

PART ONE

Core Factors in Teaching

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All About You

chapter ONE

It has always seemed right to me to think of teaching as a craft. For any craft, one of the most important aspects is having the right tools and knowing how to use them to their best advantage. As a simple example, having high-quality masking tape makes it far easier to paint a house, but you need to know that it must be removed before the paint is completely dry if you don't want to leave marks (and bits of tape stuck to your walls). One of the differences between teaching and other crafts is that the main tools are the educators themselves. When you are teaching, your personality, your approach, and your values influence the form and outcomes of the process. This is such an important aspect of teaching that it makes a huge difference to be aware of who you are as a teacher and how those strengths may play out in the classroom.

This chapter lays out the importance of the educator's experience and philosophy in shaping the educational process, and leads readers through some options for knowing more about who they are as educators.

By the end of this chapter you will

- Understand the importance of who you are to the way you teach
- Know why reflection on your practice matters
- Have some ideas about how to use your experience

WHY WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU'VE DONE MATTERS

When somebody walks into a room to start instruction, he brings his history with him. On the factory floor, the senior employee asked to train new employees has received training in the past and also has experience of working in the factory. The football coach talking to the team is drawing on knowledge and experience of coaching as well as a great deal of time watching games and usually playing as well. The charge nurse orientating new nurses to ward procedures is drawing on work experience, standard procedures, and the way she herself was trained when she arrived. In each case, the educator has a huge range of experiences as well as many hours of formal and informal learning to draw upon.

These background factors can make a big difference to the ways people teach. The overall approach people bring to teaching includes their actions, their beliefs, and their intentions (Pratt, 2002). Actions are observable, and it intuitively makes sense that they demonstrate the approach of the teacher, but beliefs and intentions may not be so obvious. Beliefs, in this context, are the assumptions the individual makes about the purposes and processes of education, and intentions are the outcomes the educator hopes for. Many educators assume that participants learn only from their actions, because these actions represent deliberate communication. Learners do more than this: they learn from the whole context, and that context is shaped by beliefs and intentions. This can be illustrated by thinking about a trades class where the instructor is strongly anti-union. In this case the students learn about installing drywall, but the instructor will choose examples and frame teaching in a way that does not acknowledge the unionized reality of most of the students' working lives. Even if nothing explicit is ever said, the students will pick up on the lack of references and most likely get the message.

One influential factor is the educator's own educational experience. Somebody who did well at school when she was young, tended to be friendly with teachers, and enjoyed reading and writing will have a particular view of teaching and learning. An educator who disliked school, was uncomfortable with the authority of teachers, and hated sitting still at a desk will have a very different perspective. These differing views make a huge difference to the sort of teaching these educators design and deliver, from the objectives through the process to the ways that learning is assessed. We could imagine that the first educator would be quite happy with a student essay as an assessment method, whereas the second would find marking essays excruciating and enjoy something "hands-on" a great deal more.

Ed Taylor (2003) conducted a very interesting study to understand more about the ways in which individuals' experiences in school affected their approach to educating adults. He talked to a number of aspiring adult educators about their experiences as school students and about their approach to being educators themselves. His results were striking, and they underscore the extent to which experience influences educators' practices.

Taylor found that when people are asked to talk about the most positive experiences they have had with teachers and to describe the ideal teacher, the similarities are very strong. So if a person has related well to a teacher who was friendly and supportive, then they describe the ideal teacher as a supportive person. Perhaps more surprising, they also describe themselves as friendly and supportive. The influence of positive experiences with schoolteachers seems to be very strong, even when the educator is thinking about teaching adults in a very different setting.

Previous learning experiences seemed to matter a lot as well, and they shaped how the educators in the study thought about learning. If an educator gained a great deal of insight through project-based learning, then she tended to use projects in her own teaching. It seems that if somebody is involved in an educational experience that suits her and helps her to learn, then she will try to recreate it in her own teaching. With regard to learning, one useful insight is that when asked about positive learning experiences, study participants tended to describe occasions when the teachers made learning engaging and interesting. These educators associated good teaching with effective transmission of existing knowledge rather than a more participatory or ground-up approach.

