When Teaching is Joyfully Subversive: Toward a Holistic Curriculum for Adult and Higher Education

Randee Lipson Lawrence
National Louis University

Keywords: Holistic, Participatory, Indigenous, Curriculum

Abstract: This paper describes a participatory, inclusive and holistic curriculum model that adheres to the ideals of adult education while meeting institutional requirements.

A major paradox exists concerning how we espouse and practice adult education in our institutions of higher learning. We use terms like *participatory*, *inclusive* and *learner- centered* yet the academy with its predilection for behavioral objectives, structured syllabi, and standardized assessment models militates against these adult education practices. The dominant curriculum is out of balance as it privileges cognitive rationality to the exclusion of embodied, affective and spiritual ways of learning. This model was developed out of a need to create a holistic curriculum for adult education that is inclusive, flexible and responsive to learner needs, one that does not alienate nor marginalize the students. If we are to respect and honor our learners, we need to dispense with standardized syllabi and one size fits all rubrics.

For those of you reading this who work in academic institutions, I can see you shaking your heads. "This is all well and good, but I live in the real world. My institution requires that I submit a standard syllabus that has clear and measurable outcomes. They'd never go for this stuff". So what is an adult educator to do?

I believe that it is possible to teach in imaginative and emancipatory ways while still being responsive to one's institutional requirements. I am personally averse to the skinning cat metaphor so let me try another one. There are many ways to eat a meal. You could use a knife and fork, chopsticks or pick up the food with your fingers. They all lead to the same outcome. You get fed, right? So, too there are many ways to teach a curriculum. We may have to use these standard processes to report to our institutions, but we generally have control over what we do and how we do it in our own classroom. We might need to be a bit subversive and certainly tap into our imaginations but that can be fun. I call it being "joyfully subversive".

Holistic Curriculum

This paper explores holistic curriculum development that is arts-based and that educates the whole person, not only the mind. Holistic curriculum models have been discussed in K-12 education (for example, Miller, 2007) however there are few if any in adult and higher education.

While holistic curricula are not synonymous with participatory practice, using holistic processes that integrate the cognitive, affective, embodied and spiritual domains of learning consider the learner as an integrated whole. Holistic education includes: deepening relationships to self, family, community, the planet and the cosmos; balancing learning for economic gain with learning necessary for responsible action, respecting individuality by eliminating uniform assessment; honoring multiple ways of knowing; promoting freedom of inquiry and expression; teaching for participatory democracy and social justice; recognizing the interdependence of all beings; educating for global citizenship; and nourishing the health of the spirit (Flake, 1993).

I am advocating a teaching practice is earth-centered, participatory, and culturally relevant that incorporates imaginal teaching processes that view the learner and the subject

matter as connected wholes.

Holistic Education is not New

"Authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae—all of these have no place in adult education", declared Lindeman in 1926 (Lindeman, 1961 p. 7). Lindeman believed that education was part of life, not separate and compartmentalized. Have we abandoned these ideals and bowed to the bureaucratic structures that govern our institutions? Is there hope for the future? To look for answers we must look to our past and to indigenous cultures that have been practicing holistic education since the beginning of time.

This section considers what we can learn from traditional African as well as Native American traditions. Omolewa (2007) describes a traditional African approach to education as being liberating for the learner as it "is based on practical common sense, on teachings and experience and is holistic- it cannot be compartmentalized and cannot be separated from the people who are involved in it because essentially it is a way of life." P. 596. Sounds a lot like Lindeman. Traditional African education is intimately connected to the culture of a people and often incorporates myth, folklore, music, dance and ritual. Ntseane (2011) also believes that education needs to be connected to cultural values of Africans including spirituality, a collective worldview and community empowerment. These values recognize the interconnectedness of all beings, local knowledge that resides in the community and the sharing of knowledge through myths, stories and proverbs. (Ntseane, 2011 P. 318)

Native American indigenous learning shares many of these values including the interconnectedness of all life, the centrality of spirituality to education and the use of ritual and ceremony, art and storytelling to transmit knowledge. The arts are central to indigenous learning. In fact there is no word for artist in tribal languages as there is no separation between artists and non artists (Cajete, 1994). Cajete describes several of what he refers to as "axioms for indigenous learning". These include: paying attention to the natural world, learning by doing (what we call experiential learning), examining taken for granted assumptions (what we call critical reflection), and the use of arts, ritual and storytelling in the classroom.

