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Doing Business with an Educator's Heart - Transforming Adult Teaching and Learning

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Barbara Bee

Doing Business with an Educator's Heart – Transforming Adult Teaching and Learning

The author presents first-hand and personal accounts of what popular education looks like in a classroom. Barbara Bee has had over 30 years teaching experience in adult education programs with poor and disadvantaged learners. She describes how teaching in the 1970s and 1980s was so different to today. Back then teachers were encouraged to negotiate curriculum with students. And Barbara is regarded as one of the leading Australian practitioners in that time who drew inspiration from Paulo Freire. But today teachers are expected to adhere to a tightly prescribed set of curriculum and assessment guidelines.

Introduction

I have been a “Technical and Further Education” (TAFE) teacher and adult educator for most of my professional life. At present I work in Outreach, the community arm of TAFE at Sydney Institute. Currently, I am undertaking doctoral research about emancipatory teaching and learning possibilities in adult education and more particularly in “Technical and Further Education New South Wales” (TAFENSW) equity programs for disadvantaged learners. I began academic research late in life so I have found the role of researcher frustrating. I have had a lot of difficulty finding the “right” voice and language for academic discourse. I simply could not find an adequate narrative articulation and thus I often felt silenced and insufficient when I had to write formally. However, it is relevant to acknowledge, describe, interrogate and interpret my long and varied experience as a teacher and practitioner. The way I have developed my philosophy and practice is indeed integral to my research and might be of value to other practitioners and teacher educators, too. Thus it seems to be important to include my biography as part of my research, as an element of my own “tales from the field” (van Maanen 1988, in Waterhouse 2004, 50).

In preparing this article Peter Waterhouse's research about the importance of story-telling in professional practice has proved both inspiring and thought provoking (cf. Waterhouse 2004). He describes the inhibiting effects of the human capital agenda on literacy teaching and the subsequent curtailing of personal growth and individuality except to the extent that they serve the interests of the workplace (cf. Waterhouse 2004, 57). But what about voices and narratives which validate and give expression of knowledge and experience outside the economy?

He tells of and reflects on his own personal journey both as a teacher and a researcher including an account of the first teacher who inspired him. Waterhouse waxes

lyrically and says the teacher “gave me wings” (Waterhouse 2004, 51). He describes this inspirational teacher, Mr. C., as a “passionate professional”. He reflects that his experience with Mr. C. and other significant teachers drew his attention to the crucial importance of the teacher’s role:

My research revealed the influence of teachers who embody their curriculum, they become their stories. Their passion, their love of their discipline or vocation, inspires and permeates their teaching and their students. In a very fundamental sense, we teach who we are (Waterhouse 2004, 52).

Those words “we teach who we are” touched a nerve. Nowadays the only forms of knowledge being valued in adult education seem to be those having to do with informational technology and workplace skills. Thus I had to ask myself to what extent I still have the freedom to teach “who I am”. Increasingly it feels more and more as if I am being constrained to teach what I am not. This stifles my ability and freedom to make the classroom a place of passionate possibility for me or my students.

For some time now I have been deeply troubled by the undercutting of the professional role of teachers generally, but more specifically in relation to my experience in technical education equity programs where training is the basis of the curriculum.

By means of breaking education into units and modules of competency I am expected to deliver an insitutional version of what is relevant knowledge. The spaces and places for celebrating and narrating rich traditions, narratives, stories, both teachers’ and students’ grow fewer and fewer.

So I ask whose voices are being heard if not ours as experienced professionals who know the art and science of teaching and remain committed to it. Equally important and laying aside the issue of how the neo-conservatives captured the educational agenda with so little opposition or resistance, I want to speak about what potential there remains for teachers and adult educators to take back control of the classroom so that it becomes once again “a location of possibility, of transgression” (Hooks 1993) where individual and social justice issues are canvassed and woven into the curriculum.

I want to consider what I believe should lie at the heart of our professional, passionate teaching practice and first of all I want to tell two stories from my own experience. I hope my stories convey something of the rich and complex relationship between teacher and student co-joined in the search for meaningful knowledge and experience which has the ability to transform a life and maybe challenge inequality, too.

Tales from the field – Part one

P. told me he not only wants, but *must* learn to read. He was always deeply ashamed and embarrassed when his tiny grand-daughter climbed into his lap and commanded: “Read story Hairy Pop!” (He is an older man with long white hair and beard.)

