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Introduction

Direct Education for Adult Learning Groups

This book is for everyone who assists groups to learn, whether formally or informally, through workshops or courses, as facilitator or teacher or trainer. I wrote it to share a lifetime of confronting mysteries in how individuals learn in groups.

I was twenty when I was first paid to lead learning groups of adults. At first the job was a bit intimidating for me; each Friday in the late afternoon I met fifteen or twenty strangers and led them through a volunteer weekend at a psychiatric hospital so they could be helpful to patients and learn about the mental health system.

I admired the content of the weekend. The volunteers let go of stereotypes, learned skills for relating to mental health consumers as human beings, and got the latest theories on mental illness and treatment from occasional meetings with staff psychiatrists. As a facilitator I found out that the sequence of material and experience mattered a lot to how much the volunteers could learn.

By working with the same setting and same core curriculum but with ever-changing groups, I learned that each group had a personality of its own. I observed how the atmosphere of a group influenced how much and how fast the volunteers learned. I saw that different groups needed differing amounts of help in making their diversity work for them.

The volunteers came from markedly different settings. Most came from the colleges of the region, ranging from state to elite schools. Some participants were out of college and in workplaces,

establishing themselves as adults building a life. These subgroups meant a lot in the beginning of each weekend, but then shifts could occur, with new subgroups and new dynamics among them that affected the learning the volunteers were doing.

I found that by accident I had signed onto a laboratory in adult learning, and I was hugely stimulated. I found that learning in groups is not at all straightforward. I had more and more fun wading into the complexity, intuitively experimenting with different approaches and interventions. Even though we had no rigorous evaluation process in place, I could see that the group dynamics very much influenced the learning curve of the volunteers and how much they were willing to risk to achieve their goals.

Thanks to the Quakers who ran this program, I was well-launched on a lifetime quest to evolve a pedagogical approach that could optimize learning in diverse groups. My quest included leading over fifteen hundred courses and workshops for adults, mostly in the United States but including countries on five continents. My journey included teaching in colleges, universities, and graduate schools. The main points of what I've learned so far are in this book. I call the approach "direct education."

Making Our Peace with the Complexity of It All

Luckily, the supervisors in my early teaching and facilitation jobs didn't tell me at the outset how complex a learning group is! The layered reality dawned on me gradually, at a pace at which I could stay excited about it.

I came to believe that individuals in the learning group learn in different ways from each other: some learn chiefly through their ears (auditory), others through their eyes (visual), some learn mainly through their bodies in motion (kinesthetic), and others learn by making a gut-level connection with the information and the group (emotional). Of course, some tune into a combination of these. I learned that the very concept of "intelligence" has also

been re-evaluated, with recognition that broad diversity shows up even in that dimension (Gardner, 1983).

The communication styles and life experiences of different racial and ethnic groups strongly influence how they learn, including what they learn from the same presentation. Gender matters. Class background makes a strong difference; public education levels the playing field only in our dreams.

At one point while teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, I grew tired of how the students were writing papers, so I substituted journals to see what would happen. After some coaching, most of the thirty-five students wrote deeply personal reflections on their encounters with the course. Our agreement was that they could keep confidential whatever they wanted to, as long as they would share with me four pages a week from their larger journal. As the semester went on and trust grew, more and more divergence of experience was revealed, and by the end I realized that instead of teaching one course, in the experience of the students I was teaching thirty-five courses!

I've made my peace with the reality that participants in a learning group pursue their own agendas, whatever my intentions are. At the end of one training of trainers workshop, a young man came to me. "Thank you for the breakthrough I had this weekend in my relationship with my dad," he said. Surprised, I asked him how he managed that, since nothing of that work had been visible to me.

"Well," he said, "you reminded me of him from the moment I walked in, and of some of the ways he drives me crazy, and so I used the workshop to confront my issues with him." He smiled. "I was up half the night with my journal, and I had a breakthrough. So thanks."

"You're very welcome," I smiled back, shaking my head at how much goes on under the surface.

Not only is the facilitator or teacher facing many kinds of diversity—the learners' agendas, culture and class background,

and learning styles are just a few—but there's another level of influence operating powerfully in most groups: the characteristics of the group itself. Since my first job, this principle has been reinforced through the years to the point that it is one of the things that keeps me from burning out: I can't get bored in teaching, because the next group will be a new adventure.

Letting Go of the Old Paradigm of Education

Thomas S. Kuhn (1962) argued that when a paradigm is wearing out, people increasingly notice exceptions to the rule. "Yes, the earth is flat, but it's also true that Columbus made it back to Spain." "Yes, only violence is capable of overthrowing a dictatorship, but in 1989 some East European dictatorships were overthrown nonviolently."

