



Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults

Jane Vella

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In this updated version of her landmark book *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, celebrated adult educator Jane Vella revisits her twelve principles of dialogue education with a new theoretical perspective gleaned from the discipline of quantum physics. Vella sees the path to learning as a holistic, integrated, spiritual, and energetic process. She uses engaging, personal stories of her work in a variety of adult learning settings, in different countries and with different educational purposes, to show readers how to utilize the twelve principles in their own practice with any type of adult learner, anywhere.

Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults Details

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Brandon says

Kind of hard to read, but very informative.

Paul, says

I wish Jane Vella had a professional writer. That is the only thing that keeps this book from getting 5 stars.

But if you are a teacher at any level, I highly recommend reading this book AND PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE. I have had terrible experience being taught this material in a way completely divorced from the methods taught in the book. Praxis - action with reflection - is the key to this book.

The strongest ideas are one that Vella borrows. She acknowledges and reiterates Freire's brilliant insight that education is ALWAYS political. Especially if you don't teach politics, because then its political nature is hidden. Yes, I'm looking at you, American public education system. The question, "Who learns what as decided BY WHOM?" is crucial!

The second idea is one that is central to participatory development: the learner / beneficiary as active agent. This is also crucial to education. No one learns what they don't care about, unless the external incentive is big enough. As Dewey forecast 100+ years ago, education is either relevant or we bribe / force people to learn it or we make it so easy and entertaining that it takes no effort.

Oh yeah, it also has some crazy weird stuff about quantum physics. Just ignore that part. Everybody is allowed to be a little crazy. And those ideas (if you erase the quantum part) are still good.

Here are a few of my favorite quotes.

Julius Nyerere's description is important: "Globalization is like a boxing match, where a huge professional boxer faces a small amateur, and the umpire disappears." (p.97)

It is our job to collate and organize the responses of the groups when their tasks are completed. During this collation there is often occasion for our responses: linking one point with another, showing significant differences in points of view, sharing related experiences from similar groups, making corrections where the perception of learners is distorted. While learners enjoy this commentary, teachers must realize that this is not the only learning time. Students have been learning throughout the task. If our commentary, coming from another cultural perspective, does not seem reasonable to them, they will object to it or question it. Their objections are a vital part of the dialogue, clarifying both the materials and the tasks. It is important for the teacher to ask the open question, What are your questions about this synthesis? (p.61)

Paulo Freire in the early 1970s spoke of "problem-posing education" (1972, p. 74). This was a big step forward from a monologue that offered answers before questions were named.

A relationship of mutual respect between teacher and learner is often cited as the most important motivator

of adult learners (p.227)

Open dialogue can readily be structured in any event: teaching a complex concept, practicing a skill, or learning an attitude. Concepts can be presented as open systems—as the hypotheses they actually are—and the adult learner can be invited to examine, edit, and add to them from their experience and unique context and do something with them through learning tasks. (p.105)

It was the German philosopher Hegel who spoke against perceiving human beings as objects and not as they truly are, subjects—decision makers—in their own lives. He was writing in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, when men were considered “hands” on the assembly line. The idea of being subject of one’s own life is a powerful one

We Americans were known in Nepal as “the quick ones,” apparently famous for wanting to achieve more than is possible or desirable in a given time. (p.143)

Without engagement there is no learning. We know this from our own learning experience. The protocols of formal learning, however, put the burden of engagement on the learners. Their response to a formal lecture is entirely up to them. In dialogue education we design programs based on a competent learning needs and resources assessment that is engaging. If we accept that we can set learning tasks as open questions put to a small group with the materials and resources they need to respond, we know how to engage learners. All the successful educational programs you have designed, taught, and celebrated in your life were those in which learners were deeply engaged. (p.235)

Without reinforcement, without a sequence of continued learning activities and a research agenda on the epistemology, without the stimulation of appropriate rewards and motivation, professionals will go back to teaching the way they were taught (p.222)

Jeff Burkett says

The title contains an important lesson: that listening and teaching are related; that using what is called 'dialogue education' takes some work and thoughtfulness but is absolutely worth it for the impact and quality in teaching that results.

Unfortunately this book (the 'blue' Vella book) falls far short of being a well-designed and executed learning experience. It is mostly her telling of various educational opportunities around the globe, and while the actions are laudable, the narrative comes off sounding conceited. Each chapter/story is supposed to illustrate a specific point about dialogue education, but the learning points often seem forced or misplaced.

