

Leadership Letter

How's your dialogue in teaching?



The power of dialogue in educating adults: A principle is the beginning of an action. And an action that is done regularly becomes something we believe and develops into a value. It is values that we make happen. These issues are worth something to us. If teaching is just something we do that needs to be done, it will lack passion. If teaching is just part of our role to perform, we will fall into the trap of doing what we have always seen done and sadly that is teaching without dialogue. Where there is a passion for people to grow, a passion to pass on learning, a passion for learners to be transformed, then we have to look at how we teach and not just what we teach.

We can't get away from the fact that we are creatures of habit. We imitate what we see. We quickly get into ruts in the way we do things. I think back with horror at my first lecture in DTS. I was trying to imitate. All I knew was the 'talking head' model. You have a topic and speak about it for an hour. I feel sorry for my poor students who had to listen to me grind on with my stuttering thoughts and scripture interpretations. There were no questions asked, no pauses for thought, no room for questions, no discussion or time to think through concepts with a role play, game or exercise - just words alone.

For those of you who, unlike me, are actually entertaining and fun to listen to, inspiring in your story telling and able to hold attention with your demonstrative style, there is some room for 'the talking head' but I personally can't get away with it. As I think about Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening intently to what he had to say, it is obvious that Jesus was able to attract and keep her attention. Five thousand people sat on the mountainside, captivated by his story telling and sharing of the mysteries of the kingdom. Wow that is a gift. Praise the Lord, there are some people with this dynamic gift but this letter is for the rest of us. Even these gifted people know that gaining attention and keeping it is only part of the goal. In order for your words to produce fruit, they have to be applied and this is the important discussion point here. We all want a lasting impact.

There are some of us that found school was made for us. I enjoyed school. I liked being a student. I listened, I learned, I followed through with the exercises and homework (which I did at school) and did well in my studies. Rite tells me she didn't like the process so much - she was often told off for talking too much and told to be quiet ('can't imagine that' you say!). My kids seemed to have the same problem - the female genes are obviously stronger in my family! One of the basic assumptions in adult education is that adult learning is best achieved in dialogue. Umm. Interesting. So as students, we actually need to talk in order to help our learning process. So perhaps if someone wants to talk in one of my sessions, I should let them and if they don't, I should draw communication out of them?

If you remember anything from this letter, this is the key: adults have enough life

experience to be in dialogue with any teacher about any subject and will learn new knowledge, attitudes or skills best in relation to that life experience. So teaching becomes the management of dialogue. How can I best get my audience talking about this topic in a way that they will learn its importance to them. Here are a few important principles that I have been learning over the years, with help from Jane Vella and her very helpful book, "Learning to listen, learning to teach."

1. Scratching where it itches: It is very easy to get on our own personal soapbox and talk about our favourite topics which unfortunately may not be relevant and interesting to those we are talking to. So dialogue starts here. Adults tend to know what they would like to learn and so asking them will give honour to them and help to you. Adult learners need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning. We want to spend our time studying content that will make a difference now. As a teacher, I need to discover what they already know and what they think they need or want to know. If adults are bored, it usually means their interests have been neglected in the design of the course. Receiving people's input doesn't form the course but informs it. For example, I teach DISC quite often and one of my first questions is, 'how many of you have been to a DISC seminar before? How much exercise work have you done beyond finding out your DISC profile and understanding a little about yourself?' If the class has some understanding already, I cut out some of the basic input and jump right into group work where further learning can take place.

2. A safe environment: Should learning be challenging or safe? Probably a bit of both. It's helpful for learners to know who you are, what you have done and to know they can trust you. If you are able to express the kind of things they will be doing and how the learning process will work, this can put their minds at rest too. I recently had a chat with someone who was nervous about coming to an LDC because she had heard about all the "creative stuff" and she didn't consider herself that way inclined. Just talking about it together, I was able to put her mind at rest and help her to feel safe again. A good orientation time into a seminar or course, is one that is open for any question and covers all the major areas of expectations. This will also help to create a safe place. If there is opportunity as soon as possible for small group activity to share their hearts, concerns, desires, etc. this also helps people feel at home. Little things that you can communicate will help tremendously. For instance: 'help yourself to a drink at any time of the day; everything is negotiable - so do talk about anything that concerns you; you will have choices about what kind of work duties you can sign up for, what groups you would like to be in and who you would like for your one to one.' The more choices for adults, the better it is for them. We actually call learners delegates in the LDC rather than students, so that they don't take their leader hat off! Remember - don't ever do what the learner can do and don't ever decide what the learner can decide.

3. The power of affirmation: Depending on where you did your schooling will make a difference to your attitude to learning. Being brought up in the UK, you get used to having assignments sent back with red markings and crossing out all over the pages. It was just part of my life back then and you had nothing to compare it to. But now, I realise how little affirmation I received in my education. For this reason, many people have a fear of education. When I attended an LTS (leadership training school) in Hawaii back in the 80's there were a number of people who didn't even turn up for the final exam due to a fear of failure. As a result of this, we have a

standard chat in the LDC with learners about assignments. We tell people that these assignments are not for us, but for them. So they can put as little or as much work into them as they would like. If they present something that we consider isn't their best work, then we offer to help them with it and they can have another chance at a better mark. Learning is suppose to be encouraging. So it's important to take every opportunity to affirm learners in every task they fulfil.

