

9

This chapter explores somatic learning and narrative learning, two lesser-known but valuable ways in which adults learn.

Off the Beaten Path: Some Creative Approaches to Adult Learning

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This journal is like a hike across the varied terrain of adult learning theory. It begins on level ground with the wide and well-traveled path of models of learning that essentially defined us as a field early on, moves on to a somewhat steeper grade of the currently fashionable and often challenging modes of learning, then winds through the forest of more complex, interdisciplinary approaches. With this chapter we're on the other side of the forest, confronting an immense prairie of tall grass and big sky; the recognizable path has dissolved into a labyrinth of rabbit trails leading off in multiple directions. Where to now??

The truth is that out here on the prairie there are lots of possibilities, and the direction you choose is determined more by personal predilection than current fashion. When I say these types of learning are off the beaten path of adult education, I mean that they are topics that we rarely encounter in our own journals and conferences. However, our field has always been interdisciplinary, some would say eclectic, so explorations of this sort are quite normal for us. This chapter, then, simply presents areas that intrigue me at the moment; others would make different choices, I'm sure.

I've chosen two types of learning. The literature on both of these areas is usually framed in terms of knowing, but here I will use the terms knowing and learning somewhat interchangeably. The first type is the connection between learning and the body, what is usually called somatic learning. While we know a fair amount about kinesthetic learning and physical skill development, we know little about how we learn from our bodily experience. The second area that intrigues me is narrative learning. Here I'm curious about how the narrative process itself—the storytelling of our experience—teaches us something.

Both types of learning cover a lot of ground. My plan for this chapter is to describe the fundamental concepts of each type of learning, discuss a few specific examples of how that learning is manifested, and briefly explore how these modes of learning might influence our practice as adult educators.

Somatic or Embodied Learning

Years ago I had a friend who was studying art, and one of her assignments was to do a self-portrait. The other students drew their faces; my friend drew her body. I was jolted by her portrait because, like the other students, I identify my self with my head and not my body. This isn't surprising because we're situated within a culture that has a complex and largely troubled relationship with the body. The Western cultural discourse on the body is couched most often in terms of gaining control over it, most prominently by physical exercise or by dieting, so that we can meet social norms of healthiness or body size. But short of the assaults of illness and aging, our experience of the body is usually unconscious and largely unspoken. We live much more comfortably in our heads than in our bodies.

Things were not always this way. In medieval times, knowing was more emotional, more internal, more connected to the natural world (Bordo, 1987). Berman (1989) makes the case that the senses were primary in this period, that "the facts' were first and foremost what happened on a psychic and emotional level" rather than being determined through the exercise of reason, and that "the essential truth was an interior one" (p. 111). A person "knew" something by being deeply and intimately connected to it, a knowing that was somatic and emotional.

With the rise of the Scientific Revolution, beginning especially with Descartes, this interior knowing through a sense of connectedness was displaced by the primacy of reason and the requirement that the knower and the known be separate and distinct. In privileging reason, the body is delegitimated as a mode of knowing. Bordo (1987) notes that there are two dimensions to the Cartesian worldview:

On the one hand, a new model of knowledge is conceived, in which the purity of the intellect is guaranteed through its ability to transcend the body. On the other hand . . . the spiritual and the corporeal are now two distinct substances which share no qualities (other than being created), permit of interaction but no merging, and are each defined precisely in opposition to the other [p. 99].

The consequence of this split is that the primary way of knowing the world in the modern era has been cognitive. "Somatic and emotional knowing, then, came to be regarded as unreliable, biased, and 'only' subjective, a mode of knowing that may be useful for our intimate, personal lives, but not for claiming knowledge about the world" (Heshusius and Ballard, 1996, p. 5).

In recent years we've seen renewed legitimization of the body. Much of this work has been located within the Women's Movement, since one means by which women have been disempowered and marginalized in our culture is by associating them with the body. In consciousness-raising groups, issues related to the regulation of their bodies and their sexuality were addressed by women as part of their reflection on their oppression. What had been considered secret and even shameful began to be the object of study and public discourse. Feminist scholars began to theorize the body as foundational for women's conceptualization of the self and the construction of knowledge (see, for example, Jaggar and Bordo, 1989). And perhaps even more important, many popular women writers began to speak honestly about their experience, including their bodily experience.

My personal favorite in the last category is Nancy Mairs (1990). She writes with refreshing frankness about her own experience with multiple sclerosis. In recounting the development of her disease, she says the hardest part has been "the fact that it has rammed my 'self' straight back into the body I had been trained to believe it could, through high-minded acts and aspirations, rise above" (p. 84). And it's a body that she talks about honestly and without shame: "No more lithe, girlish figure: my belly sags from loss of muscle tone, which also creates all kinds of intestinal disruptions, hopelessly humiliating in a society in which excretory functions remain strictly unspeakable. No more sex, either, if society had its way. . . . Fortunately, I've got a husband with a strong libido and a weak sense of social propriety" (pp. 89–90). It is precisely this willingness to give voice to what our culture tells us to shroud in silence that creates freedom, bringing the body "into the plain light of shared human experience" (p. 92).