Dialogue education has a lot to offer, but if you are an educator, the place to go to learn about it is the much better organized and written 'yellow' Vella book: 'On Teaching and Learning.' That book also at least includes a modicum of actual research/data which is distinctly lacking in the blue book (aside from a few favorite authors she liked to quote). Perhaps an even better book, and with a much firmer evidence-base, is 'How Learning Works' by Ambrose et al. which I'd absolutely recommend for an educators.

A few worthwhile quotes:

- "The demand for testing and competency-based education can be met, not through more severe tests, but

- through designs of accountable learning"
- "In adult learning accountability is mutual"
- "How can we offer adult learners as many opportunities for choice as possible... Don't ever do what the learner can do; don't ever decide what the learner can decide....be careful not to steal that learning opportunity from the adult learner"
- "learners learn far more (or less) than we teach"

For reference, the 12 principles of adult learning and dialogue education discussed: needs assessment, safety, sound relationships, sequence and reinforcement, praxis, respect for learners, ideas/feelings/actions, immediacy, clear roles, teamwork, engagement, accountability.

Shari says

This is a great book for anyone working with adult learners. Vella's background is in corporate training specifically, and she has experience working all over the world, even with people whose language she doesn't speak. Her 12 principles for dialogue education are helpful, useful, and fully described. I expect to return to this book again and again.

Kimberlee says

I love Jane. Her insight into teaching is invaluable. She is not only a wonderful author, she is also a dear friend.

Peter Johnson says

Sorry, but Jane Vella is no linguist. "Praxis" is NOT a Greek word meaning action with reflection. She has many other failures with language. However, as an educator, I believe she does well and provides practical help that has value. Some of this stuff just helps you think differently about teaching, and that is a plus.

Stan says

Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach is a great book on adult education, specifically focused on teacher skills and course content preparation.

The author spreads her life experiences in adult education in many countries throughout this book to highlight specific concepts and to show the inter-relatedness of the concepts.

In the end, it is possible to view the concepts together in an integrated manner. Excellent presentation of the material!

If you teach adults in any venue, applying this book should help you improve what you offer. Enjoy!

John Levasseur says

Vella, J. (2002). Learning to listen learning to teach the power of dialog in educating adults [Kindle] (2nd ed.).

Text Purpose:

The purpose of Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialog in Adult Education by Dr. Jane Vella (Vella, 2002) is to promote dialog education as a method for andragogy; andragogy is the art and science of teaching adults (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Dr. Vella makes it clear that her fundamental assumption is adult learning happens best through dialog (Vella, 2002). The word dialog has a root meaning of the words between us these words express perceptions of the world, allow for communication and share observations (Vella, 2002). Through dialog in adult education both teachers and students are equally engaged and connected to the learning process in terms of shared observations, perceptions, and communication (Vella, n.d.). As a means for dialog education Dr. Vella in her book (Vella, 2002), proposes 12 principles for adult education in association with teaching adults via dialog. These principles include: an assessment of students' needs, the creation of an environment of safety, the development of sound relationships, the design of an appropriate learning sequence that ensures reinforcement of content, the incorporation of consistent reflective action known as praxis, the respect for learners as decision makers, the union of the three learning domains of ideas, feelings, and actions to engage cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of the learner, the need for immediacy in the application of knowledge and skills acquired to accomplish genuine tasks, the determination and communication of clear roles, the fostering of teamwork and collaboration, the engagement of all participants in the learning community, and lastly, accountability for individuals and participants in the learning community (Vella, 2002). Dr. Vella demonstrates these principles of dialog education with stories and experiences from her career as a teacher in different countries across the globe. An example of Vella's storytelling as a means to communicate examples of her 12 principles deals with the principle of creating a safe environment for all participants (Vella, 2002). The story of a Muslim entrepreneur in Tanzania who was offered a position in a Catholic rural development project and was opposed and ostracized by Tanzanian Catholic authorities illuminates the need to develop a safe sense of community in adult education settings (Vella, 2002). Dialog education, in Vella's viewpoint based on her worldwide experiences, not only leads to improved learning but ultimately produces a more peaceful world; the tagline for Dr. Vella's website reads: "The means is dialog, the end is learning, the purpose is peace." (Vella, n.d.). Vella enhances her ideas on adult education with allusions to quantum thinking in the text (Vella, 2002); quantum thinking, which is also referred to as the new science, incorporates explanations of twentieth century physics into an understanding of human interactions and to the social sciences (Vella, 2002).

