of my lived experience in Western Australia. Autoethnographers maintained that by listening to the stories of others, I would be drawn to more deeply reflect upon my own. This was my experience. My story is not what is most significant, however, as it served as the medium, not the focus of this research. Most significant was how my lived experience was influenced when intertwined with

the stories of others. Autoethnography, a learning journey in search of a deeper understanding, honours the knowledge acquired through life experience and shares this knowledge with others (Ellis & Bochner 1996). Blending dialogue and autoethnography was sensitive and honouring of Indigenous ways.

Sample and Limitations

Nine females and one male participated in this study. All worked or studied within an Indigenous educational setting. Eight were Indigenous; two were non-Indigenous; three were adult learners; three were adult educators; four assumed both roles. Ages ranged from 27 to 48 years of age. All resided in Broome or Perth, Western Australia. All self-identified and wanted “real names,” synonymous with voice and power, to be used. Due to participant self-identification, there were limitations to a broader representation of culture, gender and linguistics with this sample.

Data Generation and Analysis

I dialogued with each participant one, two, three or four times. The frequency, location and duration of the dialogues were determined by each participant. Dialogues extended from two to four hours. All were taped and transcribed. Analysis included: journal notes; storyboarding emerging themes; identification, connection (and sometimes illustration) of stories shared, emotions expressed, questions asked and insights drawn.

Dialogues Unfolding

Most participants used the word “soulful” when stories of life and learning were shared. I understood “soulful” to mean all that was authentic, meaningful, and purposeful and implied connection and belonging. Two participants spoke of “whole person learning,” learning acquired beyond textbooks, reading packages, learning outcomes and program objectives. Whole person learning addressed needs that significantly impacted how an individual experienced and functioned in society and was not necessarily geared to the acquisition of employment preparation skills and abilities.

Molly and Debbie, both Aboriginal women and adult learners from Kurongkurl Katitjin Centre in Broome, spoke of childhood challenges in traditional school settings. Molly shared stories of marginalization in a White culture and to how being “so far away” from her roots, left her feeling disconnected “from everything and everyone.” She said, “I missed the bush when I’s in the city. Distances in the heart are the most painful of all you know.” Debbie tested my authenticity by offering me a lizard sandwich. Debbie laughed and said, “Don’t worry, it takes just like chicken! Debbie shared stories of living in boarding school and like Molly, referred to this as “a very lonely place far away from kin and community.” Now back at school with her “mob,” Debbie said, “It’s very relax’n and comfortable here. Theys all understand me here...lots of confidence in each other...that’s why I keep com’n back...there’s a place for me here.”

Carla was working on her second undergraduate degree at Kurongkurl Katitjin. When referring to the knowledge she had gained from her Elders, Carla said, “They taught me lots about liv’n. That’s our kinship system. It goes very, very, very deep for me...so much deeper than book learn’n.” Carla maintained that “the knowledge passed down is my real know’n.”

Eileen, Mark and Elaine all worked at Kurongkurl Katitjin. Eileen confessed that she had watched me for several days before inviting me into dialogue. Eileen said, “We’s know you aren’t some do-gooder...like one of those White people who is always help’n ‘cause they believe us Aboriginals are less than them. You listen. You don’t think you know everything... you even ate that lizard sandwich didn’t ya!” Mark and Elaine stated that “new knowledge” was born of the land. Mark described his peoples’ “relationship to all aspects of [the] environment.” Mark said, “Relationship to me is with the land...we’re all connected to the land and this links us to

each other.” Mark spoke of “oneness” and of “common ground” and maintained that “if we cared better for our land, we would give care to each other. We can’t hurt one without hurting the other. We can’t love one without loving the other.” Elaine also felt deeply connected to her physical environment describing Broome and “the land – the bush” as her “safe space.” Elaine said, “I would get up at four in the morning and it would be like I would see dawn touch the sky with her colours of pink and rose.” Elaine described the silence she found within “safe space” and said, “This is where real learning happens.” This awareness guided Elaine’s work with adult learners. Elaine said, “This is how I like to teach now...because when [I’m] not so busy thinking that [I] have all the answers, that’s when [I] truly see and experience others.”

Petrine, an adult educator committed to the “co-creation of community,” spoke to the critical importance of “a spiritual and emotional connection,” to “being at one with each other,” and to “well-being.” Petrine advocated for cultural sensitivity in higher education curricula and said that “sensitivity knowledge is not visible.”