There are two important lessons from this study. First, teachers have a strong tendency to adopt a teaching style that they would enjoy if they were students, including the sort of techniques and classroom exercises chosen. It is not necessarily a problem that teachers teach as they wish to be taught. In many cases this will be a powerful approach, as the educators will bring insight and enthusiasm to the process. But I do believe that it is important for educators to know that they are doing this and to be aware of the preferences they are bringing to their teaching. For example, I like ideas very much and find them energizing, and this works pretty well with graduate students who love to discuss theory. But I also work with practitioners, who are busy people with a lot on their minds. For them, ideas are often interesting only if they are concretely linked to the complexities of their everyday experience, and it is important to respect this.

Knowing my preferences allows me to act thoughtfully and change my approach if another way of working might produce a better outcome for all involved.

The second insight from the study is the way people tend to think of good teachers as good transmitters of information, which reflects only one possible view of the way teaching and learning fit together. In the view of teaching adopted by Taylor's participants, only one side of the equation is considered—that of teaching—and learning is assumed to occur if teaching happens in the right way. Later in this chapter I will be describing other ways of thinking about these factors. Good teaching is not necessarily about transmitting a predetermined set of information in an efficient way—more often than not it is about management of a set of relationships, which may result in efficient transmission but ideally leads to a deeper exchange between the people involved.

The field in which the educator was trained can also be an influential factor (Jarvis-Selinger, Collins, & Pratt, 2007). For example, if you are a trained scientist your teaching might be very orientated toward facts, whereas somebody with a background in literature may want to encourage students to explore ideas and make arguments. Admittedly, this is a bit stereotypical, but it represents the way that different educational experiences can affect the educators' views of the types of knowledge that are most useful. The important thing is being aware of the extent to which your approach as an educator is influenced by this factor and how it is more or less helpful in different situations.

Length of experience in the classroom makes a big difference in teaching—in two different ways. On the positive side, research shows that schoolteachers with experience can be more effective teachers (Murnane & Phillips, 1981). In fact, the difference they discovered was very significant. Children taught by a teacher with five years of experience progressed four to five months more in a single year than those taught by one who was just beginning to teach. On the less positive side, one classic study suggests that over time teachers in schools become less concerned with building rapport with students and more focused on a "tight" process with clear expectations and rules (Rabinowitz & Rosenbaum, 1960). Even though this research looks at schoolteachers, it alerts us to the danger of becoming too rigid in our approach to teaching wherever we work.

These studies suggest that we have to think about our experience in order to ensure that we are making it work for us in positive ways. We need to find ways to hold onto the interest and enthusiasm with which educators start their career of

teaching adults, and this chapter will give you tools that will allow you to do this. Before turning to this, though, I need to make one more point. As you go through the questions for reflection and the different philosophies in the next two sections, it is very likely that you will think “Well, it depends,” or “With this group I would do that, with the other group something else,” or “It changes with the aims of the class.” These are absolutely fair reactions—teaching is a dynamic process, and it would be misleading to suggest that any educator approaches it in the same way every time. However, trying to understand your own favored approach can alert you to two aspects of your practice. The first is the starting points you tend to use. What do you take as the default position for teaching, the home base from which you work? The second is the gaps in your practice, the areas where you could potentially do more. Nobody is a perfect educator able to respond in an ideal way to every situation, but being aware of the less developed areas in your practice can be extremely helpful. The next sections look at some ways you can build deeper knowledge of these aspects of your teaching—a necessary step in mastering the tools of your trade.

REFLECTING ON YOUR APPROACH

It is quite useful to educators to understand their own perspective and how it grows out of their experience and any training they may have had. The process of understanding who you are as an educator, and of constantly thinking about how to improve your practice, is called *reflection*. Somebody who approaches his work in this way is called a *reflective educator*. This approach has many benefits—not only does it lead to better teaching, but reflective educators often find their work more interesting and challenging.

