Embodied, Spiritual, and Narrative Learning

Chapter 8

Background

- Most of our knowledge of adult learning is centered on the mind
  - that is, cognitive processes related to acquiring, storing, and making meaning of new information.

- But the whole person is always involved in learning, even when we think it is just our brain.

The whole person is made up of mind, body, and spirit.

- However, rarely are the body and spirit taken into account when we talk about learning.

- Our Western heritage has defined learning as a mental process that takes place in the mind
  - never mind that we cannot locate the "mind."

- The brain, which we can locate, becomes the place of learning, severed from something as concrete as the body and as ephemeral as the spirit.
Focus on the Mind

- This focus on the mind is partly due to Western science's investigation of learning as a mechanistic process
  - . . . one designed to produce responses to stimuli, or to process information, or more recently, to construct knowledge largely through reflection on experience

This emphasis on the mind

- Goes back even to Descartes, a 17th-century French philosopher who declared that "I, that is, my mind, by which I am what I am" is entirely and truly distinct from my body" and that "body, figure, extension, motion, and place are merely fictions of my mind".
- This separation of the mind and body was reinforced by 18th-century Enlightenment philosophers who believed that knowledge could be obtained through reason alone; other sources of knowledge at that time, such as faith, tradition, and authority, were rejected by many.

As a result...

- . . . this thinking, learning has come to be equated with mental processes, with knowing through thinking or cognition.
- Not until the last few decades of the 20th century has the role of the body and the spirit in adult learning theory been considered.
- Feminist theorists and multicultural theorists in particular have significantly shaped this discussion, along with a number of adult educators.
This chapter takes on . . .

- Somatic or embodied learning -- learning through the body.
- Spirituality -- its role in learning.
- Narrative learning -- with which we often make sense of this learning through storytelling.

Somatic or Embodied Learning

- This is learning through the body
- This type of learning is learning in an experience as it occurs, rather than from reflecting on the experience after it occurs.
- The body actually has receptors throughout that take in sensory information.
  - At times we attend to this information better than at others, as when we have a physical, emotional, or "gut" reaction to what is transpiring around us.

Body Communication

- The body communicates to us, whether it be:
  - a panic attack brought on by stress
  - a "gut" reaction to a racist comment
  - an upset stomach as we contemplate complaining to a teacher or boss
  - being drained and exhausted from an intense encounter.
- So why have we tended to ignore the body as a site for learning?
Embodied learning is most often linked to experiential learning

- Somatic or embodied knowing is experiential knowledge that involves senses, perception, and mind/body action and reaction.
- Attending to these noncognitive dimensions of knowing can bring greater understanding to our lives; they enable us to make meaning of our everyday experiences.
- Learning in the experience is immediate, physical, emotional.

Amann's 4-Part Model of Somatic Knowing

- Kinesthetic
- Sensory
- Affective -- emotional or feeling dimension
- Spiritual

Athletes, artists, dancers are all concerned with the movement of the body, or kinesthetic learning. This "movement and action... often yields lessons about discipline, diligence, dealing with stress, or solving problems."

Issues arising from this somatic approach include the following:

- Recognition of the body as a source of knowledge
  - learners become adept at exposing the process of constructing knowledge and (de)legitimizing knowledge claims.
- Empowerment/resistance to dominant culture
  - awareness of bodily experience disengages learners from the apprenticeship of observation and prepares them to question the primacy of dominant knowledge sources.
A means of developing empathy and respecting diversity
- suggest that awareness of and respect for our own somatic responses and the sharing of insights about embodied experiences open us to alternative perspectives.

Two paths for adult educators:

- The Embodied Way
  - Using a more holistic approach to curriculum design, teaching, learning, and research brings the body back into educational theory and practice

- The Body Project
  - Recognize the body's place in the classroom as well as the ways in which classrooms, teachers, learners, and institutions construct the body as gendered, raced, diseased, disabled, and sexually oriented.

Spirituality
Spirituality

- The notion of spirituality and its place in our lives and our learning has captured the attention of not only the popular press but also adult educators.
- What is being acknowledged is that our spiritual selves help define who we are, whether we are at work, at home, or in a classroom.

SPIRITUALITY AND LEARNING

- Like somatic embodied knowing, spiritual knowing or learning is also about meaning-making, though perhaps more difficult to accommodate than embodied learning, which does have a tie to physical sensations.
- Traditionally, the learner is "merely an animal to be socialized, a computer to be programmed, a unit of production to be harnessed and utilized, a consumer to be won" (Sloan, 2005)

- Carl Jung has asserted that as adults move into midlife and beyond, there is an inward turning to contemplate the meaning of life and spiritual aspects of oneself.
- In one longitudinal study of spiritual development in adulthood, "all participants, irrespective of gender and cohort, increased significantly in spirituality between late middle (mid50s/early 60s) and older adulthood".
**In higher and adult education today**

- Books, conference presentations, journal articles, and student theses and dissertations are grappling with spirituality and making visible what has long been ignored...
- There is a spiritual side to our learning despite the domination of rationality in the classroom.