Allison, Terry and Robyn identified “welcoming differences” as paramount. Allison explained that “openness to difference” was key to “new knowledge acquisition” and to “liv’n peacefully” in the world. She said, “It is beyond differences that we will come to realize our sameness.” Terry emphasized that safe space could not exist unless “tightly held assumptions and beliefs were explored.” In dialogue, we explored faulty beliefs that informed oppressive practices. Robyn shared the story of the broлга bird dancing under the moonbeam. Broлга was not pretty, muscular or graceful; he was gawky and uncoordinated. Under the moonbeam, however, broлга found his true colours and rhythm; he found his place in the world. Broлга then opened to receive the moon dust; he began to dance. This image of broлга communing with the moon dust spoke to me of oneness. As I reflected on the human condition, on our need to connect, to belong and to “be claimed” by a community of others, I recalled the words of *The URANTIA Book* (2001), “[Humankind], very early, becomes conscious that [we] are not alone in the world or in the universe” (p. 1123). Broлга was no longer alone. He was transformed by love.

Union: Intersections Illuminated

Dialogue affords great potential for illumination when intersections, rather than feared, are experienced as opportunities for union with others. Through dialogue, intersections that could potentially fragment and alienate were illuminated, namely: 1) Individual Stories – The Cosmic Landscape; 2) The Threat of Difference – The Equality of Difference; 3) Dangerous Space – Safe Space; 4) The One – of Many.

Individual Stories and The Cosmic Landscape – To view our own story and the stories of others, in isolation, would negate our connection to the broader context of culture and community and as stated by Mark., “There is an abundance of knowledge to be found here.” Kearney (2002) stated, “Every life is in search of a narrative...a desire for a certain ‘unity of life’” (p. 4). Through authentic presence and self-reflection, I was able to see meaningful patterns emerge, patterns that helped me to understand that it was in our cultural difference (and not in spite of it) that the interconnectedness of our lifelong learning journeys were intertwined in the most profound and remarkable ways.

The Threat of Difference and The Equality of Difference – To view difference as a threat is common. There is potential for “union,” however, if only we are prepared to transcend beyond our differences, in search of common ground. Yogananda (2000) said, “Harmony is the fruit of common understanding” (p. 105). Yogananda referred the “symphony of the Cosmic Conductor” and to a universal rhythm when individual parts are “heard in relation to the whole composition” (p. 101).

Dangerous Space and Safe Space – In dangerous space, there is a struggle to find voice and personal power. In safe space, however, cultural boundaries are dissolved. Through dialogue, we recognized that we were spirit companions on a lifelong learning journey, saturated with immense potential for learning and knowing.

The One of Many – In safe space, stories were shared; connections were made; insights were gained; and oneness was experienced. With a profound and timeless sense of calm, connections that unified our differences became visible. Oneness, experienced as harmony, was not always free of tensions, however. Bohm (2002) spoke of the dance between tension and harmony, “Harmony does not mean that there is no tension between the parts. Tension is almost essential for harmony” (p. 56). Beyond tensions, an appreciation of difference resides.

Epilogue: Insights Drawn

I reflected on the emerging patterns that evolved from the dialogues. I gathered and juxtaposed them with the labyrinthine pathway. Side by side, these patterns appeared like “mazes” embedded with multiple intersections, starts and stops, and dead-ends. Mazes are designed to trick; walls are too high to see over; corners are sharp and unsuspecting. I analysed the data through the lens of the maze metaphor and reflected on participants’ stories of oppression and marginalization, stories of dangerous space. Rooted in societal perceptions of inequality, participants spoke of violations at intersections of difference. Caught and lost in the maze, startled, bewildered and isolated, participants searched for a way home. The labyrinth is not designed to trick or to amuse. It represents *one* path, one way to the center. By overlaying the labyrinthine transparency on top of the maze, intersections are illuminated and transformed into opportunities for healing. Mazes separate and fragment individual experience; labyrinths maintain the relationship of each part to one another, hence, to the whole. Humankind feels abandoned in a maze, with no ability to see beyond the constrictions. In the labyrinth center, we connected to a community of others. Through dialogue, the maze was illuminated, transformed into a labyrinthine pathway and new knowledge was co-created. The insights embedded in these findings illuminated my perspective and praxis. How might our lives be different if, as adult educators, we shared our stories of significant learning and as we listened to each other’s stories, we spoke of our whole life and the sense and meaning it held for us? How might our lives be different if we recognized that we were all learners on a lifelong learning journey, needing to claim our wisdom and the wisdom of others, the wisdom of our souls? How might our lives be different? How might our lives and the lives of those we touch be transformed? We need to reflect on the meaning and value of difference. More importantly, we need to “walk our talk” by actively engaging “with difference” by *reforming* held notions of power. Perceiving cultural differences as less than equal contributes to oppressive and exclusive power differentials and like the maze, this impedes knowledge acquisition. We must advocate more thoughtfully, purposefully and collectively for soulful and holistic adult education programs. To singularly focus on “employment preparation” is to deny the importance of citizenship skills, social/relationship skills, art appreciation, and the development of a critical consciousness. To ensure the completeness of the labyrinthine pathway, I revisit Dewey’s challenge, “If we cease to embrace this ideology...who, then, shall conduct education so that humanity may improve...?” (1944, p. 95)

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