One person who has thought and written a lot about teaching adults is Stephen Brookfield (1995). He really pays attention to his own teaching practice and why he does the things he does, and he encourages others to do the same. For Brookfield, one of the keys to reflective teaching is identifying assumptions and questioning them.

For some educators, the assumptions that need to be identified might include that adults like to be told what to learn and how to learn it. These educators may believe that adults are busy and don’t have time to work this out for themselves. For other educators, the key assumption might be that adults should always be

included in course planning, as they are the experts on their own learning. For Brookfield the problem is not that one of these assumptions is wrong and the other right—it's that both represent absolute, unquestioned perspectives on teaching and learning.

Brookfield does not expect educators to adopt a completely open, relativistic approach. What he hopes is that teachers of adults will think about these things and how they play out in their particular teaching context. There are few final answers; really, all we have is a set of well-thought-through responses to a specific situation and set of learners.

On one hand, this is a really high standard to set. The expectation that teachers will genuinely reconsider their most basic beliefs on a continuing basis seems impossible to live up to! On the other hand, the call for an open attitude whereby we really think through what we are doing—and why—sounds like a practical and sensible idea. For many of us, who have a range of tasks other than teaching to deal with, this can be an important and attainable starting point.

The first question is how to begin this process. We get used to our own way of seeing the world, and it becomes transparent to us, like looking through a window. The trick is finding a way to make the glass visible. Sometimes educators get a feeling as they teach that something they are doing is not quite right and could be improved. Sometimes external factors have an influence on how educators think about things. Perhaps most often, educators find themselves thinking about things differently without really knowing why. In any of these situations, reflecting on our work can help us to understand what is happening.

As an example from my own practice, I used to dislike “learning outcomes” or “learning objectives” in my own teaching. They seemed to make education sound mechanical and reduce the opportunities for learners to shape the process and direction of the class. After many years, I started to see that having clear, well-defined objectives could go a long way in helping learners to plan their learning on an informed basis and make it easier for them to know what to expect. They can also provide a way for learners to call instructors to account, in that learning objectives can be seen as a contract between the participants. From this perspective, learning objectives do not limit the power of learners but contribute to that power on a number of levels. My understanding of this complexity came when I stepped back and really thought about something I had noticed—students I worked with often really liked objectives and would ask for them.

If they were not available, it could be really stressful for the students and immobilize them. I was struck by the fact that even if the objective was simply to “define the learning objective,” that seemed to be valuable and useful for folk. At this point I began to realize the critical importance of the difference between *structure* and *constraint*. Students expect you, as the educator, to (1) help structure what from their experience can seem like a vast field of the unknown, and (2) not limit the ways in which they can cross it. Providing a few landmarks and warnings about the boggy areas is not the same thing as making them walk along a single previously mapped trail.

What helped me to understand this process was starting to write about it. I had become interested in quality systems in education, which require clear objectives before the educational process starts so that final outcomes can be measured. As I began to think through the implications, it became clear to me that I had been too simplistic in my approach.

Not everybody will reflect in this way, of course. Many educators prefer an informal journal in which they can write down important events and ideas. Sometimes people who write journals never go back and read them, having found that the process of writing was enough. Other educators do not like to write so much, but keep index cards (either literally or electronically) with details of things they’ve tried and what happened. Some experienced educators do not write anything at all but say that they reflect either through talking with colleagues or thinking over their classes. There is an important balance to be found here. On one hand, I do believe that it is important to find a way to structure reflection on your work as an educator—in fact, this can be considered in many ways as the mark of a professional in any field. On the other hand, it is also critical not to end up in the situation where reflection is a separate activity from teaching. This will not only reduce its effectiveness but also make it much harder to sustain.

