

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

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 participants? Consider some of the ways in which safety might not be possible for all of your participants (people 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?

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?

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 a specific learning event fit into your community’s curriculum? What elements of your topic do you need to explore first as preparation for later topics (eg. learning how to find passages in the Bible before working on specific texts)? 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 community?

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 community? Think beyond simply “doing, ” to feeling, being, ways of interacting with multiple senses, and so on. What does “action” consist of in your denomination as well as your specific community of faith, what kinds of action are you interested in nurturing in your participants, or are they interested in nurturing in their homes or other contexts?

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

In what ways do your learning events allow people 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 participants?

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 setting for exploring feelings? What kinds of action might be prompted by the topics you engage? What are the crucial concepts embedded in the content you are exploring with your participants?

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 you the topic you’re working with? How do you convey that to your participants? 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?

9. “Clear roles”

What roles do you carry as you teach (pastor, fellow member, mentor, spiritual director, pastoral counselor, friend, etc.)? Which of these roles are clearly defined for you by the setting in which you teach and learn, and which come to you without asking through participant expectation? How can you signal the roles you carry appropriately and/or authentically, and those you refuse to accept?

10. “Teamwork”

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

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 participants 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 participant engagement impact your overall teaching/learning goals, or the *telos* of your community? To what extent might it be problematic? How do factors over which you have little control affect issues of engagement (eg. participant exhaustion from working full-time, parenting and also being involved in a community of faith)?

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 participants accountable to you? What structures of accountability are in place at your church, in your denominational context, in your theological understanding?

(expanded from *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, Jane Vella, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994; by Mary E. Hess, Luther Seminary, 2001)