**Tisdell's (2003) definition of spirituality**

- Spirituality and religion are not the same...
- Spirituality is about an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things...
- Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning-making.
- Spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment.
- Spiritual development constitutes moving toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self.
- Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual which are manifested culturally.
- Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise.

**Foehr (1997) speaks of "spiritually empowering forces or energies..."**

- Having to do with:
  - creativity
  - imagination
  - inspiration
  - intuition
  - kinesthetic knowledge
  - felt sense
  - passion for knowing
  - the aha experience
  - archetypal energy
  - the collective unconscious"
Using the word grace instead of spirituality

- Graves (1997) notes the transcendent nature of grace as well as its more common understanding as "harmony of movement, coordination, poise under pressure" (p. 15).
- His notion of grace is not tied to a religious perspective; rather, grace, "moves to its own rhythm, follows its own agenda, and it is always beyond our power to control or manipulate."

In relating grace to pedagogy, Graves (1997) delineates several characteristics of grace.

- It is transforming.
- It is healing
- It transcends the ego.
- It opens the possibility.
- It points toward what is right.
- It is about enhancing creativity.
- It is surprising.

FOSTERING SPIRITUALITY IN ADULT LEARNING

- To the extent that spirituality is about meaning-making, it can be argued that it has a place in adult learning.
- Unfortunately, formal programs of adult education suffer from "order, hierarchies, grades, tests, a gloried past, control, deprivation, remoteness of various kinds, and weighty seriousness" (Moore, 2005)
For spirituality or moments of grace to happen, "weighty seriousness" must be replaced with playfulness, openness, creativity, and imagination.

If, as Hooks (1994) writes, "we believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students," then we must "teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students. . . [and] provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."

"necessary conditions"

- The instructor must examine her or his own biography, acknowledging and "perhaps reconciling the influence of our religious upbringing on our current spiritual preferences and resistances".
- There must be space in the learning environment that is safe, supportive, open, "sacred."
- Allow for dialogue . . "the interpersonal connections and interchanges among people that encourage and promote their spiritual development. . ."
- Mentoring is an activity that can promote spiritual development
- Use creative and imaginative activities such as visualization, storytelling, and the use of literature, poetry, art, and music.

Tisdell's Cultural Imagination

- Imagination is a meaning-making activity in that we put together insights, images, symbols, and ideas in new ways so that new meaning is revealed.
- This imaginative activity cannot be separated from the person's cultural context and history.
- When imagination, which "helps people to see from multiple perspectives, to visualize new possibilities, and potentially to create something new" involves "cultural stories, histories, and issues, it engages cultural imagination"
Using Tisdell’s Cultural Imagination

- Using teaching strategies that cross cultural borders such as service learning opportunities, engaged dialogue about current issues, and problem-posing techniques along with the cultural imagination (such as sharing personal cultural symbols with others) can bring about transformation.
- Image, symbol, music, ritual, art, poetry, often touch off memory in conscious and unconscious ways, which sometimes connects to spirituality...
- Combine these ways of knowing with the intellectual and critical analysis aspects of higher education to facilitate greater student learning and greater equity in society.

Narrative Learning

Whether our learning is through our mind, our body, our spirit, or some combination of these, we often make sense of this learning through narrative, through putting it into a story format.

We learn from "storying" our experience.
Narrative Learning

- The difference between scientific and narrative knowing:
  - Narrative knowing . . . is concerned more with
    - human meaning than with discrete facts
    - coherence than with logic
    - sequences than with categories
    - understanding than with predictability and control

Narrative Learning in Adult Education

- It has only been since the 1990s that narrative learning as received some attention in adult education.
- The field's historical recognition of the importance of experience in learning, as well learning as a meaning-making activity, have made for the ready acceptance of narrative as learning.
  - For example, journals, a form of narrative, is a crucible for processing the raw material of experience in order to integrate it with existing knowledge and create new meaning.

Forms of Narratives in Learning

- "Storying" the curriculum
  - the curriculum or the text of a course is treated as a story and students interact with these texts to come to some understanding or interpretation of the subject matter.
- Storytelling
  - such as fiction, case studies, exemplars from practice, role-playing, or critical incidents-is a common means of engaging students in understanding concepts, principles, or theories.
- Autobiography
  - include journaling, dream logs, therapy, blogs, and "educational biography."
Assignment

- Read Chapter 9
  - Do annotation
  -
- Begin Learning Activity 4