Two ideas have shaped my thinking on reflection very strongly. The first is Donald Schön’s (1983) work on reflection in action. Schön looked at a wide range of professionals, such as doctors and architects, and came to the conclusion that they were deeply reflective about their everyday practices, but this reflection was embedded in the actions they took as part of their work. There was not so much a separate activity called “reflection” as a conscious application of ideas to problem-solving. The practice and reflection upon it were inseparable. The second idea is the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, which (expressed very simply) refers to

being conscious and thoughtful about what you are doing. Even if you are teaching a lesson for what seems like the millionth time, mindfulness asks you to be aware of what you are doing and why.

I think there is great value in educators' reflecting on their work and processing their experience—and this requires finding the approach that really works for them. It is not possible to tell somebody else what that approach is going to be. Some people will record copious detailed observations of their teaching, others jot a few notes, write a blog, or take a photo. “Questions for Reflection” can help you get started with your reflections, no matter how you choose to address them.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Who was your favorite teacher at school? What was it about this teacher that you liked? Was it teaching, personality, or both? In what ways does your teaching reflect these same values?
- Who was your least favorite teacher? Why? In what ways does your teaching avoid these same issues?
- Have you had a mentor in your life? What was important about this person's influence? Why did you respond to this mentor as you did?
- What do you dread about teaching? What seems difficult and ineffective?
- What do you love about teaching?
- In what situations do you feel most successful as a teacher?
- In what situations do you feel most challenged?
- How do you approach discipline in your classroom? Do you use humor in a way you are comfortable with?
- How prepared do you like to be when you enter a classroom? Do you think that coming into a class “empty-handed” disrespects the students or respects their contributions?
- If you could change one thing in your teaching, what would it be?

As you develop your own approach to reflections, there are a few criteria it can be helpful to bear in mind. Whatever your approach, it seems to me that reflections are most useful if:

- You can return to them at a later date.
- They are focused on a concrete problem or question—including the solution!
- They are based on an understanding of your teaching approach.

One way to inform and challenge your reflections is to understand a little more about how you think about teaching—which can all too easily be invisible. In the next section, I will lay out a few ideas for making your thinking more visible.

WHAT ARE WE DOING IT FOR?

One aspect of who we are as educators is how we think about education. What's the purpose of education generally, at the “big picture” level? What are we trying to achieve in our own classes? What matters most in the educational process? What ways of doing things will we support or not support?

There have been a number of attempts to bring the answers together and create a consistent way to frame the actions of educators in terms of their educational philosophy. Perhaps not surprisingly, this has been both challenging and not always entirely successful. In my many years of preparing adults to teach adults, this has always been the most complicated thing to discuss with my students, and the topic has not always really engaged people. Some have commented that the “philosophical” frameworks can seem artificial, too removed from real life, and oversimplified. I do have some sympathy with these concerns. After all, when you are struggling with establishing yourself as an educator, it does not really help to be told that Plato had the same difficulty. On balance, however, I believe strongly that some knowledge of these frameworks can provide insights into what you are hoping to achieve and, perhaps equally important, what sort of assumptions you wish to avoid.

To show how philosophy matters, consider the situation in which an educator has to prepare people for a written test such as the European Driving License, even though the students have not had much formal education and dislike “examinations.” In this situation, there are various options open to the educator. One is finding an alternative way to measure their skills in a way that does not punish

them for their past experiences. Another is working to strengthen their ability to complete a written test, such that their past experience need not prevent them from meeting the same standards as everybody else. The difference between these two options is philosophical, reflecting the educator's beliefs about assessment, about equity, and about the most respectful way to work with students with a limited educational background.

If you are interested in exploring your educational philosophy, there are two quite different ways to begin.

What Is Education For?

