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*Emotions and imagination are integral to the process of adult learning. The imaginal method is discussed as an alternative to rational and reflective processes of meaning-making.*

## The Power of Feelings: Emotion, Imagination, and the Construction of Meaning in Adult Learning

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Recently I participated in a curriculum workshop that focused on developing more contextual, integrated approaches for adult learners. Because I am interested in better understanding how subject matter becomes personally meaningful for adults, I looked forward to this experience with much anticipation and enthusiasm. As the workshop unfolded, however, I found myself growing increasingly dissatisfied and in disagreement with much of what was being said. Group members and the facilitator seemed to be recognizing the importance of contextualizing content and skills within the learners' real-life experiences, but there was a strong, instrumental sense to the ways in which this was being interpreted. I felt myself grow tense. My face felt flushed and it seemed as if a tight knot was forming in the pit of my stomach. I was obviously upset and feeling even a little irritated and angry. I was at a loss as to why I was feeling so strongly about this discussion. My ideas were at odds with the dominant views in the learning group, but why was I reacting so strongly to what was being said? Why should these views of curricular integration evoke such strong emotions and feelings within me? What does this all mean?

This vignette illustrates the powerful role that emotions and feelings can play in otherwise ordinary adult learning experiences. Dominant views of this relationship suggest that emotions are important in adult education because they can either impede or motivate learning. Most of these perspectives inadvertently reinforce a "rationalist doctrine" that pervades most, if not all, formal educational efforts; one that places an emphasis on factual information and the use of reason and reflection to learn from experience.

This chapter presents an alternative way of understanding emotions and adult learning, one that reflects the central role of emotions in our ways of knowing (Heron, 1992). I argue that personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and is derived from the adult's emotional, imaginative connection with the self and with the broader social world. The meanings we attribute to emotions reflect the particular socio-cultural and psychic contexts in which they arise. This process of meaning-making, however, is essentially imaginative and extrarational, rather than merely reflective and rational. Emotionally charged images, evoked through the contexts of adult learning, provide the opportunity for a more profound access to the world by inviting a deeper understanding of ourselves in relationship with it.

### **Understanding the Meaning and Experience of Emotion in Our Day-to-Day Lives**

The expression of emotions within adult learning experiences is not hard to discern. One adult learner described his feelings about returning to school: "I was terrified to death of coming even to this college. . . . the thought just scared the crap out of me." Referring to the first day of class another said, "It's like being scared to death because you know no one. . . . For the people that have been out of school a while and they walk back in here and they know no one, that was like terrifying for me" (Amey and Dirkx, 1999). Contexts for adult learning are also often regarded as "emotional battlegrounds," with learners vying for recognition and authority (Brookfield, 1993). Some learners describe their classroom experiences as boring or stressful while others characterize them as fun and exciting. Some returning adult students look to their classroom experiences as something that connects them more deeply with other learners and the campus (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, and Dirkx, 2000). These observations suggest that emotions and feelings play a critical role in our sense of self and in processes of adult learning. As Lupton (1998, p. 6) suggests, "Our concepts of our emotions are often integral to our wider conception of our selves, used to give meaning and provide explanation for our lives."

Understandings of emotion are shaped by specific sociocultural (Denzin, 1984; Hochschild, 1983; Katz, 1999; Lupton, 1998; Lutz, 1988; Lyons, 1995) and psychic contexts (Chodorow, 1999; Chodorow, 1997; Denzin, 1984; Hillman, 1975; Moore, 1992; Ulanov, 1999; Woodman and Dickson, 1996). Through learning and acculturation, we construct the meanings we attribute to emotional states, reflecting "aspects of cultural meaning systems people use in attempting to understand the situations in which they find themselves" (Lutz, 1988, p. 65). The meanings we attribute to emotional states also inform us about ourselves and the broader social world. As Denzin (1984) suggests, "To understand who a person is, it is necessary to understand emotion" (p. 1). Emotions always refer to the self, providing us

with a means for developing self-knowledge. They are an integral part of how we interpret and make sense of the day-to-day events in our lives. As we look at and come to understand our sense-making practices in daily life and the ways emotions constitute that practice, we reveal ourselves more fully to ourselves and to others.