4. Education is relationship: I think back to my schooling days and realise that the topics I didn't do so well in, were the topics where I didn't like, connect or really engage with the teacher. So I chose not to pursue history and geography as the classes were so boring. I lost heart for English, as my teachers were intimidating and I feared going to class because I didn't know when they would next put me on the spot to spontaneously speak, act or read. So I gave up English literature as soon as I could. What a shame! It's our job as teachers to relate with those we are teaching. We also need to step down from the pedestal we are often put on and share our lives and stories with an attitude of humility and a listening ear for involvement of the learners. If you like someone, and establish a heart to heart connection, you will be more likely to learn something from them. So it's good to establish a peer relationship. As soon as a learner sees you as a professor, as an expert, as someone one level up with whom there is no possibility of disagreement, no questioning or challenge, the dialogue is dead in the water and you have lost connection. So in order to stay connected and build a depth of relationship, it will require humility as the teacher. One of the applications for us is to have our staff involved in the class so that when there are break out sessions and group work they will be there and ready to relate with the learners.

5. Sequencing of topics and course development: During the first few days of a course it's important to have as many of the staff up front of the class as possible, so they can all be seen in action, with their different gifts and styles to be viewed. People quickly get the understanding that this team is diverse. In terms of topics, at first you want to lay a simple foundation that settles people and brings them in gently. Then build on the relationships that have been laid and begin to move to more complex and more challenging topics. For instance, you don't want to go too deep too quickly. People won't be ready to be vulnerable about their fears and insecurities on day 2 but as trust builds and an openness is experienced you can move in that direction. For this reason, we don't tend to get into signature sin, and personal strongholds until week 3 and 4. By this time people feel safe and are ready to share openly.

6. Move towards the sensorial: We are made up of more than just minds and so the teaching needs to include involvement of emotions and hands on activities. In order to move away from the talking head style of teaching, we have to think about how to give learners an experience that goes deeper than just getting our notes into the note book of the learner. So how can we explore ideas, allow feelings to emerge and have a hands on experience? This is where we can use role plays to experience the real emotions in an exercise. You can play a game and feel the real issues and attitudes coming to the surface. You can watch a movie clip and relate with the person emotionally. You can enter into a discussion and find out others don't think the same way as you at all. You can start working on a project and realise you don't understand the concept after all. Teaching needs to involve all the

senses (sensorial) and so as you think about the topic you are teaching, move beyond words and think how you can use sight, hearing, speech, smell and hands on touch to enhance the learning experience. Get people moving, relating, thinking and feeling and people will come away changed.

7. Teamwork: How much more interesting it is to have several different people interacting on a topic, with different styles, personality and emphasis. You need team to develop synergy. It is so much more effective but it does take a little longer to develop. One of the reasons we don't have more team teaching is the time it takes in preparation. Another is the cost - If you are travelling to take a seminar, generally only one flight is covered and thus the team aspect is lost. If I have a choice, it's always team. Back to my example of DISC teaching: how much better it is to have 4 people involved in the training so that each specific personality shares on their own personality style and you can see it modelled out as you hear them explain it. Suddenly you understand with so much greater clarity than if one person was sharing and explaining all the 4 personality types. How can you teach on team and not involve team? We can all too easily teach concepts and ideas about things rather than model them, live them and experience them.

8. Application: It is one thing to listen, interact and seek to understand what is being taught. It is quite another when it comes time to apply what you have heard. This comes in the form of an assignment. We are asked to apply the knowledge we have just received and apply the principles into our own lives and experience. For DISC we look at the results of the indicator we took and share back what we agree with and what we don't. From these examples in our life we can affirm that we have a tendency towards this profile. These are the strengths and weaknesses that we see in our lives in these examples. Or we could look at the timeline application and start to think of certain experiences that we have gone through where we learned certain principles and a story emerges that is the foundation for that principle in our lives.

However, there is one step further in application. The first part of application helps us to know and understand a principle, but it needs to be further applied so that it has an affect on our lives. It's the movement from head to heart and as teachers we need to continually look for ways to see this movement take place. Back to our DISC example: Having written the profile, understand the strengths and weakness, now we get an opportunity of relating and interacting with real people with real personalities. Where I have viewed them wrongly, misused them, hurt them, accused them or whatever, I now have the opportunity of putting it right. I get to speak out forgiveness, affirm these good qualities in others that I can gloss over, humble myself and declare my need of others. In the timeline example, there is movement from head to heart when we walk through a simulation of the stages of growth in a leaders' life. We receive prayers for that phase, we think through changes, we feel the emotions and act something out that moves us to a new place of understanding. The Greek has two words for knowing: "gnosis" = to know something and "epignosis" = to really know something from experience. We want to move towards the latter.

This all takes time, prayer, preparation and planning – so let's do the best job we can as we prepare for schools and seminars so that we can see the most effective training possible taking place.

Until next month

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