While it is important to use culturally relevant teaching processes with students of African, and Native American origin as well as other ethnic groups, I argue that these practices are part of a holistic education model that benefit all students.

Mind, Body, Heart and Spirit

In a previous publication (Lawrence, 2012) I created a graphic model called *Intuitive Holistic Knowing* (p. 7). The model shows an upside down triangle with heart and mind at the top, body at the base and spirit, fuzzy and gray at the center. I was attempting to show the connection between our different ways of knowing and how they worked together holistically. In this section I briefly expand on these ideas and how they contribute to a holistic curriculum.

Mind

Traditional curriculum development privileges the mind over all other forms of knowing. I don't have to tell you that, as you are all experts in rational and cognitive learning. We read books, listen to lectures and engage in cognitive discourse. We take tests, conduct research and write properly referenced papers (like the one you are now reading). Institutions love cognitive learning. It is after all easy to describe and easy to measure.

I am not saying that there is anything wrong with this way of learning. In fact, it is necessary. However it is but one component of a holistic model of learning. As you will see, there are others.

Heart

A holistic curriculum engages the heart of the learner. When we tap into our emotions we tend to retain more as the learning becomes personally meaningful. Emotions are often ignored or even dismissed in higher education as getting in the way of objectivity. Yet, we are emotional beings. We can't not experience our emotions. Dirkx (2006) suggests we use these emotions as a teaching tool, using the language of imagination to work with our emotions to help find meaning in our experiences. Meditation, poetry, image and metaphor construction are some ways students can tap into their heart center as a source of knowledge.

Body

The body appears at the base of the triangle because we first experience the world through our bodies. Embodied knowing precedes our conscious awareness. (Lawrence, 2012). Babies absorb knowledge through their bodies before they have a spoken language or have developed any thought processes. Yet, with the exception of gym class, embodied learning is rarely a part of the school curriculum. Many educators are reluctant to engage in embodied activities because being in one's body seems so uncomfortable. However those who are willing to risk their own and potentially their students' discomfort often are surprised to find that the students engage with the material in ways they never had before. Embodiment in the curriculum can take the form of dance, theatre improvisation, yoga, outdoor education or simply getting out of one's chair and moving. Snowber (2012) brings dance into the curriculum because it gives students "a visceral language that has the capacity to connect body, mind, heart and soul, and imaginative thinking." P. 54

Spirit

Spirit appears in the center of the triangle model. It is grayed out to represent the fluidity and liminality of the concept. Spirituality is difficult to express in words yet we know when it is present. As indigenous educators know, it is part of our everydayness. Additionally, "Everyday spirituality is located in participatory practices in which we approach life as sacred, in all its interconnectedness, and seek a way of creating life on earth based on human flourishing." (Ledwith and Springett, 2010 p. 31) Many educators are reluctant to acknowledge spirituality in education as they see it as synonymous with religion. While there are many religions, spirituality transcends particular religious beliefs. It is possible to incorporate spirituality into the curriculum without naming it. Other terms used to convey the sacred in education include presence, inspiration and awe.

Presence (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004; Kornelsen, 2006) is described as being present with what is happening at the moment. In doing so we may need to let go of a pre-planned agenda and pay attention to learning that is happening in the present. When we let go of control we open ourselves to the possibility of new and unexpected learning opportunities.

Hart (2000) uses the term inspiration where one feels a deep connection between the self and some transcendent other. In these instances we are open to learning that comes from unexpected sources. Engaging in visual art activity, creative writing or listening to music are ways to tap into inspiration.

A.W.E. (ancestral wisdom education) is a term coined by Fox (2006) to describe education that is based on compassion, social justice and passion. Education should inspire awe. Fox believes our schools are in crisis and indeed our survival as a species is threatened. He

believes we have much to learn from the wisdom of our ancestors about overcoming racial and other forms of oppression. Fox also questions whether or not we are doing things backward by developing curriculum before we get to know our students and their interests and needs.