Author's Background and Credentials:

In 1978, Jane Vella received her doctorate in education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (Vella, 2002). Dr. Vella is an experienced global educator, having taught on five continents and some 40 countries during her career. Dr. Vella is also the founder of Global Partners in Learning, a company dedicated to assisting and coaching adult educators worldwide in how to use dialog in adult education (Vella, n.d.). As a consequence of her dedication to the craft of teaching Dr. Vella is a mentor for hundreds of educators (Vella, n.d.). Dr. Vella's ideas on dialog education blossom in her work at Global Partners in Learning and in her experiences around the globe; however, they grow out of the work of many adult education scholars, particularly from the work of Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire (Vella, n.d.).

Tamara Gantt says

I'm reading this now, and I'm on Chapter 8, "Praxis: Turning Practice into Action and Reflection." As a teacher, I need to explore new ways to teach adults. Praxis, as the writer explains, is a Greek word that means 'action with reflection.' "It is doing with built-in reflection" (115).

Reflection is a word that we use often in education, but we may not fully appreciate the concept of teaching people to think about what they are doing while they are doing it. It may seem that people would do this naturally, but that's not always the case. As Vella notes, "Engaged learners do learning tasks USING new content and then do further learning tasks to REFLECT on what they have completed" (115) --- emphasis mine.

Today when I was going over verb tenses, my class and I used our text and a website for basic understanding of a couple of tenses. Then they did exercises using this content together in small groups. We went over the answers, and then I used a couple of videos to underscore what we had learned and what still needed to be learned: for example, irregular verbs. The learner pretty much has to memorize the forms of irregular verbs such as bring, brought, brought, which does not follow the same pattern as sing, sang, sung, or ring, rang, rung. I recommended that my students use the music they regularly listen to and start to write down partial lyrics that use verbs in different tenses, especially but not exclusively nonstandard English. We worked with a song in which the singer says, "It be on," and determined as a group that the meaning is, "We are ready to begin," or "We are ready to fight."

This is a good example of learning and then reflecting. I plan to use more of this type of activity in my classes with adults.

Donna says

By listening and responding to the learner, by respecting what the learner brings to the conversation, those who facilitate adult learning can be more effective. And isn't that the point?

Tammy says

Just ordered 2/7/10 off ebay! Total price=\$23.00

Jennifer says

I read this in the hopes that it would help with training volunteers, and I think it did! If nothing else there are interesting stories in it from all over the world. And the general concept, that adults actually know already what they would like to learn and can tell you what that is, should be a no-brainer but is so potentially powerful.

Jade Lauron says

I hate the fact that everyone wants to dress up perfectly good information with pseudoscience just to make it sound even better than it is. This author is in love with the word "quantum" but what she really means is "holistic" and instead of saying "quantum thinking" she should be saying things like "holistic sensory engagement" or "holistic engagement" or even "dynamic approach". Just because you call a thing "quantum" and give a sloppy analogy regarding quantum and Newtonian physics at the beginning of the book, doesn't make your approach scientific.

That said, there is a wealth of good information shoved into this book, however I got the sense that the author has problems with strict organization (maybe that's the true difference between the her approach and the rest). In fact, despite the listed "12 key points" which were supposed to be represented anecdotally, I felt each exposition to be rather unclear. Instead, there is wisdom thrust helter-skelter amidst the pages, so much knowledge it practically leaks out everywhere tangentially--I would not be surprised to learn that the writer suffers from a touch of ADD.

John Henry says

I HAVE SEVERAL PROACTIVE QUESTIONS:

What I would like to know from this book that will help me in my ministry?

1. How can I adopt principles of Vella's dialogue education and quantum thinking?

The WWW, 'Who needs What and defined by Whom', is a key assessment principle that I want to adopt in all of our programs. To do that I believe I need to be intentional on a personal level first. I need to keep a journal as I pray for individuals in my team and network around the world. In my journal I need to write a WWW assessment for the individuals and their projects. As I take on projects with and for others I need to have this principle become a part of my regular practice.

2. Which of the quantum thinking principles have I already practiced and how can I improve on them?

The Field Ministry Internship program is a serving/learning outreach project for university student teams integrating their field of study with ministries cross-culturally. Vella's book referred to so many things that I have been attempting to do since 1989. For example, to help students feel 'safe' we form small teams of 4 to 7. During the first few days in the host country, we typically send small teams out on a 'scavenger hunt' in order to learn how to get around with some measure of independence within the safety of their small group. We send small teams to integrate well as a short-term team on a long-term field project. In this way, the students also gain a greater level of participation in the serving/learning process. The students design their own field projects on site as they assess the needs of the long-term personnel and projects they are serving.