First, you can start with the overall and much broader question about what education, as a set of activities, is for. As you try to clarify your beliefs, different philosophies of education can provide a lot of food for thought. The most influential approach is probably that taken by John Elias and Sharan Merriam (1995), which identifies six different philosophical viewpoints that underpin adult education. The five related to practice are:

- *Liberal*: Interested in making sure that as many people as possible get access to the best of human ideas. The role of the educator is to ensure that learners have an opportunity to engage with and master this knowledge; the educator may also take on the role of expert.
- *Progressive*: Supports alternative ways of learning, such as problem-based learning and group learning. Educators working on this basis tend to take on a more facilitative role and to believe that knowledge comes out of exchanging ideas and experiences.
- *Behaviorist*: Focused on observable behavior and making changes in it. The role of the educator is to bring about and measure changes in behavior, often placing more weight on designing an environment that rewards the desired behaviors.
- *Humanist*: Chiefly concerned with the development of the person, with great importance placed on respecting and supporting people involved in education. The role of the educator is to facilitate development and growth in an appropriate manner.
- *Radical*: Interested in education as a means to support social change, justified by the inequities in current social structures. The role of the educator is to raise

consciousness of unfair situations and help learners develop responses likely to bring about change.

These perspectives have generally been recognized as the main philosophical approaches for the last thirty years. Lorraine Zinn (1983) took these ideas in the early 1980s and created a tool that would allow educators to answer a number of questions and see where their beliefs best fit. In recent years this has been developed into an online tool that can be easily and quickly completed. This is an interesting exercise, especially when it suggests that you are not in the category you expected, and I recommend that everybody, whether an experienced educator or not, give it a go.

One insight that comes from looking at the philosophy of teaching adults is that the dominant perspectives have changed significantly over time. For example, the GI Bill in the United States, and similar measures elsewhere, were strongly rooted in liberal traditions and the notion that returning troops deserved easy and free access to the best thought in the civilization they had been fighting for. Recent developments in workplace training, however, reflect more behaviorist notions, wherein the intention is to support specific changes of behavior in employees. Neither of these philosophies is inherently better or worse than another, but they do constitute a major part of the worldview of the educator.

What Perspective Informs Your Teaching?

The second way to examine your underlying assumptions is to start by thinking about the practical details of your teaching. Every educator has a idea about what their teaching should achieve on a concrete level, though we are not always good at explaining what it is. Dan Pratt (1992, 2002) and a number of associates have been working on ways to help educators clarify their position using the Teaching Perspectives Inventory. This online tool requires the educator to answer a number of questions in order to place their practice in terms of these five perspectives:

- *Developmental:* Teaching is seen as being about developing the capacity of the learner to solve more complex problems and deal with more complex ideas. Educators need to start with what the learners already know and work out how to strengthen and deepen it. In learning a musical instrument, for example, learners start with simple exercises and move on to Bach.

- *Apprenticeship*: In this perspective, teaching provides opportunities for learners to learn by doing as much as is possible. Classroom processes try to mimic the demands of the situations in which the learning will be applied. In learning a language, the emphasis would be on participating in conversation rather than learning grammar tables.

- *Transmission*: This perspective focuses on the content and the information, with an emphasis on “getting it across” to the learners. Instructors must be experts in the content, and there is a specific, approved version of the content that must be passed on to learners. In this case, learning a language does involve tables of verbs.

- *Nurturing*: Here the emphasis is on the emotions of the learners and on ensuring that they are comfortable and emotionally committed enough to learn. Learners may be seen as vulnerable, and the role of the instructor is to build the learners’ confidence and self-esteem regarding learning. In adult literacy settings, it can be important to ensure that the atmosphere in the classroom is friendly and warm, to counter learners’ potential experiences of failure at school.

- *Social reform*: From this perspective, teaching is about supporting changes both within and beyond the classroom or learning setting, and the instructor sets out to facilitate this. In the case of literacy, for example, the emphasis would be on the reasons why some people have valued skills and others do not, rather than the mechanics of using written language.

Pratt and his fellow investigators found that in secondary schooling and college level teaching, the dominant model tends to be transmission. In compiling the results from the one hundred thousand educators who have completed the inventory so far, they discovered that most adult educators have two or three dominant perspectives rather than just one.