As suggested above, spirituality in education is a loaded term, yet it encompasses so much of what we need in our curriculum. One way of being subversive is to infuse education with spirituality without referring to it as such. We can do this by teaching in ways that foster openness and authenticity and engage learners from multiple cultural perspectives. Cultivating spirituality can happen though ritual and ceremony or engaging in practices like meditation, dreamwork or quiet reflection.

The Arts are Integral in a Holistic Curriculum

Holistic curricula are multi-disciplinary. Just as the arts are a natural a part of indigenous learning, they can play a role in the curriculum in any discipline. According to Collister (2010 p. 79) "The use of aesthetics, recognizes the holarchical nature of all existence, connecting the whole person with their community, their place, the Earth, and the universe through embodiment, spirituality, and cosmology". I've spoken at length about the uses of the arts in learning in other publications (see for example Lawrence 2012A) so I won't elaborate here. In addition to the applications already mentioned, a holistic curriculum might include the reading and writing of poetry or creative prose, fiction, photography, digital stories, documentary and feature film, improvisational, popular or reader's theatre, dance, body movement and music.

Can Curriculum Design ever Really be Inclusive?

What does a participatory curriculum look like? How do we balance the need for learning objectives, instructional strategies and assessment models that are part of an instructional design in higher education? Can we really be inclusive or is it true what Baptiste and Brookfield (1997) proclaimed, "Your so-called democracy is hypocritical because you can always fail us"? As professors in higher education we do have certain obligations to be accountable. We are accountable to our students to teach them something. We are accountable to our institutions to certify that the students have met certain learning objectives so that when we confer degrees, they mean something. I am not denying that we have power. Ultimately we decide whether our students pass or fail. Or do we? There is a concept from feminist literature of power-with vs. power over. Instead of using our power to dominate and control (power over) we can share power with our students and use our power to help empower others (power-with).

Objectives

There is nothing inherently bad about learning objectives. Objectives give us a goal to shoot for and a way of knowing when we've achieved that goal. Objectives however need not be quantifiable. In a holistic curriculum objectives reflect the different learning domains including the affective, cognitive, embodied and spiritual. And they may not be the same for all. As Fox (2006) suggested, how can we predetermine the curriculum before we know the students? In a participatory curriculum the students can be involved in developing the course objectives. Sometimes I have my students critique and modify the objectives and even develop their own individual objectives for what they want to get out of the course. One student suggested we ought to rename them "subjectives" because they are subject to individual needs and learning styles. I rather like that.

Instructional Strategies

As you can see, there are multiple ways to achieve learning objectives I've already discussed some instructional strategies that engage the mind, body, heart and spirit. Many of these strategies involve the use of one or more forms of artistic expression. Ledwith and Springett (2010) also advocate the use of storytelling and dialogue as part of a participatory practice. Storytelling makes learning personal. It taps into the experiential knowledge of the participants and assumes that knowledge is not only "out there" in published works of so called experts but also that people are experts on their own experience, and that their knowledge is valuable to others. Dialogue is a form of deep inquiry that encourages people to ask questions, observe their own thoughts and remain open to considering new ideas. "re-experiencing life from a participatory paradigm opens our minds to the notion of multiple truths and a more holistic way of making sense of the world". (Ledwith and Springett, 2010 p. 196)

Assessment

Ultimately professors are responsible for assessment. At least they are the ones assigning grades. But how those grades are determined can vary widely. I believe in giving students choices in assignments. There are many ways to demonstrate learning and not everyone learns the same way. Lately I've been experimenting with digital stories and photo essays as a way to express learning. Having a choice in the method of completing an assignment or even suggesting that the student propose alternative strategies are ways of sharing power. Cranton (personal conversation, 2013) is even opposed to the world *assignment* which connotes power over students, preferring the word *activity*. Allowing students choices also recognizes and honors different ways of knowing and different cultural contexts. Often what they choose to do is not only personally meaningful for them, it is more creative and imaginative then what I could come up with.