I can see how we practice a learning needs assessment, but we do not involve the students enough. We are concerned for safety in the learning process, but I can see that some additional structure and demonstration of concern for the students learning process will raise the energy level and create an environment where

learning can take place even when there is much uncertainty. We have deliberately sequenced the program from Orientation to Cultural Awareness to Ministry to Debriefing, but we need to be more deliberate about an Assessment Phase before the Ministry Phase begins. To date it has been assumed by the leadership, but students have had little understanding of that important phase. To show more respect for the students/learners, we need to document the Assessment Phase. By doing so we will be showing more respect to the learners giving them more opportunity to participate and take responsibility to decide.

This book is providing a guideline for a full team leader training program for FMI. I am very excited about the potential increase in skills that our team leaders can develop through a week-long seminar for FMI team leadership.

3. Do any personal or ministry leadership experiences come to mind as I read this book? Which ones? Why?

The FMI team to Albania in 1997 comes to mind because we consulted with the local leadership a year in advance to send a health and education team to the Pogradec region to research the needs of handicapped children and their families. We narrowed the research to 5 mountain villages along the Macedonian border. The following year, the student team created an assessment tool by visiting with the director of the national handicapped school in Tirane and the chief pediatrician in Pogradec. The participation of our students in the process of creating the assessment tool helped them to take responsibility in their learning process and the results of the research that was done as they visited five villages, 100 homes, to interview the handicapped children and their parents. They found that 40% of the children with severe handicaps were directly linked to a cultural practice of ‘baby-wrapping’. The students compiled the data, wrote a report, and presented their research to the director and the chief pediatrician before we returned home.

My role definition on summer teams of interns has always been the director, but during the Orientation Phase that role has always quickly moved to the background in order to encourage the students to have full participation and responsibility for their learning experience. In 1991 in Guatemala, one of our teams was working the medical clinic at the city dump community. Annette, a pre-med student intern, was the most fluent Spanish speaker on the team. The FMI team leader, a nurse, depended on her to help in the clinic. But Annette was also a very dominant personality. I heard from some of the other team members that she was being very ‘bossy’ in the clinic. I decided to visit. When I walked in the door I could see she was the ‘in charge’ person. The nurse, team leader, was faithfully ministering to patients and mentoring the students. But it was Annette who was giving everyone ‘orders’. She handed me a broom and told me to go sweep. I did. But I also prayed. I asked the Lord what is the right response to Annette. I could have asserted my ‘role’ and told her to stop ordering people around. But God spoke to me with a simple phrase, “She has a leadership gift, but she is not using my gift my way.” I spoke to her privately about God’s kind affirmation and admonition. I said, “God wants you to use your gift to release the gifts in the other members of your team. Can you do that?” She responded positively and the team was transformed. My role was not a directive teacher, but a facilitator in the learning process.

4. What areas of specific training do I most need in light of Vella’s book?

As I read the book I was challenged to intentionally adopt several principles that I generally understand. The new thing is the ‘quantum’ concept that the whole is greater than the sum. If I can personally learn these principles and intentionally put them into practice, there will be a quantum leap of energy release in the teaching/learning experiences that make up most of my leadership role. For example, I need to encourage my staff to participate in the process of writing their own job descriptions. I need to be more effective at listening and giving open questions, especially in the teachings I give. Those open questions need to be put to the ‘safe’ environment of small groups. I have practiced this sort of thing at some level, but I see I need to be more intentional. For example, I have asked the question, “What was your best learning experience?”

Sometimes, but not always, I send the participants to small group to discuss the question. I need to be more effective at defining learning tasks and follow through on them so that the participants truly participate in the learning process.

SUMMARY

I have created a matrix grid in my journal for follow up. I've listed Vella's 7 steps for course design. The key words, RESPECT and ENERGY, are at the top of the list to encourage me to focus my attention on these key values for the adult learners. I have placed column on the page for each of the 10 different programs I am leading or developing. For each of the seven steps I am considering the different approaches for each of the different programs, depending on the participants, the outcomes, the context, the content, and how learning can be measured and sequenced for greatest effectiveness. I'm expecting quantum changes in all of our programs.