The two lists, from Elias and Merriam and from Pratt, have some clear overlaps. One is the social reform perspective and the radical viewpoint, which the writers describe in a very similar way. There are also some very obvious differences. To me, this underlines the point that the values that you attach to education do not necessarily determine your practices. After all, not all humanist educators teach in the same way. This is a useful thing to bear in mind when designing courses—there are many different pragmatic pathways to any given broad and philosophical destination.

Whether you begin at the highest, most philosophical level or investigate your practices more directly through teaching perspectives, I believe you can make several valuable discoveries. The first possibility is looking at your philosophy and your perspective together and seeing how much alignment there is between the two. Most educators will probably find that they pull ideas and values from several different philosophies and perspectives to create their own particular mixture of beliefs and intentions. The interesting question is how consistent these are. If you believe that education is about distributing human knowledge as widely as possible, but you have a nurturing teaching perspective, this will create a certain tension as you try to take care of learners while trying not to “dilute” the content. If you are philosophically humanist but find yourself drawn to a transmission teaching perspective, this will produce other tensions. By starting to understand a little more about the way these levels work together, you can begin to develop an approach to teaching that reflects all you hope to achieve.

The second benefit of looking at your work in these ways is that it can alert you to areas to which you are not paying sufficient attention. For example, if you are a very nurturing teacher, it can be tricky to ensure that you are challenging students sufficiently. If you are very strict about transmission of facts, there may be times when you need to focus on classroom atmosphere and building a welcoming environment. Really, what we need to find is the point of balance between these different perspectives and approaches to our work—one that is both true to who we are and respectful of the learners and the context we work in.

My final point is that thinking through your philosophy and perspective can be a very powerful and effective way to identify the areas you would like to change. If, for example, you would like to be an educator who builds apprenticeship in your classroom, but you find that your dominant perspective is transmission, you can think about what you need to change in order to bring your teaching perspective closer to what you hope for. Which values and intentions do you need to change—and how can you change them?

Philosophies and perspectives hold great potential for providing insights into your educational practices and helping you to plan different ways to do things. Though they can seem abstract, they have powerful concrete consequences for your life and work as an educator. However, you need to take your findings and explore how they can be translated into substantial and sustainable development of your teaching.

WHY IDENTITY MATTERS

In the next chapter I discuss how *learner* identity makes a difference to teaching and learning. One major theme of this book is that your identity as an educator—your life experience, professional background, interests and values—plays a very important role in the way that you approach education. It is important to be clear about who you are and how that makes a difference. In my own case, I am a White heterosexual middle-aged male. People see me in a particular way because of this identity, and there are a number of issues that remain invisible to me because of my identity. I cannot know what it is like to be a woman or a member of a minority in our society. However much I recognize the value of others' experiences in this aspect of life, they are not my experiences. I am strongly aware of the importance of recognizing these gaps and the value of the ways others can address these experiences. If I had to sum up my philosophy of teaching, I would borrow a title from a piece by Michèle Foster (1994): “The Power to Know One Thing Is Never the Power to Know All Things.”

I started out working as a community educator in Scotland in the early 1980s. At the time there were deep concerns about unemployment, poverty, poor housing, and drug abuse in what were called “peripheral housing estates.” These were enormous swaths of public housing to which people had been moved as the inner-city slums were demolished. There was little money in these communities and typically very few shops or amenities of any kind. My job was to help the people living there to design and build their own recreational resources. The job was challenging, fascinating, and very different from anything I had ever worked at.

Since then I've worked in education for adults in Scotland, Canada, and the United States. I completed a Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia (UBC) that looked at how people set the curriculum in adult learning, and I have followed up with a range of research projects looking mainly at education for adults, though I have made a few dips into schooling from time to time. Recently I've been starting to look at online education because of the recent arrival of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and the potential for some really interesting opportunities.

Working as a university professor, I still think of myself primarily as an educator of adults. The questions that I face every day are not that different from those I faced in 1983. They revolve around credibility and how to place learners at the center of teaching and learning. I still think a lot about the tendency of educators to impose

ideas, or to say what's "right," and how we could handle this better. How can we, in other words, be knowledgeable and have something to offer without drifting into the tendency to act as "experts" and close down the conversation? Teaching still fascinates me because it is so difficult, still, after thirty years.

