

Reflections on Learning and Legacy

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Elders are wonderful. With the leisure time associated with living in long term care, elders make exceptional learners, bringing a wealth of life experience and wisdom to the learning environment. Typically, health care language does not usually include the words "learning or educational opportunities" when referring to elders. Consequently, leisure opportunities for elders can often be limited to programs of a social or entertainment nature.

From the unusual point of view of having been an educator of frail elders residing in the long term care health system over 25 years, my perspective on student learning arises from the underlying question, "What are old people for?" This question, posed by American essayist Wendell Berry, was later adopted by Bill Thomas, originator and author of the Eden Alternative model of nursing home care. Contrary to the traditional declinist model of aging, Thomas identifies the state of elderhood as a distinct and separate state of being from adulthood characterized by its unique leadership role in the leaving of legacy to future generations.

In validating and honouring elders and the state of elderhood, experience has taught the value of student learning that is firmly grounded in the concepts of teaching with 'hospitality' (Bennett, 2000) and a capacity for 'connectedness' (Palmer, 1998). The inner work of teaching, we as teachers choose to undertake, comes from a place of identity and integrity, creating covenantal communities of learning where teachers become facilitators of their own and their students' learning. Teaching with these concepts in mind facilitates a relational learning environment that welcomes elder life experience, expertise and wisdom, truly good news for those relegated to life in the health care system. The resulting reinforced self-esteem, new social networks and renewed feelings of empowerment experienced in such learning environments are critical to furthering health care goals of elder quality of life and wellness. These outcomes also have the potential to ease the experiences of loss and consequent trauma that often go hand in hand with the transition to life in long term care. In addition, the concepts of connectedness and hospitality are essential elements in establishing a 'reflective practice' (Brookfield, 1995) that encourages teachers to explore teaching practice in new and dynamic ways in support of student learning.

Learning opportunities are further maximized among a frail elder population through respect for individual 'narrative' or 'identity' (Postman, 1996) and accommodation of a diversity of learning styles and needs. Approaches such as 'brain-based learning' address the realities of cognitive injury associated with aging. In addition the model of 'situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger) facilitates the welcome of "newcomers" by "old timers" into the formal or informal learning environment. And finally, an appreciation for a Vygotskian developmental model that identifies learning and development as inter-related and therefore socio-cultural in nature further supports the importance of opportunities for shared endeavours, communal discourse and active learning throughout life.

To summarize these reflections, intellectual inquiry into the scholarship of teaching and learning is well advocated to include even the frailest of elders in the words of Psychologist Jerome Bruner-

"It is unquestionably the function of education to enable people, individual human beings, to operate at their fullest potential, to equip them with the tools and the sense of opportunity to use their wits, skills and passions to the fullest."

In the day to day reality of life in long term care and in context of teaching and learning the question remains "what are old people for?"

References

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