With greater freedom to speak honestly about the body comes growing awareness of how the body is a source of knowledge. All of us, of course, have the experience of stress manifesting itself in our bodies before our heads fully understand what trouble we're in. That in itself is an example of how we tend to discount somatic knowing in our everyday experience. Polanyi (1969), in his work on tacit knowing, argues that knowledge actually begins in the body: "Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts. Such is the exceptional position of our body in the universe" (p. 147–148). In a sense we lead with our body.

Michelson (1998) offers an interesting example of this in her discussion of experiential learning. Ironically, the traditional understanding of experiential learning has been cognitive—we have an experience, then later we reflect on it. This locates the learning in the act of reflection rather than in the experience itself. Michelson argues that the body needs to be understood as the site of learning. To illustrate this she tells a story about Mary, a manager who has just been promoted to the position of team director. In their first team meeting, one of the senior men acts dismissively to the more junior women, then later claims their ideas as his own. Mary notices this, is

angered by it, but chooses not to confront the behavior in the meeting. Tense and agitated, she gets on the train to go home after work and there reflects on the experience and figures out some strategies to deal with the problem. Michelson argues that Mary's learning happened at the meeting, not on the train:

The understanding that came to Mary on the way home was not a cognitive flash of new learning, but simply the moment in which her mental processes caught up with what her body already knew. . . . Thus, her learning is understood as a moment of emotional and physical response, not a moment of dispassionate self-reflection, as the product of an embodied, social selfhood rather than of a disembodied mind [p. 226].

Michelson isn't saying that the cognitive dimension here is unimportant, but she is making a case, and I think a persuasive one, for the legitimation of somatic learning.

Heshusius and Ballard (1996) offer a different example that makes this point. They examine the stories of scholars who made the shift from positivism to interpretivism as their paradigm of research. This, of course, is a very intellectual process, one that involves examining assumptions about reality and the process of knowing, yet they and the other scholars they studied did not come to their new positions solely through the application of reason. Instead, each of them began with an inner sense, a gut sense, that they needed to change. Heshusius and Ballard describe their own experience that gave rise to their book:

When we started to consciously reflect on how we had changed our most basic beliefs, we had to acknowledge that we knew, before we could account for it intellectually, that we no longer believed in what we were doing or in what we were being taught. That is, while the dominant assumptions still made sense rationally in terms of how things are done, they no longer made sense somatically and affectively. Something *felt* wrong. Our bodies told us so [1996, p. 2].

How can this notion of somatic knowing be used in an educational context? Matthews (1998) considers this form of knowing to be "at the heart of the arts and applied culture and is at least as central to daily competence as the analytically discursive, distanced knowing that traditional schools cultivate. . . . [it is] the embodied experience of being and doing" (p. 237). He tells the story of his fifth-grade teacher, who excited her students about science by giving them lab coats and inviting them to "*become* scientists" as they did the things scientists do—apply all their senses to the world around them and try to make sense of it. It is this act of embodiment that engages students most completely in the learning process. Crowdes' (2000) sociology students studied power relations by physically engaging in several exercises and then reflecting on their somatic and

emotional responses to the experience. For example, in one exercise students were paired up and then faced each other across a line on the floor, with the objective of getting their partner on their side of the line. It was their full experiencing of pushing, arguing, resisting, and occasionally cooperating (simply trading places would make both win) that enabled them to better understand how power works. These examples suggest how powerful somatic learning can be. They also illustrate the creativity that is necessary to facilitate learning in this way.

Narrative Learning

When we think of narrative we typically think of stories, accounts of events that happened to us or to others, real or imagined. It is probably through the examination of our own stories that we can begin to understand the underlying purpose of narrative, which is to enable us to make sense of our experience. Because we are instinctive storytellers, this is a fundamental mode of meaning-making. Bruner (1986) goes so far as to claim that narrative is one of two modes of thought (the other being scientific—what he terms “paradigmatic”) and that “it deals in human . . . intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (p. 13). This function of narrative to deal with what is most human is especially obvious when we are confronted with tragedy. Riessman (1993, p. 4) quotes Isak Dinesen as saying, “All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story.” But narrative really suffuses all aspects of our lives.

Narrative is closely linked to our understanding of ourselves. As Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p. 1) argue, “Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned.” Rossiter (1999) thinks of the self as “an unfolding story” in that “as we understand the world and our experiences narratively, so also do we understand and construct the self as narrative” (p. 62). That construction is complex and ongoing, but the central task of the personal narrative is the creation of coherence. Our lives need to make sense, to have their various elements be in a reasonable relationship with one another. Linde (1993) makes the point that coherence has two elements: continuity and causality. She notes that the most common mode of continuity is the identity of the self across time. Gergen and Gergen (1988) go a bit further, seeing continuity as a process by which “the individual attempts to understand life events as systematically related. . . . [so that] one’s present identity is thus not a sudden and mysterious event, but a sensible result of a life story” (p. 19). But while there needs to be fundamental continuity of this self over time, we also must account for change in the self. An essential way of accounting for those changes is by providing adequate causality, which Linde describes as providing convincing reasons for the change. All of this implies that our personal narrative is fluid and dynamic, never fixed. In order to achieve coherence, then, that narrative must constantly be reformulated (Hermans, 1997).