Grading

Grading can be a sticky issue. In our doctoral program we use a pass-fail system that removes the pressure to please the teacher and produce what they think the teacher wants, to earn the A. In some programs however, letter grading is required. Kucukaydin and Cranton (2012) advocate self-grading as it shifts the power from the instructor back to the student. I sometimes teach online where class participation is usually part of a student's evaluation. Some teachers use structured rubrics to evaluate the quality of every online post. I am strongly adverse to such rubrics however to work around the system I ask the students to assess themselves. After all who knows better the quality of a student's participation than the student him or herself. Artistic expression can be very subjective and difficult to assess. Self-evaluation in this case just makes sense, especially if they have determined their own objectives.

Being Joyfully Subversive

This paper suggests that even within the constraints of our institutions we can critically reflect on our practice and understand how the dominant curriculum structures serve to undermine adult education practice. By involving our students in the process of curriculum development and co-creating holistic learning activities that connect learning to the learners, their communities and the natural world we can create more participative and inclusive learning communities.

Horton (1990) believed that education was naturally holistic and his goal was to see that it was not pulled apart and put into segments, which he referred to as "dehumanizing". Yet, the more we have formalized education the more we have moved away from these holistic ideals. This model brings adult education back to its roots and offers new hope for those who feel the

pressure of institutional constraints. Teaching and learning should be a joyful experience. If we need to revert to subversion, at least we can do it with joy.

References

Baptiste, I., and Brookfield, S. D. (1997). Your so-called democracy is hypocritical because you can always fail us: Learning and living democratic contradictions in graduate adult education. *Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries: Research in the Education of Adults*. London: University of London.

Cajete, G. (1994). *Look to the Mountain: An ecology of indigenous education*. Skyland, N.C.: Kivaki Press.

Collister, R. C. (2010). *A Journey in search of wholeness and meaning*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang.

Dirkx, J. M. (2006). Engaging emotions in adult learning: A Jungian perspective on emotions and transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor (Ed.), Teaching for change: Fostering transformative learning in the classroom. (pp. 15-26). *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education # 109*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Flake, C.L. (1993). *Holistic education: Principles, perspectives and practices*. Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press.

Fox, M. (2006). *The A.W.E. project: Reinventing education, reinventing the human.* Kelowna, B.C. Canada: CopperHouse.

Hart, T. (2000). Inspiration as transpersonal knowing in T. Hart, P. Nelson, & K. Puhakka (Eds.), *Transpersonal knowing.* (pp. 31-54). New York: SUNY Press.

Horton, M. (1990). *The long haul*. New York: Doubleday.

Kornelsen, L. (2006). Teaching with presence in P. Cranton (Ed.), Authenticity in teaching. (pp.73-82). *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education # 111*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Kucukaydin, I. & Cranton, P. (2012). Participatory learning in formal adult education contexts. *International Journal of Adult and Vocational Education and Technology,* 3(1), 1-13.

Lawrence, R.L. (Ed.), (2012). Bodies of knowledge: Embodied learning in adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. 134*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lawrence, R. L. (2012A). Transformative learning through artistic expression: Getting out of our heads. In E.W. Taylor and P. Cranton (Eds.). *Handbook of transformative learning.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Ledwith, M. and Springett, J. (2010), *Participatory Practice.* Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.

Lindeman, E. C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education*. New York: New Republic. (Republished in 1961 by Harvest House.)

Ntseane, P. G. (2011). Culturally sensitive transformative learning: Incorporating the Afrocentric paradigm and African feminism. *Adult Education Quarterly, 61*(4), 307-323.

Omolewa, M. (2007). Traditional African modes of education: Their relevance in the modern world. *International Review of Education, 53*, 593-612.

Senge, P., Scharmer, C.O., Jaworski, J, & Flowers, B. S. (2004*). Presence: Exploring profound change in people, organizations and society.* New York: Ransom House, Inc.

Snowber, C. (2012). Dance as a way of knowing. in R. L. Lawrence (Ed.), Bodies of Knowledge: Embodied learning in adult education. (pp. 53-60). *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education # 134*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.