

Principles of adult learning, and possible implications for curricular design

(expanded from *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, Jane Vella, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.)

Vella's twelve principles

1. "Needs assessment": "Learners need to participate in naming what it is to be learned," (Vella, 1994, p. 3 and following).

How do you diagnose what your students need to learn? To what extent do they participate in that process consciously and self-reflexively? How flexible is your syllabus, your institution's curriculum? What kinds of support are in place for students whose needs are different from, or more extensive than, your expectations?

Tools: asking students to write and later revise learning goals, pre-tests, opening/orienting conversations, short (one page) essays turned in before a discussion, online discussions that take place prior to a class meeting, half page check-in sheets following lectures...

2. "Safety": People need safe environments in which to trust themselves to dialogue, particularly if that dialogue has transformation as any part of its intentionality.

What is your own definition of a "safe" environment? How might you figure out what that means for your students? Consider some of the ways in which safety might not be possible for all of your students (students who are marginalized, issues that are tension creating, physical environments that are hazardous, institutional/denominational pressures, etc.) What can you do when safety is not possible?

Tools: dyad (2-person) and small group discussions, journaling assignments, asynchronous online discussion formats, open discussion of power structures, consensus-derived rules for conversation, confidentiality, support for networking and conversation partners outside of the immediate context...

3. "Sound relationship": "Friendship, but not dependency, fun without trivialization of learning, dialogue between men and women who consider themselves peers" (1994, p. 65) is Vella's definition of "sound relationship."

What is your own definition of “sound relationship”? How do your theological commitments enter into that definition? How does that definition influence the teaching/learning environment in your context? What does “fun” look like in your teaching setting?

Tools: clear expectations stated from the beginning, significant time spent on introductions, classroom (or environment) structures that promote collegial relationships, support for multiple styles of participation (see above), “texts” (eg. the use of media such as films, music, rituals, and so on) that come from a broad variety of places and allow for different members of a class to experience ease as cultural interpreters and other members to experience dis-ease or unfamiliarity, specific assignments that work on expanding and maturing understandings of relationality...

4. “Sequence and reinforcement”: Vella writes that it’s important to begin at the beginning, to “move from small to big, slow to fast, easy to hard” (1994, p. 80).

Where does this class fit into your institution's curriculum? What elements of your subject do you need to explore first as preparation for later materials (eg. learning the Greek alphabet in preparation for learning Greek)? Remember that sequence and reinforcement has implications for feelings and actions, too, not simply ideas. Learning tasks that are difficult on the feeling level may appropriately be designed more simply on the level of ideas, and so on. How do you communicate the scope and sequence of your learning design to your students?

Tools: the overall syllabus (and calendar) of a class, assignments that break down learning tasks into component parts that are sequenced, multiple kinds of feedback (with a focus on constructive reinforcement), questioning techniques that lead students through successively more complex issues...

5. “Action with reflection, or *praxis*”: Within religious reflection this process has been described by Henriot and Holland (1983) as a “pastoral circle” of “insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning.” Vella uses the terms “description, analysis, application, implementation” (1994, p. 12), and says “this is what we mean by praxis. We begin with experience, analyze that experience, search for new information that can inform the experience, and then change our knowledge set or behavior to incorporate the new data” (1994, p. 101).

What kinds of action are possible in the setting of your class? Think beyond simply “doing,” to feeling, being, ways of interacting with multiple senses, and so on. What does “action” consist of in your denomination/setting,

what kinds of action are you interested in nurturing in your students, or are they interested in nurturing in their congregations or other contexts?

Tools: participatory research, various kinds of experiential learning tasks, developing case studies based on contextual education and/or internships, turning writing assignments into publications (either on the web or in print), student-developed curricula, homilies that are tried out in multiple contexts...

6. "Learners as subjects of their own learning": learners as decision makers in their own learning processes.

In what ways do your learning experiences allow students to make decisions about their own learning? Can you remember times when you felt "in control" of your own learning? How can you make similar experiences possible for your students?