P. was barely literate and could not read the actual words in a book. So he had to guess what the story is about aided by clues from the illustrations on each page. He told me the story of an orphaned life, a life without formal schooling and of subterfuge in disguising his problem. Whatever his academic deficits are – what I also picked up is his courage and resilience in the face of overwhelming odds and a life well lived. In no way he sees himself as a victim.

After a lengthy period of tuition including extra teaching-time P. finally read aloud to me. Gradually he began to make the connections with words, sounds and letters; in other words: he began to read, slowly at first, but with time more fluently and coherently. As Christmas approached we both were confident he would be able to read and not just guess a story to his grandchild.

When he returned to class after the long TAFE holiday and I asked him how it all went, his smile said it all. P. has always listened to the radio, and he managed to make sense of the newspaper and dealt with official forms and shopping tasks – things literate people take for granted but which for P. have always been a trial and stressful. He never wanted to read for vocational purposes but rather because he wanted to please his family and more specifically his grandchild. In addition there is a marked change in how he views himself in relation to the world generally because now he can take it on its own terms instead of always feeling behind and excluded from aspects of living that others took for granted.

His new found skill expanded his view and knowledge of the world and the community issues in which he was interested, so for this adult learner teaching gave him social benefit and self confidence. No learning outcome boxes were ticked and flicked, no reading levels were assigned and no assessments were made for auditing purposes. Neither was P. subject to a short term, quick-fix course for which payment was extracted for tuition.

As his teacher, I learned as much from the dignity of P.'s life experiences as he took from me in the shared experience of working together. P. took back control of his life and rewrote its story as both more hopeful and useful to society – he gained in the process what another passionate adult educator, Jane Thompson, labelled “really useful knowledge” (Thompson 1977, 147) which both expanded and extended P.'s understanding and actions.

Tales from the field – Part two

M. was referred by Centrelink to my literacy class for one-to-one tuition in resume writing and interview techniques because he was unsuccessful at various job interviews he had attended. He was an immigrant from central Africa where he had acquired rudimentary reading and numeracy skills in a village school several kilometres from his own village and to which he walked each day, otherwise he had no other formal education.

When I first questioned him about his situation and needs M. was clearly both upset and frustrated. But his state of mind was obviously caused by his personal circumstances and his lack of meaningful work. He told of being separated from his wife and the difficult relationship he had with his primary school daughter who was born in Australia and who gave him a hard time because he could not afford to buy her the things she needed for school or give her outings and presents like the other girls in her class were used to. He expressed deep shame about this.

I assumed the cause of M.'s difficulties did not lay only in his lack of basic workplace skills, but was related to the wider Australian economy. Jobs, even for skilled workers, let alone unskilled ones, were shifting off-shore where labour costs were cheaper. Also, as I suspected and M. confirmed, the colour of his skin had resulted in some negative reactions when he was sent by his case manager for job interviews. He had lost count of the number of times a position "had just been filled" or "was no longer available" when he came face to face with prospective employers.

I am relating M.'s story in detail because it illustrates the dilemma of teachers in technical education who work with economically and educationally deprived adult learners like M. We have to ask ourselves: Do we ally with the system which victimises and blames individuals for their circumstances, or do we side with the person and see the wider social justice ramifications? If the former, then it is legitimate for teachers to teach discrete units of competency in subjects such as resume writing, interview and job seeking skills as if these would ultimately lead to find a niche in the market place – even though in an ailing global economy this is less and less likely and so we teachers become complicit in peddling false promises and hopes. In M.'s case, he decided my actions for me because one day he began to weep and said he couldn't go on and that he believed what we were doing wouldn't get him work. My choice became clear at that point and I confessed I thought his judgment was correct.

If all the textbooks and curricula competency units dedicated to job search skills and attitudes were successful, unemployed students wouldn't need to return to the classroom for another dose of formal tuition in these areas. But the truth is that unemployment is not just a matter of under-skilled (or over-skilled) people learning how to meet the demands of either workplace or TAFE. M. and I discussed how I could usefully help him to "get out from under" and how to strengthen his capacity rather than undermine it by emphasising his failures. I thought what we were being required to study in class was a complete waste of time and told him so. Instead we made a plan whereby he would use his time as well as his old bicycle to regularly visit every potential work site in his neighbourhood to ask if there were any job vacancies. I told him to expect racial discrimination in some instances, but that he had to learn to tough it out rather than let it demoralise him and that if he needed a testimonial if he was offered even casual work he was to give my name as a referee and ask the employer to call me and I would speak on his behalf. (I knew that with so few jobs and so many applicants, most employers simply did not bother to wade through hundreds of writ-

ten applications no matter how professionally or skilfully prepared and expressed.) I advised M. to keep his appointments with his case manager so that he could continue to get the dole. But I also suggested that he should explain that he and I had a new contract to help him find work and field interviews. I suggested to M. that he should give his tutorials with me a miss for a little while and save the much needed train fare but to keep me informed of any developments and stay in contact.

