

## Book Reviews

### **Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults**

(Revised edition)

JANE VELLA

Jossey-Bass, San Francisco (2002)

263 pp., ISBN: 0-7879-5967-7 (US\$ 24.00, pbk)

Might you be one of the minority of educators in the health professions who takes your instructional responsibilities so seriously that you look for new sources of ideas about the teaching-learning process, even outside the health professions? If so, you might be familiar with the considerable literature that has been accumulating for nearly a century on “Adult Education”. You may also know that the late Malcolm S. Knowles is widely credited with articulating and elaborating the principles that have become the foundation of this field in recent decades. Given his preeminence in this domain, his observations in his Foreword to the 1994 edition of Jane Vella’s book are especially meaningful. He said, “The deep lessons (this book) contains creep up on you and flower into joyful insights. Jane Vella is one of the most gifted adult educators I have known”.

If you read this book, which I recommend you consider doing, I suspect that you will come to the same conclusion. Her book can be fairly described as both a primer on adult education for those unfamiliar with this field and a wonderfully enriching set of elaborations for anyone who is already well versed in the field.

Professor Vella’s book is a splendid example of the successful use of case histories for bringing abstract concepts and principles to life. In Part One of her book, before offering the case studies (stories), she introduces the 12 principles that she regards as the foundation of contemporary thinking about adult education, and she discusses the ways in which these principles inform the process of course design. And she does one more thing, which you may or may not find helpful. She posits “quantum thinking” as a reference point, metaphor, or organizing framework for the educational principles she presents. I didn’t find these allusions necessary or particularly enlightening. I felt that her clearly stated rationale for each of the principles, combined subsequently with the vivid, moving illustrations of those principles in action, in real-life events from many countries, needed no further justification or validation. Yet, you may well find these references to the findings of quantum physics and their adaptation to human interactions helpful. Happily, these allusions are gently offered and are sufficiently sporadic so they never came close to being annoying, even if you agree that they aren’t really necessary.

Part Two of the book consists of 12 chapters, each devoted to one of the principles of adult learning. Each principle is clarified and made tangible in the context of the story of an adult learning experience that Professor Vella had designed and facilitated. Somewhat paraphrased, the 12 principles are: Determining learners' needs and assessing available resources; Creating a safe environment for learning; Building sound relationships; Attending to sequence and reinforcement; Providing "praxis" (ensuring that practice includes both action and reflection); Respecting learners and having them be decision-makers regarding their learning experiences; Attending to the whole person, including their ideas, feelings and actions; Designing learning experiences so that they have immediate usefulness to learners; Minimizing monologues in favor of dialogues; Benefiting from collaboration and teamwork; Using active learning and achieving genuine engagement; Making the learners accountable for their learning. Although all of the examples feature short-term, fairly narrowly focused learning experiences with relatively small groups, I don't think you will have any difficulty recognizing the relevance of the principles to the educational work you do. All 12 principles are as fully applicable to health professions education as they are to any of the groups Dr Vella describes.

Vella's examples are drawn from work she has done with groups all over the world, mainly under the auspices of Save The Children and other community development agencies. In each of her compelling, touching stories we meet impressive people from Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Nepal, Tanzania, The Maldives, United States of America (twice), Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In her willingness to share both her achievements and her difficulties, even some mistakes she had made, Vella earns both credibility and our affection. Most readers, I expect, will identify with the challenges she acknowledges facing and will celebrate the impressive victories she achieves. Her victories serve as vivid examples of the deep sense of fulfillment that can come from being a genuinely effective educator.

This book is certainly not for everyone. In the health professions, sadly, in my view, we have many teachers who are quite content to just keep doing what they've always done, and many who disdain stories from outside their profession, proclaiming that the challenges they face are unique and can't be informed by examples drawn from other domains. I worry that such teachers may be missing out on large parts of the joy that can come from a deep understanding of the teaching-learning process and from doing it well. I also worry that their learners may be getting far less than they deserve.

If you are – or aspire to be – a teacher in the fullest sense, someone who is intrigued by the subtleties and complexities of human learning and excited by the opportunity to be authentically helpful to others, then you are likely to value Jane Vella's sensitivity, insights, human warmth, caring, and expertise. I commend her book to you without reservation. It deserves a slow, careful reading and some accompanying discussion with colleagues. I encourage you to

consider making it the basis of an ongoing faculty development sequence or the focus of several meetings of an educationally focused journal club.

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**A Book for Midwives: Care for pregnancy, birth, and women's health**

SUSAN KLEIN, SUELLEN MILLER & FIONA THOMSON

Hesperian Foundation, Berkeley, California, USA (2004)

527 pp., ISBN: 0-942364-23-6

*A Book for Midwives* is a comprehensive and beautifully illustrated textbook which encapsulates the knowledge necessary for safe midwifery practice in any setting. Not only does this text cover the basic knowledge about antenatal, intranatal and postnatal care as well as the standard midwifery texts, it does so in a way that makes that care available to and relevant for midwives in rural communities within developing countries.

Midwives learn how to assess women at all stages of pregnancy and labour to enable them to confirm normality or to recognize problems requiring transfer to a medical facility. They are guided in the use of appropriate, and the avoidance of inappropriate, technology and encouraged to use traditional knowledge safely and effectively.

However, this book goes far beyond basic maternity care to enable the rural midwife to become a trusted and respected member of her community. This guide explores topics such as: women's health, changing community attitudes, adapting cultural beliefs, finding creative solutions to problems such as lack of transport and many more. Finally it covers advanced skills such as external cephalic version, pregnancy termination, prevention and treatment of STIs and family planning.

As someone very involved with clinical skills training and preparation of clinical educators, one of my favourite things about this text is the all-encompassing emphasis on education. It is about working together with women to improve the health of the whole community. Simple teaching aids which can be created by midwives or women are shown being used in childbirth and community education. Many of these could be used successfully in any western skills lab setting to replace or augment expensive teaching models.

As much as I liked this book, my one problem was ascertaining for whom, exactly, it was produced. With its emphasis on midwifery as a vocation of love rather than remuneration and with such a strong community focus, this book

was clearly not written for the “professional” midwife. That is not to say that there are not many lessons which could, and should, be learned by professionals, but the focus of this text seems to be for the traditional birth attendant, or TBA. As TBAs are usually apprentice-trained rather than formally educated, they may not be literate and almost certainly would not be familiar with the English language. Furthermore, the current World Health Organization policy seems to be the eradication of TBAs in favour of professional birth attendants (World Health Report, 2005). Perhaps it is time to re-visit that policy as this book demonstrates just how skilled many traditional midwives are and how they can be helped to provide an even safer standard of care combining the best of medical and traditional knowledge. A more holistic and realistic policy to that of replacing all TBAs with professionals might be to ensure that all traditional midwives have access to a basic education so that they can understand and use written materials. If this were the case, I would certainly promote this text as filling the niche and would recommend its translation into languages spoken by traditional midwives all over the developing world.

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