Our experience of emotion, however, and our understanding of self arise from more than just rational, conscious thought processes mediated by cultural symbols (Lupton, 1998). As in the opening vignette, we sometimes find ourselves feeling strongly about something or toward someone without really consciously knowing or understanding why or from where these feelings came. Emotional experiences are often shaped by strong inner, extrarational dynamics (Chodorow, 1999). They are not always expressed through words but gain voice in dreams, fantasies, or other imagined aspects of our day-to-day world.

Emotions, then, give voice to our fundamental sense of irrationality (Chodorow, 1999). Through our emotional experiences, we recognize that our conscious sense of agency is often subverted by desire. In these situations, we experience a self that seems ambivalent, contradictory, and fragmented. Our consciousness seems populated by multiple voices, each claiming a different sense of reality (Clark and Dirks, 2000). Thus, experience of emotion often reveals a multiplistic, contradictory self. For example, I felt angry toward the workshop facilitators, but I also felt guilty for feeling angry at them. Understanding of these multiple selves is achieved not only through conscious, rational, and self-reflexive practices (Mezirow, 1991) but through the products of our imagination, the images that come to populate consciousness (Dirks, 1998). Relying on Jungian and post-Jungian thought, I now turn to a fuller development of an imaginative view of emotion, and how we might understand its expression in adult learning settings.

### **Experience of Emotion as Imaginative Engagement**

Emotions are often associated with voices or images that emerge within consciousness. As Jung (quoted in Chodorow, 1997, p. 26) suggests, "I learned how helpful it can be . . . to find the particular image which lies behind emotions." Through emotionally charged images, individuals and collectives potentially express and connect with this deeper reality. We use these charged images to perceive and understand ourselves and the world. For example, behind strong feelings of anger and outrage may be a person who feels left out. A sense of confidence within group discussion may be undermined by an image of the imposter lurking at the edges of consciousness. Angry reactions to a teacher may arise from an unconscious image we hold of him or her as an over-controlling parent.

These images convey a deep, inner life constituted by "intentions, behaviors, voices, feelings, that I do not control with my will or cannot connect with

my reason" (Hillman, 1975, p. 2). As Whitmont (1969) suggests, "[I]mages may appear spontaneously when inner or outer events which are particularly stark, threatening or powerful must be faced" (p. 74). They are gateways to the unconscious and our emotional, feeling selves, representing deep-seated issues and concerns that may be evoked through our experiences of the world. They connect some aspect of our outer experience with dimly perceived or understood aspects of our inner worlds. Behind the feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, and anger that I experienced in the curriculum integration workshop was a distinct image that animated my consciousness within this situation. This image can, when properly understood, foster a deeper sense of the underlying meaning that curriculum integration holds for my sense of self within this particular sociocultural context.

Through the formation of images, emotions and feelings express the personal meanings that arise for us within any given context (Chodorow, 1999) and serve to animate our thoughts and actions. These meanings arise through our imaginative connection and engagement with these contexts. Our initial construal of meaning within particular emotional situations is largely an act of fantasy and imagination, guided by our emotional connection with both our inner and outer worlds. They help us understand and make sense of our selves, our relationships with others, and the world we inhabit. Our experience of this inner life is inherently emotional and deeply connected to the sense of self we construct and maintain (Chodorow, 1999; Denzin, 1984; Lupton, 1998). My experience of the workshop was largely mediated by the image that formed within my consciousness. I perceived and interpreted what was happening in this workshop largely through the lens of this image.

Neo- and post-Jungians (Hillman, 1975; Moore, 1992; Sardello, 1992; Ulanov, 1999; Woodman and Dickson, 1996) stress the importance of these emotionally charged images to the vitality and reenchantment of our everyday lives, to fostering our sense of spirituality, and to developing relationships and dialogue with inner selves.

When manifest as images, emotions can be interpreted as "messengers of the soul" (Dirkx, 1997, 1998) seeking to inform us of deeply personal, meaningful connections that are being made within an experience. They are expressions of the deeper, nonegoic aspects of our psyche. Images circumvent the controlling purposes of the ego and put us in touch with a deeper aspect of our being. In her study of personal emotional experiences, Lupton (1998) reported several people who used the concept of soul or spirit to describe the nature of emotions. A thirty-six-year-old woman said of emotions, "I think they're generated, like through your soul. 'Cause I think everybody has a soul and emotion comes from somewhere deep within you and I don't necessarily think it comes from your mind so much. . . . I think it is the soul for me that generates those feelings" (p. 42).