Finally I affirmed M.'s efforts to help himself and reinforced his courage in the face of overwhelming odds. I hoped he would have a different and more hopeful story to tell me before long, but M. needed to believe he could achieve his goal despite enormous odds. As with P. it was a case of playing to his strengths rather than his deficits in the eyes of the system. We must empower students like M. so that they can perceive themselves differently from how society or the system casts them. We have to teach them to put a different slant on their adverse circumstances.

M. was desperately battling to make a better life for himself as well as fulfil his responsibilities to his family. I saw my role as his teacher to ally with him rather than collaborate with the system which was undermining him, albeit unintentionally.

Critical Pedagogy and Passionate Teaching

When I became a TAFE teacher in the mid-seventies it was with the Outreach Program whose fine achievements I hoped to document and celebrate as part of my doctoral thesis. Later I moved to the Women's Co-ordination Unit and thence to literacy teaching. All these initiatives came under the general heading of Special Programs, because they were largely funded through federal government grants under the equal educational access and opportunity banner. What I recalled about my teaching role in the 1970s and 1980s was the freedom and responsibility of negotiating course content with mature age students within the broad parameters of what they came to TAFE to study. Much of my work happened outside of the formal classroom and in community centres.

Often and in the absence of suitable teaching resources, I designed my own thoughts about what students might need and want to know and practise. There were many opportunities for staff development and support from Head Office Staff. Programs, particularly in Outreach, were always planned and co-ordinated in partnership with community groups who requested them and were conducted off campus.

Courses were free and open to all who could benefit from them and in keeping with the political and social reforms of that era there was nearly always a distinctly radical edge to one's teaching. Thus although the women's return to work programs were about creating individual vocational opportunities and pathways for women wishing to return to work or further study, the course content included questions and issues about the structural barriers to women's lives and work which some students feared were intended as a crash course in Feminism. (And why indeed not? I would challenge my classes.)

But what I recall the most about those times were the heated debates about the purposes and politics of education. Now there seems to be little common debate outside the walls of the Academy, edicts have replaced consensus decision making around important educational matters and instead what we debate are edicts from above about more cutbacks or when the auditors will next visit to check the records.

Neo-liberal influences in education

Rick Flowers (personal communication, 2008) has expressed his concern about the little resistance against the instance he describes as the “rampant neo-liberal agenda” in both technical and further education. One indicator of this he claims, is the language, beliefs and policy developments that are taken for granted, common sense and beyond question including the following assumptions:

- Education agencies and TAFE colleges are providers of training as distinct from further education.
- Credentialed learning is more important than non-credentialed learning despite its valuable outcomes.
- Competency-based outcomes outweigh the learning journey.
- Individual learning competencies are more important than collective outcomes such as partnerships with community organisations, with the exception of the Outreach programs.
- Teachers are accountable to auditors and must report on the minutiae of assessment to ensure portability, accountability and portfolio development of students.
- Worthwhile learning is that which “users”, “clients” “customers” pay for as distinct from a well-resourced public sector.
- Productive relationships between students should be competitive to foster striving for high marks.
- Adult education will become more relevant with more user-payers and exposure to commercial market competition. This leads to shorter courses and greater recognition of prior learning, in strong contrast to a public-sector system that is more interested in improving quality of life than satisfying the hip pocket.
- Productive relationships between staff in different TAFE institutes and colleges tend to become less possible when there is competition for limited funding and resources.
- Education for schools is seen as more important than adult education and this justifies the withdrawal of public support for adult education.
- Universities educate while TAFE’s business is training.
- Lifelong learning has come to mean access to training for work as opposed to learning for life.
- Relationships between university programs involved in TAFE teacher development are competitive as opposed to co-operative.

Rick Flowers concludes that the above statements should be named for what they are – as ideological beliefs that underpin the expansion of a market-driven as opposed to a public-sector and community-based education system (personal communication with Flowers 2008).