The old paradigm of education is also wearing out, and parts of the new paradigm have been emerging in my lifetime. John Dewey (1966) famously insisted that "we learn by doing." During World War II the U.S. government's effort to educate families to eat foods formerly wasted discovered that homemakers were far more likely to change through discussion groups than through lectures. Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1972, 1994) found that peasants learned to read more effectively when he used participatory methods that supported their power; his work flowered into popular education. The activist intellectual Ella Baker gained influence in the U.S. civil rights movement through her brilliant organizing skills and coached the young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to use her version of popular education to empower Southern African Americans to stand up to the Ku Klux Klan (Ransby, 2005).

Some founders of the Movement for a New Society (MNS) were active in the civil rights movement and then in the early 1970s began a training program that became international in scope.

Drawing on activist experience, on Freire, and on early insights from mediation training and encounter groups, MNS trained trainers for a variety of groups and published the widely read adult educators' guide *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Coover, Deacon, Esser, and Moore, 1977).

Experiential trainers like those who started Outward Bound got life-changing results through group challenges and adventure-based learning. Religious educators made their work come alive through hands-on and participatory methods, which now permeate adult education.

I was lucky to be taught at a young age by a couple of innovators who had begun to tune into the new paradigm of education. They planted seeds that later sprouted; they gave me early personal experience with a model more complicated than that of traditional educators.

Ruth Frederick had a sharp eye and a commanding presence. We fifth graders thought it really was possible that she could see every one of us and at the same time write on the blackboard with her back turned. Unlike some of the dowdy-looking teachers in our school, she wore colorful dresses that fit her snugly, and her brown hair shone as it fell in a wave to her shoulders. Maybe being daughter of the mayor of my town, Bangor, Pennsylvania, added to her air of authority.

Ms. Frederick was full of surprises. She gave each of us a German pen pal—this not long after World War II—and we were soon puzzling about what we could possibly write back to these youngsters with their fractured English and postcards showing strange-looking towns. Another day she took me aside and told me that, instead of reading each of the stories in the fifth-grade reader and completing workbook exercises, I was to choose a few of them and turn them into plays. English class shifted immediately from a chore to a thrill. Finally, she astounded us all one morning when we arrived to find all our desks had been re-organized into a giant circle. "It's

time you look at each other when you speak," she said. "We need to have real discussions. You're growing up, you know."

In eleventh grade I again had one of those rare teachers who had a more complex view of education than the mainstream paradigm. Carmela Finelli, I now realize, looked at us and saw thirty adolescents with scant attention for the names and dates of great American authors. We hungered for knowledge, but not names and dates. We most of all wanted to learn to know ourselves, obscured as we were by awkwardness, anxiety, and competition.

"Finelli," as we referred to her, had grown up in the Italian town next door to mine. Roseto, Pennsylvania, later became famous among epidemiologists because of its low incidence of stroke and heart disease despite a diet of rich food. A study of Roseto concluded that the closely-knit Italian community itself was one protection against the stress that promotes heart trouble (Bruhn and Wolf, 1979).

Finelli acted as if she knew how to heal our teenage heart trouble, because from the first day she built community in her English classes. Her method sent the message of affirmation. She used small groups for sharing our essays about the authors. She patiently taught the talkative students that our quiet class members had important things to say. She used debate and dialogue to engage us in the great themes in literature: integrity, relationship, individuality, and courage. The class became a learning community of trust and growing self-respect. Of course, Thoreau mattered, and Emerson, and Hawthorne, and Whitman! How had we coped up till now without them?

Lucky me. I did have some teachers who even in the conformist 1940s and '50s glimpsed the complexity, the multidimensionality of the learning process. Now even Ruth Frederick and Carmela Finelli might be boggled by what pioneers have learned about learning, but I like to think that they would be pioneers today, too, handling in their graceful way the risks and challenges of a learning group.

What Is Direct About Direct Education?

Direct education cuts through the fluff and pretense that distances learners from the subject. It drops unreal expectations—for example, that kinesthetic learners will somehow learn from PowerPoint presentations—and unreal assumptions—for example, that a group is simply the sum of the individuals. I call this kind of education *direct* because it brings focus to the encounter of teacher and group; it replaces scatter—of teacher preoccupied with curriculum and participants preoccupied with distractions—with gathered attention. *Direct education takes the most direct path to the learner in the here and now.*

Because this approach builds so strongly on the achievements of popular education, the reader might wonder if there really is a difference. In 2005 I became the chief consultant to a million-dollar leadership education course of the Canadian Postal Workers Union. The course was based on popular education, and it had produced good results in its first dozen years. The union aimed to make it even better. I spent many hours in the back of the room, observing popular education applied to their content, and that woke me up to the distance that direct education has evolved from popular education.