The reformulation of personal narratives has a social dimension, since they are shaped by the culture in which they are embedded and through which they are given meaning. Sarbin (1993) points out that we live in “a story-shaped world” (p. 63), surrounded as we are by narratives of all kinds—myths and folklore, popular television shows and movies, social scripts and mores, religious histories and parables—all of which embody our cultural values. These provide what Sarbin calls “libraries of plots . . . [that] help us interpret our own and other people’s experience” (p.59). Linde (1993) speaks of a cultural supply of normal events, reasonable causes, and plausible explanations that are not only available to us in constructing our life stories but that also offer the legitimacy of normalcy. Personal narratives are also social because they require an audience, whether real or an imagined Other, or even the self. In that sense we can think of these stories as performances, played out in multiple ways but always referencing cultural norms.

Because of the connection between narrative and identity, stories offer enormous potential as a mode of personal change. Sometimes that change comes from identifying with a powerful story that makes sense of a person’s experience in a new way. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, provides a narrative of decline and degradation caused by alcoholism, which then becomes a narrative of restoration and new life through a structured process of behavioral and attitudinal change. I believe that the power of the story lies in the fact that alcoholics who have hit bottom can identify deeply with the first half of the story they hear at AA and, because they see others who were once like them now living a better life, can embrace the second half in the belief that their lives can change as well.

One type of narrative learning can occur through the process of therapy. While this is the underlying principle of Freudian psychoanalysis, it is a relatively new idea in psychotherapy, which has largely been shaped by the medical model of identifying problems and treating them. Narrative psychology focuses on the life story itself (Sarbin, 1986). Narratives, after all, are what clients bring to therapists; through the dialogic relationship between the therapist and the client, that narrative is reconstructed. This could involve bringing to the surface significant submerged themes within the narrative, or developing a narrative that is more coherent and unified (Polkinghorne, 1988). White and Epston (1990) focus on altering the plot form, for example, casting clients as heroes rather than victims in their stories. Josselson (1995, p. 33) speaks of this as “reframing a story in search of life plots that better serve the individual in the present.” However these reconstructions proceed, the new narratives offer clients a more satisfying way of understanding themselves and of moving into the future. “Each analysis amounts in the end to retelling a life in the past and present—and as it may be in the future. A life is re-authored as it is co-authored” (Schafer, 1992, p. xv).

A similar process occurs when a person keeps a journal or diary, though here it is a dialogue of the self with the self and not with another person. There is a long history to journaling and it is probably the most accessible form of

personal writing. I think that a large part of this popularity is connected to the privacy of the form—it is writing about the self, for the self. It's also a highly varied form whose structure is self-determined. Lukinsky (1990) sees it as a tool for introspection, powerful especially because it allows the person to withdraw from an experience in order to reflect on it, then reenter active life with a new or deeper understanding of that experience. Wiener and Rosenwald (1993), in their study of diarists, conclude that the form offers many psychological benefits, in part because “the diary is multifaceted as a ‘space’ and an ‘object’ (in the psychoanalytic sense of an other); as a process and a product; as a container, its contents, and the experience of containment” (p. 51). Among the benefits they found are the management of boundaries and emotions, and the exploration of aspects of the self (the so-called mirror function). Most significant, however, is the benefit of personal growth, or what Wiener and Rosenwald call “the mobilization of memory in the service of new living” (p. 53).

While there is no prescribed form for journals or diaries, the most well-known approach is probably Progoff's intensive journaling process. Progoff (1975) designed workshops on his method for adults who want to systematically examine their lives in order to develop a more complex understanding of themselves. He divides the journal into three sections: first, life history information, developed in multiple ways; then various dialogues with this information; and finally, a depth exploration of dreams, images, and other inner experiences as they relate to the previous two sections. These sections are not written in a linear way; instead, the journalist moves back and forth between sections, allowing each to inform the other. Progoff's approach, while not for everyone, is wonderfully creative and flexible, and engagement with it enables people to develop unexpected new insights about themselves.

Narrative, then, provides a very natural mode of learning, linked as it is to the meaning-making process. There are lots of ways this already is being used in educational settings. Learning journals, for example, can be used by learners to examine both the process and content of their learning (Kerka, 1996), and by teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching (Holt, 1994). Dominicé (2000) applies life history to learning by having students write their educational biography and thereby understand how learning has shaped who they are. Unlike somatic learning, narrative learning is something with which we're already familiar and comfortable. The challenge here is to expand our understanding of narrative and explore exactly how narrative can both facilitate and explain the learning process.

Conclusion

Adult learning happens, and some of it happens outside the boundaries that, at any particular moment, define adult education as a field. I hope that the two types of learning that I have briefly explored here will not only be of interest in themselves, but also encourage adult educators to look around

and to notice new modes of learning. The prairie is wide, the rabbit trails are many, and it is always in the best interest of the continued growth of our field to explore them. Which ones would you choose?

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