Giving the story a different ending

In her powerfully eloquent prose Jane Thompson reminds us that the history of social change is not simply determined by structural conditions or by charismatic leaders and individuals but rather

the history of social movements is a history of people operating in the cracks of superstructures. Of using the energies generated at the margins of systems and organisation. Of exercising considerable imagination, critical thinking, subversion and undutiful behaviour to de-stabilise and de-construct the authority of the inevitable. All of them ways of “taking back control” based on the inter-relationship between consciousness and courage, between theory and practice. Taking back control and joining with others in collective action to achieve change is at the root of concepts like participation and democracy. It finds its impetus in human agency and can transform people's lives. As well as transforming views about oneself (Thompson 1997, 146).

Although as I approach what I suppose can be called the twilight of my teaching career, I confess the ending of my story could be one of resignation and defeat in the face of what looks like the dismantling through short term expediency of a former great public technical education institution which has transformed the lives of individuals, served community interests and demonstrated in its philosophy and practices a strong commitment to social justice and equal opportunity. Today “doing business” seems to be its main aim for the 21st century.

But I take heart from Thompson's words and her reminder that when faced with what seems like the inevitable, there are places and spaces to defy and subvert the system, especially in the classroom where you can teach by example the concept of education as the practice of freedom (cf. Freire 1972) and where you can look for opportunities to teach students still the art and practice of critical thinking through the interpretation and analysis of the experiences they bring to the classroom.

I heard a teacher tell recently how she structures her English communication skills classes to include her young students' accounts of how they fell foul of the law. Their stories have been made into reading primers through which they are able to better understand the consequences of their behaviour on others. These resources for useful knowledge go well beyond pro-forma units of competency with the workplace in mind and are a good example of a teacher taking back control of the educational

agenda while at the same time helping her students to take better control of their lives and possibly frame them more positively.

Tales from the field – Part three

During 2007, I enrolled in the Adult Learning and Teaching (ALT) program a woman who lived in a public housing estate which Outreach supports with partnerships and programs. A condition of entry as a mature age student to the course is a successful completion of a certain module which includes sufficient reading, discussion and three short pieces of writing on an educational topic of their choice, plus one longer essay. During the course at TAFE they are given support for their essay writing skills and they are not graded. Even so, fears about formal essay writing vex the students as much as they do me at the doctoral level. One day I found the woman J. in tears in my office because she had tried to write her final essay and found no matter how hard she tried – she was blocked. (You know the feeling, I am sure!)

I knew this student's life story and what she has to contend with in seeking an education for herself. I also knew from her participation in class that she had an excellent mind and that she wanted to work in the women's policy area. Thus I suggested her to write an open letter to her local state member giving reasons why funding to the TAFE women's studies' programs should be maintained. One week later an eloquent, heartfelt, passionate letter in defence of education for women in deprived situations landed on my desk. I don't have the space to reprint the letter here, but suffice it to say that the student sent the letter to her local Member who subsequently asked the new Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, to read and take note of it.

I end this paper with an extract from the letter. She is now a student at UTS and is struggling to continue because of the situation at home, but she tells me her children are proud of her and that helps her to persevere. She describes the impact the ALT bridging course had on her perception of herself:

I found that as I progressed through the course things that I had often felt and thought were validated and my thoughts and opinions were valued. Those years of oppression and abuse had only served to quell my spirit but the course renewed my zest for life, my belief in myself and my desire to learn and to better myself. It brought out the wealth of knowledge that I had acquired throughout my life which had lain dormant for so long.

Does this adult learner's story speak to you as loudly and as clearly as it speaks to me? And does her story move you as it moves me with implications for life transformational potential she hints at in her letter and of her dawning belief in her own ability and self-knowledge?

So, despite the assaults of the neo-liberal lobby in TAFE with its flawed conceptions of adult teaching and learning, I remain passionately committed to teaching and

learning from the lives and experiences of my students using their voices and stories as the foundation for transformative and emancipatory education and making the classroom a place, space and a location of possibility through our collaboration learning and enquiry.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and teacher killed by the Nazis, once observed that the relationship between teacher and learner could be described in two ways: I-Thou meaning an equal meeting of minds and respect, or I-It whereby the relationship is one of dominance and where the teacher is superior to the student in knowledge and life experience.

In a roundabout way Bonhoeffer was echoing Freire's model of conscientization and both are implying, that education should lead to really useful knowledge. Therefore teachers and students must become engaged in a mutual enquiry about their world and the world at large with all its complexities and possibilities. We teachers indeed teach who we are and therein lies the potential for oppression or freedom, stultifying knowledge or knowledge which changes the world and those we are privileged to teach.

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