Principles of adult learning, and possible implications for learning goal

(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 have you diagnosed what you need to learn? To what extent have you invited other people into that process? How flexible are your expectations? What kinds of support are in place for you, if you discover that your needs are different from, or more extensive than, those of other students?

Tools: pre-tests, opening/orienting conversations, short (one page) essays turned in to a professor for input, online discussions with other people, behavioral instruments (surveys, MBTI, Strong-Campbell, etc.)

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 whether that exists in your learning environment? Consider some of the ways in which safety might not be possible (if you are a student who is marginalized in your learning environment by culture, race, gender, disability, etc.) Where could you turn, and to whom, when safety is not possible? How can you develop a border community to which to entrust your learning?

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 learning 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 learning environment 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 learning event 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 teachers? How do you want them to communicate with you?

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 learning environment? 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 yourself or your community (ies)?
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), 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 you to make decisions about your own learning? Can you remember times when you felt “in control” of your own learning? How can your teachers made such experiences possible for you, or not?

Tools: learner-designed and/or claimed learning goals, learner participation in assessment, learner designed projects, assignments that give permission for integration and reinforce the value of learner agency, assignments that ask learners 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 that you wish to explore with others? In what ways do you expect teachers to shape and facilitate this learning?

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 teachers? 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 embarking on, and the tasks you will encounter after you leave this specific learning space?

Tools: congruence of learning goals, insights from contextual/field ed, brainstorming of dilemmas raised by specific concepts, tours of relevant
resources (e.g., a library tour focused on exegetical texts, or a computer lab exercise that helps you accomplish an assignment, worship at differing churches)...

9. “Clear roles”

What roles do you carry as you learn (student, parent, paid staff in a church, visible symbol of diversity [particularly for students 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 the expectations of others? How can you signal the roles you carry appropriately and/or authentically, and those you refuse to accept?

Tools: design of learning goals, clear guidelines for work, shared agreements with spouses or other parenting partners, written guidelines for formation or discipleship practices, personal centering practices that allow you to learn without "having to be friends" with your teachers or other students...

10. “Teamwork”

What kinds of teamwork are appropriate in your learning environment, in your church, in your denominational setting, in the various cultural spaces you and your teachers 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 (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 yourself 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 teacher 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 (e.g., exhaustion from working full-time, parenting and also pursuing an academic degree; senior year “flakiness,” end of spring term “flakiness,”
faculty pursuit of scholarly research, institutional goals that conflict with your own commitments, etc.)?

Tools: student designed learning goals, flexible assignments that require learners to invest in the development of the topic at hand, multi-media texts that draw learners and teachers 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 persons 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 teachers accountable to you? What structures of accountability are in place at your institution, in your denominational context, in your theological understanding?

Tools: tests, writing assignments, learning journals, mentoring interviews, learning portfolios, roll calls, 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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