Direct education is highly experiential, using a variety of methods to move participants out of their comfort zones into encounters with new possibilities. Although exercises are structured, they stimulate spontaneous responses rather than demonstrations or rehearsal of previous thinking: facilitators choose interventions that go for the "here and now."

Direct education is multicultural and integrates perspectives developed by movements against sexism, racism, and the other forms of oppression. As you'll see in this book, direct education doesn't compartmentalize "diversity work" but instead merges anti-oppression work into its method, into the very framing of the learning group itself.

Direct education works the four major learning channels as naturally as a circus works its three rings. Unlike both traditional education and popular education, direct education highly values the kinesthetic and emotional learning channels. Content is not organized according to linear logic but instead according to how people actually learn. Direct education understands how natural it is for people to resist learning, even in settings favored by popular educators, and it provides strategies for working with resistance.

The natural rhythms and cycles of groups are used to accelerate learning rather than being ignored or subjected to efforts of control. Conflict is frequently encouraged as a promoter of learning. Direct education integrates lessons from humanistic psychology and group dynamics. Design for courses includes the use of the group as a laboratory in which to try new behaviors and apply new insights.

Working with so many variables swirling around in the learning group opens some participants to a deeper adventure than adding skills and knowledge. Some of them (and sometimes even whole groups) want to unlearn the attitudes that slow them down. Sometimes they want to let go of their emotionally held limiting beliefs! When that door opens, the advanced practitioner of direct education gets to do transformational work. The arena of limiting beliefs is one place where most people hold back their own power. The tools we use for transformational work go to a new level of empowerment.

Direct education was evolved by the trainers associated with Training for Change, a nonprofit organization that works with grassroots and nonprofit groups in the United States, Canada, and over a dozen other countries. Training for Change (http://www.TrainingforChange.org) teaches educators how to invent their own tools and adapt them to their own cultures.

The Method of This Book

Because direct education is a way of handling complexity in a learning group, this book relies partly on stories to show its strategies for success. Stories include more details than expository writing and therefore reveal more nuances and layers of the facilitation process. Narratives include but go beyond articulating principles because they show the unfolding—what really happens when facilitation works.

Stories have been central to my pedagogy since my earliest teaching, and I'm pleased to see that they are achieving greater theoretical legitimacy. In a recent "state of the art" volume, *Transformative Learning in Practice*, Jo A. Tyler (2009) describes how and why stories work in terms of Jack Mezirow's adult learning theory.

I do take the precaution of changing many of the names in my stories and sometimes disguising the situations, because of the expectation of confidentiality that usually accompanies this work. I hope that the stories in this book illuminate a twin possibility: admitting the complexity of teaching *and* shaping the complexity into a journey of discovery which includes fun, struggle, lightness, connection—and joy.

In four main sections the book explores key concepts and tools that make direct education work:

Part I. Traditional education pretends that a class is simply a collection of individuals, even though every aware teacher knows that's far from true. Part I offers a useful way to understand the relation between the individual and the group, and how to generate synergy. Groups are mysterious; they have secret lives. There are very specific ways that facilitators can influence, and benefit from, the secret life of the group.

Part II. Participants in a learning group are amazingly different from each other, even if they believe they are homogeneous. How is our handling of difference influenced by social class? How is difference acknowledged, supported, or confronted? How can conflicts aid learning? How do we assist emotional expression to support the process?

Part III. Whether the content of the workshop or course is learned depends hugely on the design. Design in traditional education was controlled by logic, and most people forgot the content fairly soon after the end of the course. What are the principles of design that actually work?

Part IV. Good facilitation is more than mechanically implementing a design; it's more like stalking the teachable moment. How do we make the interventions that heighten the design, experiencing the joy of fine-tuning to stay very close to the developmental life of the group? How does cross-cultural training achieve its goals, when it does? And how do advanced practitioners of direct education do transformational work when participants are stuck and their learning curve is in decline?

Additionally, the book offers four resource appendices. Appendix A addresses educator burnout: how can we thrive in the long run? Appendix B addresses the idealist inside the facilitator and teacher: how do we keep green the vision that motivates us while getting satisfaction from the day-to-day work? Appendix C addresses the teacher as lifelong learner and provides suggestions for further reading to engage the intellectual context of this book, formed as it is by several fields: educational theory, group dynamics, humanistic psychology, and social activism. Appendix D addresses the technician: where to get the detailed instructions for using direct education tools, those that are included in this book and those that aren't, and what to keep in mind as you apply them.