Thus, emotions and our imaginative appraisal of them are integral to the process of meaning-making, to the ways we experience and make sense

of ourselves (Campbell, 1997; Chodorow, 1999; Denzin, 1984; Jaggar, 1989) as well as our relationships with others and the world (Damasio, 1994; Goleman, 1995, Harré, 1986; Lupton, 1998). Through the image, emotions help us connect the inner dynamics of the self with the outer objects of our world.

### **The Connection Between Emotions and Learning in Adulthood**

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato described emotions as irrational urges that need to be controlled through the use of reason (Jaggar, 1989) and as major impediments to rationality and the pursuit of truth. This marginalized view of emotions and feelings has continued to the present day. A brief article, on the issue of whether to allow limited use of alcohol at events held at the city zoo, was recently published in the *Lansing State Journal*, a local Michigan newspaper. "Members of the Lansing City Council," the editorial read, "need to reconsider their position that seems based on emotion more than reason. . . . Emotions have thus far ruled the day on this issue. . . . City Council members' obstinate, no-alcohol stance is unreasonable. A little less emotion, if you please, and a lot more reason."

Much of the theory and practice in adult education reveals a similar tradition of marginalizing emotions and elevating rationality to a supreme position. Popular notions frame teaching and learning as largely rational, cognitive processes, and understand emotions as either impediments to or motivators of learning. Reason and rationality are viewed as the primary foundations or processes for learning, through which learners obtain access to the "objective" structures of our world (Jaggar, 1989). Adult educators refer to personal or emotional issues adults bring to the educational setting as "baggage" or "barriers" to learning (Dirkx and Spurgin, 1992; Gray and Dirkx, 2000). Learners seem filled with anxieties or fears (Tennant, 1997). If and when such issues *are* acknowledged by educators, it is often to provide opportunities for learners to "vent" and "get it off their chests" so they can get back to the "business of learning." Educators within formal settings of adult learning seek to control, manage, limit, or redirect outward expressions of emotions and feelings.

On the other hand, many of us implicitly perceive emotional and affective dimensions of learning as also contributing to a positive educational experience. In recalling incidents of memorable learning, participants in the author's teaching-strategies course typically describe experiences in which there was a strong, positive, emotional, or affective dimension, such as a supportive climate, a caring teacher who listens to us as individuals, a teacher who respects us as persons, or a teacher who involves the whole person in the learning experience. Nick, an adult who shared his experiences as a learner with us, said of his teacher, "He just keeps everybody awake. He keeps going and going and going and he comes in with such motivation and enthusiasm. It's like you got no choice but to wanna come to class."

The literature underscores the importance of attending to emotions and feelings in contexts, interactions, and relationships that characterize adult learning (Boud, Cohen, and Walker, 1993; Brookfield, 1993; Daloz, 1986; Postle, 1993; Robertson, 1996; Tennant, 1997). A growing body of research, however, suggests that emotions and feelings are more than merely a motivational concern in learning. Postle (1993) argues that affective, emotional dimensions provide the foundation on which practical, conceptual, and imaginal modes of learning rest. “Brain-based” theories (Damasio, 1994, 1999) and the concept of “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995) suggest that emotion and feelings are deeply interrelated with perceiving and processing information from our external environments, storing and retrieving information in memory, reasoning, and the embodiment of learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Taylor, 1996). Recent studies of transformative learning reveal extrarational aspects, such as emotion, intuition, soul, spirituality, and the body, as integral to processes of deep, significant change (Clark, 1997; Dirkx, 1997; Nelson, 1997; Scott, 1997).

We are beginning to appreciate the affective and imaginative as modes of knowing in their own right (Heron, 1992; Jaggar, 1989). Imagination plays a key role in connecting our inner, subjective experiences of emotions and feelings with the outer, objective dimensions of our learning experiences. These relationships and dialogues are mediated largely through what Hillman (1975) refers to as “imaginal” approaches, such as dreamwork, free association, fantasy, active imagination, and other forms of creative activity. These approaches bypass ego consciousness and allow for expressions of deeper dimensions of our psychic lives.