Values I learned in community education still affect my approach to teaching. These include recognizing that learners have lives outside of the educational process and that things happen that will affect people's engagement with the learning process. I am also concerned with being as equitable as possible. I remain slightly uncomfortable with assigning grades because they often are taken to mean differences in ability rather than in performance. I believe very strongly in diversity as a fundamental characteristic of education, and I remain deeply committed to the idea that education can make things better and bring about the social change we need to address poverty and social injustice.

When I make design decisions in my teaching they are profoundly shaped by my identity and life history, not least by my white privilege. Lund (2010) talks about the benefits that accrue from being a white educator of adults:

White educators may intellectually acknowledge racism without experiencing or confronting racism. White educators have no responsibility for educating themselves about white privilege and racism. White educators are not required to address racism in the classroom and can still maintain a nonracist image. White educators are not held responsible for learning and understanding about other races and cultures. White educators have the power to distrust and ignore those who bring up racism without recourse. If you are a white educator, your credentials are honored by colleagues and learners. If you are an educator of color, you must prove yourself competent regardless of your credentials. White educators' abilities are respected and anticipated. [pp. 20–21]

The choices made by individual educators, whatever their identity, cannot negate the power of identity in our societies. They can, however, go some way toward changing their manifestation in the specific context in which the educators work. My commitment to social justice leads to an aspiration to find ways to make choices in my teaching that do not perpetuate the dominance of particular groups

and ways of thinking, though very often these aspirations are not as well fulfilled as I would like them to be. The most insidious aspect of the privileges I enjoy is the ability to not talk about that privilege, but I believe that those in positions of privilege must not let that possibility stop them from speaking up, however difficult the conversations may be.

When each of us steps into the role of educator, our identity and social position matter a great deal. The same sorts of dimensions I mention in the next chapter when discussing learners apply to educators as well: What is your educational history? What community are you part of, and where is that community situated within your society? How does gender make a difference? What effect does your accent have? The educator can never be a neutral figure.

GOING FURTHER

So far I've laid out some of the factors that potentially make a difference to how educators view their role and put that perspective into practice. In this section I discuss what you can do with this knowledge and how you can use it to improve your teaching by building a map of your abilities and your potential. Earlier in the chapter I introduced the idea that knowing yourself as an educator is comparable to a craftsperson knowing her tools. And just as a woodworker can buy a new chisel, it is possible for educators to expand their tool collection. The more tools are in the bag, the more likely it is that the right implement will be there when you need it. In my view, educators develop by gaining more of these tools and more of the skills needed to make best use of them.

Professional development can be a real challenge for people who teach adults, for a number of reasons. For one thing, adult educators tend to be part-time rather than full-time, and very often they work in sectors that do not require ongoing study for certification. Nurses, for example, have to take a certain amount of training each year to retain their right to practice. If they are asked to become nurse educators in a clinical setting, they still have to keep learning about nursing, but there is no simultaneous expectation that they will study teaching. The same applies to tradespeople, employees of corporations, and even university professors. In most parts of the world, adult educators must voluntarily pursue further training and development. If there were a certification system with expectations for continuing education, it might be

easier for educators to ask their employers for time and resources to complete the requirements.

A second and related factor is the pressure of time and work. In England the *Skills for Life* program, designed to enhance basic skills in the population, requires a minimum thirty hours of training every year for educators working within the system. Even for a full-time educator the thirty hours can be hard to spare. In addition, there can often be issues with the range and quality of what is available. Sometimes there may not be thirty hours of high-quality training to sign up for, especially in the third or fourth year of the process.

