



Contextualizing the Spiritual in an Adult Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

I have always been interested in the spiritual dimension of our lives as people living on planet Earth. As a teacher working with a diverse range of adult learners, the dilemma of how to incorporate the spiritual into classroom work has always fascinated me. Adult classrooms now usually include groups of adults who have a divergent range of spiritual ideas and understandings. How can the teacher, who wishes to approach their work in a holistic way, approach this dilemma in a way that unifies the group and does not cause discord? This article reflects on this and offers some ways a teacher might use to develop their practice to include the spiritual dimension.

A WESTERN WORLDVIEW

I feel that often those of us with a 'Western worldview' have paid very little attention, if any, to the spiritual dimension in our lives – often simply by-passing it – and then we are left with feelings of unease and restlessness; even in our learning there can be a sense of a lack of fulfilment. Yet there are others, perhaps increasing in numbers (Nugent, 2003), who embrace the spiritual in a deeply whole hearted way. Hill and Johnston concur with the idea of whole heartedness and assert that 'Addressing spirituality in our adult education practice means bringing our whole selves – mind, heart and spirit to our work' (Hill & Johnston, 2003, p. 23).

Certainly it is beyond doubt that since people have lived on Earth, there has been a seeking for spiritual truth and ways of knowing that bring understanding and peace to our lives. How then, should a practitioner faced with a range of students of differing cultural and religious beliefs set about to create an environment which enables people to be calm, at ease and spiritually aware? What practical techniques could or should be used? What should be avoided? Can anything be done to aid this in reality in a classroom situation? Or is this just a minefield too diverse to delve into in any realistic way? These are the kinds of questions a practitioner may ask themselves if they want to include the spiritual dimension in their day to day classrooms.

This article considers four interwoven strategies for practitioners – discovering a sense of purpose, encouraging a faith in life, emphasizing internal motivators, and creating a spiritual space.

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory discusses the self actualizing person. His ideas encompass the thought that all people need a sense of self esteem and respect and all need to move towards their life's *purpose* and journey towards reaching their full potential, thus becoming a complete, self actualized person. Knowles *et al.* notes that 'creative leaders tend to see the *purpose* of life activities – work, learning, recreation, civic participation, *worship* – as a way for all individuals to achieve their full and unique potential' (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005, p. 260; emphases added). This sense of purpose is echoed in Dr Jeff Tallon's article in *The New Zealand Herald* recently where he states 'faith in God opens a door to authentic happiness, sense of *purpose* and moral obligation' (Tallon, 2010, A11; emphasis added). Hill and Johnston (2003) echo this idea of 'purpose' being connected to the spiritual dimension, and argue that life and work, paid or unpaid, should be connected with purpose. All of these ideas move us towards the fact that we all, students included, need to discover our purpose in life in order to be at one with ourselves and live in a state of peace and harmony.

FAITH IN LIFE

Many of our students are involved in this very act of 'faith in life' when they undertake their studies. They have a purpose in mind. Whether it be to develop their knowledge, improve job opportunities, simply because their work requires it, or the more ethereal quest for deeper knowledge, some kind of purpose is evident.

This is one aspect of the spiritual that a teacher can easily facilitate and encourage in their students. Assist them in setting their study goals and keeping their goals to the forefront of their thinking from time to time. Encourage students when the going gets really tough. Studying and working concurrently is pure hard work and everyone needs encouragement from time to time to keep going. The lecturer can build this encouragement into the classroom environment. Have people share a little of their journey at the opening of a class session. Have one person share with the whole group or devise a small group session whereby everyone shares a little of their personal goals and journey. Prepare people in advance so that they are able to think before they come to class about what they may feel able to give to the group.

INTERNAL MOTIVATORS

'Creative leaders emphasize internal motivators over external ones. Motivators such as achievement, recognition, fulfilling work, responsibility, advancement and growth are examples of internal motivators' (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005, pp. 262-3). As the group builds and melds together, the environment improves steadily. These internal motivators are very powerful and as people develop a sense of their own strength, ability and growth the whole group is advanced. Equally as this happens each individual within the group will sense their own forward progression. Indeed, as people begin to believe in

themselves their internal power grows and the limits that they place on themselves can begin to crumble away as a new internal light begins to dawn.

In 'Transformative Learning: A Spiritual Perspective', Nugent discusses spiritual understandings about learning to know oneself very deeply. I appreciate his ideas on the way we 'self contract' due to problems that we may encounter. This reminds me of a sea anemone – where the small creature waves its tentacles about to find food. We, as adult learners, tentatively wave our thoughts and ideas around, offering them to the group – taking courage in a classroom to do this. When we are met with negativity or difficulty we, sometimes, close down quickly, close our 'tentacles' and stay close within ourselves, wrapped in tight protection. We, as leaders in a classroom need to make our spaces *safe* and *free* so that everyone can learn 'to move beyond that contraction to a space where we can be joyful and open hearted in all circumstances' (Nugent, 2003, p. 217). This is surely a challenge to ourselves as lecturers and teachers, when we meet the full force of a negative or contradictory opinion to our own, or a direct challenge to our proposition from an articulate, well-researched student, or indeed even a negative vibe in the classroom. Our challenge then is, to remain open-hearted and joyful and not simply retract into our powerful position (as leader) and rely on that to get through our session, with our sense of self intact!

Underpinning this must surely be a deep, spiritual and wholly loving respect for each person in front of us and also and just as importantly a deep spiritual and loving respect for ourselves. When our sense of self worth is not embedded in a sense of pride and self importance, but in the spiritual (whatever the outworking of that may be for each of us), then we are able to give out freely, with love and generosity of heart. When problems with our learners confront us we will tend to look for answers by engaging the person and working together with them for creative solutions.

SPIRITUAL SPACE

Zepke (2008) suggests that first peoples such as Maori people like to have the spiritual included in the classroom situation. They appreciate being able to invite their ancestors into the learning space. He suggests gathering people at the outset of the session and having a minute's silence to allow people to invite and allow the spirit to arrive. I have done this kind of thing before and found it to be very effective as a sense of peace pervades the room and people can settle happily to their work. I have a personal experience of this myself. As an adult learner several years ago I was at a session in an unfamiliar city and in an unfamiliar lecture theatre with a large group of people I had not met before. I felt quite uncomfortable and 'at sea'. I was quite tense and not sure what would be required of me within the session. However, at the very outset of the day's proceedings a Maori man, who was a priest within the Anglican church, began the day with a beautiful prayer in Maori and English. I was amazed at how relaxed and at ease I felt at the end of his prayer. I felt a common bond with him and as I looked around I saw an old friend that I had not seen for many years and all at once, I felt quite happy and eager to begin my day. The spiritual had been set in place and 'put right', all was well and I could relax. I *know* that the spiritual must not be left out of our workplace as teachers. In

desiring to work holistically, we must not ignore the spiritual dimension, as pervading, humanist thinking has perhaps taught us to do in years gone by!

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We must work together with our students to create broad value systems where awe and wonder and delight for the Earth are nourished (Hill & Johnston, 2003), where belief in God (in whatever way we may perceive God to be) is nurtured and allowed freedom, and each person is seen as a person of intrinsic and unique value and grace. In this way, learning can be transformational, and students can feel a deep sense of connection with each other and the universal space in which we live and move and have our being.

In my opinion, we must not disengage from the spiritual but rather embrace it, love it, seek it and find ways to build it into every classroom situation. When peace pervades the room learners are well equipped to learn. A sense of inner relaxation allows the learner's mind to be at ease and the strains of life can, for a time, disappear into a genuine engagement with the love of learning which is often at the core of the student's heart and why they are, in fact, present.

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