### **Using Images to Make Sense of Feelings and Emotions in Adult Learning**

In the presence of powerful emotions and feelings, we make use of images to mediate and construct their meanings. The conscious, purposeful process used to foster this approach is referred to as the “imaginal method” (Hillman, 1975). I will draw on this idea, more a perspective than an actual method, to describe how we might help adults understand and make sense of emotional experiences and feelings that may arise within their learning.

The “text” in adult learning (broadly understood to include print, speech, visual cues, and so on) often evokes emotionally charged images. For example, a middle-aged woman in a course I teach on adult learning was stunned to see her own life so closely described in some of the developmental theories being studied. For years she had felt confused and almost bewildered by certain troubling and painful aspects of her life. Her study of the course text evoked images that suddenly brought all these puzzling experiences into sharp focus. In this new-found self-knowledge, she felt a deep sense of release and joy that she freely shared with her peers.

The images evoked by texts are not merely constructions of our conscious, cognitive egos. Emotionally charged images are not under the willful control of the ego. Rather, they tend to appear spontaneously within the learning process. They arrive as they so choose, as acts of grace, relatively independent of the needs and desires of the ego. Like Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol*, these images beckon us to vistas and realms of meaning not open to ordinary, waking, ego-based consciousness. Their presence within the learning context suggests engagement with soul (Dirkx, 1997; Moore, 1992), a deep emotional and spiritual connection between our inner lives and some aspect of our outer experience. Paradoxically, we are more likely to recognize, accept, and actively engage their presence in consciousness when we relax the ego. We often want to make such matters concerns for the ego, but these are ultimately matters of the heart or soul. The harder we try to control this process the more likely soul will go into hiding. It was no accident that Scrooge's ghosts appeared to him in the middle of the night.

The basis for this active engagement and dialogue with our emotions is imagination (Clark, 1997; Nelson, 1997). Imagination helps us connect to and establish a relationship with this powerful, nonegoic aspect of our being (Moore, 1992). By becoming aware of the images behind our emotions and feelings, we connect with the inner forces that populate our psyche. As we learn to participate with them in a more conscious manner, we are less likely to be unwillingly buffeted around by their presence in our lives. Entering into a conscious dialogue with these images creates the opportunity for deeper meaning and more satisfying relationships with our world.

In the imaginal method, we recognize, name, and come to a deeper understanding of the images revealed through our deep, often emotional experiences of the text (Hillman, 1975). Our soul work—our learning—is to recognize, elaborate, and differentiate them as a means of developing a deeper understanding of our experience in the context of adult learning. The purpose of the imaginal method or soul work is not to analyze and dissect these emotions and feelings but to imaginatively elaborate their meaning in our lives. In contrast to Mezirow's (1991) notion of transformative learning, in which we are encouraged to ask "how" or "why" questions about these feelings and emotions, we might simply ask "what": What do these emotions feel like, remind me of? What other times have I felt this way, experienced these emotions? What was going on then? Who was involved in that incident? As we elaborate these feelings and emotions, the nature of the image behind them may begin to emerge. As we recognize, name, and work with these images, we move toward a deeper, more conscious connection with these aspects of ourselves. We befriend that person or persons within our psyche. We transform ordinary existence into the "stuff of soul" (Moore, 1992, p. 205), establishing through imagination a meaningful connection between the text and our life experiences. These emotionally charged images provide access to the psyche, an invitation to

the journey of the soul and to coming to know oneself as a more fully individuated being. As they take shape within consciousness, they can deepen our understanding of their meaning. We are allowed to glimpse the nature of soul through the work of the imagination (Hillman, 1989).

## Conclusion

I will conclude by briefly illustrating how the imaginal approach helped me develop a more meaningful understanding of my reactions to the curriculum workshop. As I worked with my emotional response to this workshop, I began to see how the idea of integration is, for me, itself an emotionally charged image. On the surface, the *concept* reflects an interest in making learning experiences more meaningful for others. The *image* of integration, however, reflects my deep, underlying orientation to relationships and gives voice to an enduring yearning for wholeness. I now understand that these notions express an aspect of the self searching for wholeness through relationship. In this sense, I imagine instrumental approaches to curriculum as mechanistic, as not honoring my personal search, and ultimately as a denial of this aspect of myself.