Tools: student-designed and/or claimed learning goals, student participation in assessment, student designed projects, assignments that give permission for integration and reinforce the value of student agency, assignments that ask students to explore their own contexts and make connections with their own struggles...

7. "Learning with ideas, feelings, and actions": This principle is particularly well facilitated by engagement with visual and aural arts.

What possibilities exist in your subject for exploring feelings? What kinds of action might be prompted by the subject matter? What are the crucial concepts embedded in the content you are exploring with your students?

Tools: see many of the tools already listed above, as well as field trips, multi-media texts, web sites that provide context as well as original source information, learning workshops offered by mentors, collaborative projects, music, novels, film, and so on...

8. "Immediacy": This principle has to do with learning and teaching what is "really useful" in a particular context.

How do you assess what is "really useful" from your subject matter? How do you convey that to your students? Is there room for them to contribute their own insights to that assessment? How easily can you make the connection between the learning tasks you're offering your students, and the tasks they will encounter after they leave your learning space?

Tools: congruence of learning goals, insights from contextual/field ed, brainstorming of dilemmas raised by specific concepts, tours of relevant resources (eg. a library tour focussed on exegetical texts, or a computer lab exercise that helps them accomplish an assignment)...

9. "Clear roles"

What roles do you carry as you teach (professor, mentor, decision-maker with regard to candidacy for ordination, visible symbol of diversity [particularly for faculty from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds], spiritual director, pastoral counselor, etc.)? Which of these roles are clearly defined for you by the institution, and which come to you without asking through student expectation? How can you signal the roles you carry appropriately and/or authentically, and those you refuse to accept?

Tools: design of the syllabus, clear guidelines for access (eg. limited office hours, an e-mail address that expires at the end of the course, giving out an office phone number but not a home number), written policies regarding candidacy processes, written guidelines for formation or discipleship practices, personal centering practices that allow you to teach without "having to be friends" with your students...

10. "Teamwork"

What kinds of teamwork are appropriate in your classroom, in your institution, in your denominational setting, in the various cultural spaces you and your students inhabit? What are the concepts, attitudes and skills necessary for successful teamwork? What are the contextual factors that inhibit it?

Tools: conceptual and experiential frameworks for addressing conflict, organizational dynamics theory, personality type inventories (Meyers-Briggs, Enneagram, Kolb, etc.), collaborative assignments (multiple student projects, shared development of case studies, etc.)...

11. "Engagement": This principle has to do with helping learners express their interest and investment in a learning event... "a principle that enables learners not only to take part in learning but also to practice learning as subjects of their own lives" (1994, p. 159).

In what ways can you identify your students as being engaged with the learning experience? What clues do you have to your own engagement? How do you handle situations where you do not feel engaged with the teaching/learning experience? To what extent does high student engagement impact your overall

teaching/learning goals, or the *telos* of your institution? To what extent might it be problematic? How do factors over which you have little control affect issues of engagement (eg. student exhaustion from working full-time, parenting and also pursuing an academic degree; senior year “flakiness,” end of spring term “flakiness”)?

Tools: student designed learning goals, flexible assignments that require students to invest in the development of the topic at hand, multi-media texts that draw students into contemporary contextual problems, written texts that are compelling to read and discuss, vocabulary development that provides bridges to difficult conceptual tasks, conceptual frameworks that are adequately descriptive of problematic issues students confront, subject matter that you find personally engaging...

12. “Accountability”: Vella’s final principle in particular seeks to specify the goals of a process. As she writes: “what was proposed to be taught must be taught, what was meant to be learned must be learned, the skills intended to be gained must be manifest in all the learners” and so on (1994, p. 21).

What kinds of accountability do you seek in your design of learning experiences? To whom are you accountable? How are your students accountable to you? What structures of accountability are in place at your institution, in your denominational context, in your theological understanding?

Tools: tests, assignments, learning goal development and revision, frequent “check-in” opportunities, clear roles, adequately informative syllabus, a theological framework of and metaphors for engaging accountability...

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