The National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Learning, based at Harvard, conducted a study a few years ago to find out what kind of professional development was most useful to adult educators in terms of bringing about change in practices (Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003). Their conclusion, based on an in-depth study of 106 practitioners, was that such changes were very minimal. Seventy-eight percent did report some change, but it wasn't very substantial and was mainly in the way they thought about their everyday classroom practices rather than what they actually did. They found that changes were most likely if teachers were motivated to pursue professional development, had more years of experience, and had a higher level of education. In other words, the more engaged in education the educator was, the more likely he was to change as a result of professional development. Formal professional development is likely to be more useful to those who have education as their main career focus, but most adult educators are not in this situation. So educators need to be careful when selecting professional development, to ensure that it will actually bring about change in practice.

One alternative is for educators to commit to a program of self-development. The danger here is that educators can end up not practicing what they preach, for reasons similar to those just mentioned. Even though adult educators often work hard to support learners to become self-directed, it is not always easy for us to do this for ourselves. People who teach in higher education often have a great many resources available to them, easily and cheaply, but even here there can be a gap between what people would like to do and what they can actually manage. One study (Van Eekelen, Boshuizen, & Vermunt, 2005) found that most instructors learned through interaction rather than self-study. These interactions were equally divided among informal chats with colleagues, discussions with students, and

training and planning events. The main point here is that learning, though valuable, was far more often coincidental than part of a master plan.

For people who are interested in changing their practices I offer the following suggestions, based on my own experience and knowledge of the practices of many people working as instructors of adults:

- *Be really clear about what it is you need to learn.* Is it a new technique, an icebreaker, or a different philosophy?
- *It is far easier to start from a concrete problem than from something broader.* So, for example, “How do I help my learners understand the math they need to order the right number of floor tiles?” is a stronger starting point than “How much math should be included in trades programs?”
- *Look for gaps.* If you are aware of the aspects of teaching that worry or challenge you, or leave you wondering how to handle the situation, it is possible to orient your learning toward those parts of your work.
- *Start local*—talk to people around you about what they do to deal with the problems they face. It’s quite unlikely that you are the only person to have come across the issue that you are tackling, and even if you do not go along with their solution, it can inform you about what you don’t want to do!
- *Consult the library.* There are some excellent books about teaching adults (several are listed in the Further Reading section) that can really be useful here; they are designed to assist with thinking through concrete problems in a really practical way.
- *Look for programs.* Most locations have a wide range of programs in teaching adults available, from single courses to master’s and Ph.D. programs. One of the most helpful aspects of these courses can be meeting people in the same situation as yourself.

In the end, it is important that you take responsibility for your own teaching approach and the skills that support it. For most people teaching adults, it is not a full-time job; rather, it is something they do on top of everything else. In this kind of situation, learning comes in small and concrete steps, and your main concern is simply to ensure that those steps are taking you in the direction in which you want to go.

CONCLUSION: PULLING IT TOGETHER

By this point you understand a little about different approaches to teaching adults and why the experience of the educator matters. In concluding this chapter, I suggest some questions that it is useful to be able to answer about yourself as an educator. As mentioned earlier, the answers will not be clear cut and will change with circumstances. So think of this as a process of sketching rather than finishing the masterpiece. It can be useful to know:

- How concerned am I about making sure learners know a certain body of knowledge?
- How important do I believe emotions are in the classroom?
- When and how is it okay to bring social issues into teaching?
- How much of the classroom process should be negotiated with learners?
- How much do I focus on individuals and believe that my role is to help them learn?
- How much do I believe that the classroom is a community that rises or falls together?
- To what extent do I have a body of expert knowledge that needs to be passed on?
- When is it my job to judge how much people have learned?
- How comfortable am I with learners making up their own answers?
- How willing am I to get involved in tensions between students and other classroom relationships?
- To what extent will I be a friend to the students or take on a more traditional professional role?

There are no correct answers to each of these questions. What matters is that you, as the educator, are comfortable and knowledgeable about where you stand on these questions. The more comfortable you are with your own approach, the more effective and responsible your teaching will be and the easier it will be to design the contexts in which you and the learners will thrive. The better you understand what you are trying to do, the more fun you will have doing it.