The imaginal method seeks a deeper understanding of the emotional, affective, and spiritual dimensions that are often associated with profoundly meaningful experiences in adult learning. Journal writing, literature, poetry, art, movies, story-telling, dance, and ritual are specific methods that can be used to help foster the life of the image in our relationships with adult learners. By approaching emotionally charged experiences imaginatively rather than merely conceptually, learners locate and construct, through enduring mythological motifs, themes, and images, deep meaning, value, and quality in the relationship between the text and their own life experiences.

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1. Meaning of Imagination: Memory is the exact reproduction of the contents of past experience in the same order in which they were experienced in the past. Imagination consists in reproducing the contents of past experience and arranging them in a new order different from that in which they were originally experienced. Sometimes memory is called reproductive imagination because in it the contents of past experience are reproduced in the same form and order. Thus he shows the power of constructive imagination. In make-believe the child manipulates actual objects. Sympathy is the ability to share the feelings and emotions of others. This depends upon the ability to put oneself in the place of others, and this involves imagination. Thus sympathy depends upon imagination. Emotions experienced as imaginative engagement are central to making meaning from experience. Entering into conscious dialogue with images provides a method of making sense of emotions in adult learning. (Contains 40 references.) (SK). Descriptors: Adult Learning, Constructivism (Learning), Emotional Response, Imagery, Imagination. Publication Type: Information Analyses; Journal Articles. Education Level: N/A. Audience: N/A. The power of feelings: Emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 63-72. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Elmore, R. F. (1991). Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(2), 91-105. Google Scholar. Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process. In S. Johnson & K. Taylor (Eds.), *The neuroscience of adult learning: New directions for adult and continuing education* (Vol. 81, pp. 21-28). New York: Wiley. Google Scholar. Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2012). Emotions and imagination are integral to the process of adult learning. The imaginal method is discussed as an alternative to rational and reflective processes of meaning-making. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. Our initial construal of meaning within particular emotional situations is largely an act of fantasy and imagination, guided by our emotional connection with both our inner and outer worlds. They help us understand and make sense of ourselves, our relationships with others, and the world we inhabit (Dirkx, 2001, p. 66). Emotion Construction in the Context of Interactions. The idea that emotions are constructed "in the moment" during ongoing interactions contrasts with models that propose that emotions are first and foremost "in the head." Research on emotion construction in adult interactions is fairly scarce; however, research on marital dispute provides an interesting exception. In the present article, we argue that emotion itself derives its meaning and predictability from the relationship in which it takes place and which it shapes in return.

Emotions experienced as imaginative engagement are central to making meaning from experience. Entering into conscious dialogue with images provides a method of making sense of emotions in adult learning. (Contains 40 references.) (SK). Descriptors: Adult Learning, Constructivism (Learning), Emotional Response, Imagery, Imagination. Publication Type: Information Analyses; Journal Articles. Education Level: N/A. Audience: N/A. Emotions and imagination are integral to the process of adult learning. The imaginal method is discussed as an alternative to rational and reflective processes of meaning-making. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. Our initial construal of meaning within particular emotional situations is largely an act of fantasy and imagination, guided by our emotional connection with both our inner and outer worlds. They help us understand and make sense of ourselves, our relationships with others, and the world we inhabit (Dirkx, 2001, p. 66). Learn useful feeling words and emotion words with pictures and example sentences to improve and enhance your vocabulary in English. There are many times when you may need to talk about how you are feeling, or perhaps describe how someone else is feeling. For this reason, it is important to be able to talk about the various emotions in English. You may also need to understand these emotion names in situations where someone is explaining to you how they feel, and by being able to recognise what they are saying, you will be better able to help them. In this section, you will be presented with a d Dr Catherine E. Camden Pratt, University of Western Sydney educating Psyche Imaginatlon, Emotlon and thE UnconscloUs In LEarnIng BErnIE nEvILLE thlrd Edltlon david Lovell Publishing melbourne australia Published in 2013 by David Lovell Publishing Contents PO Box 44, Kew East Victoria 3102 Australia tel/fax +61 3 9859 0000 publisher@davidlovellpublishing.com Introduction to the Third Edition vii © Copyright 2013 Bernie Neville. 2. The Power of Suggestion 31 Front cover photo: Lee Pettet Typeset in 11.75/15 Perpetua 3. Magic and Manipulation 65 Printed in Australia by Griffin Digital National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data 4. Use Your Imagination 97 Neville