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# Archetypes of Teaching: Tethers in the Wind or Flashlights in the Dark?

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# Tethers in the Wind or Flashlights in the Dark?

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**Abstract:** A small but growing body of research focuses attention on how teacher assumptions, beliefs, and theories inform and shape teachers' actions within learning settings in adult and higher education. In this article, however, we suggest that teachers' rational conceptions and structuring of their work are grounded in emotional issues that cut across cultural and historical contexts. These emotional structures are manifest in familiar images, reflecting an underlying archetypal nature to teaching.

For many years, teaching has seemed like a proverbial black box in adult and higher education. In her book, *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins (1996, p. 86) writes,

> Though I held a Danforth teaching internship in my third year at Yale, nothing in that experience shed any light on what classroom teaching was about. When I asked the assistant professor I was apprenticed to for advice about the two lectures I was slated to give, he said, 'Stay close to the text'…as a teaching strategy it left me groping.

Despite a sizable corpus of research on teaching, many teachers in adult and higher education settings face with what intuitively feels like an incredibly complex and even overwhelming task. They ask for help and, in turn, receive platitudes and simplistic advice. Like Tompkins, these educators settle in to their roles, doing what they can to make sense of the job. Rather than floating free in a sea of multidimensionality, simultaneity and unpredictability (Doyle, 1977), they grope for something that will provide order, direction and purpose. Based on our research and observations we are left wondering whether effective teachers steer their way through the foggy mist of teaching by way of a theoretical 'flashlight?' Or, are they tethered to something from within that steadies them and helps them make sense of that unrelenting sea, and decide what to do – both in the long range and in the immediacy of the here-and-now? What is it that provides order amidst possible chaos in teaching? And, more importantly, should we be providing adult educators with external flashlights or helping them discover internal tethers?

Like others who study teaching in adult and higher education, our interest is to understand more deeply how teachers make sense of what they do when working with adult learners. In much of our work we have used the flashlight of 'beliefs' to illuminate and analyze the process of teaching (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Pratt, 1992; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Taylor, 1999). Recently, we shifted the beam slightly to suggest that teachers of adults were guided by "personal pedagogical systems," which consist of core beliefs, foundational knowledge and informal theories of teaching (Taylor, Dirkx, & Pratt, 2001). As we

continued discussion of this study and the research on which it was based, it appeared that personal theories of teaching might be one answer to what it is teachers use as they make sense of their micro-worlds of teaching. Yet, as we looked across our own studies and those of others, we noticed patterns that lead us to question the sufficiency of beliefs and personal theories of teaching as an explanatory framework. While beliefs and personal theories might actually be a helpful way to think about how teachers of adults make sense of what they do, we began to wonder if these might not be the *product* of some other underlying phenomena, rather than the *cause* of what we were actually observing. We began to wonder if there was not something more fundamental to the act of teaching adults, a character of teaching that anchored it in a sea of chaos and which served to inform and structure teachers' beliefs, intentions, and actions. This paper reports on our inquiry into what we call the archetypal nature of teaching: our tether in the storm.

## Making Sense of Teaching Practice in Adult Education

Within adult education, what and how practitioners think about their practice has been a focus of research and professional development for many years (Apps, 1979; Brookfield, 1995; Elias & Merriam, 1995; Palmer, 1998). Our own research on teaching beliefs suggests that teachers do what they do because they construct certain notions of what counts, of what is valued, and how they might act in ways to realize these things in their practices (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992; Gray & Dirkx, 2000; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Taylor, 1999). Teachers' actions are grounded in and reflective of their beliefs and intentions about various aspects of teaching, including the learner, the content, what it is they are trying to achieve, and their sense of the broader context of their teaching (Pratt & Associates, 1998). Our research on teacher beliefs reflects an interest in the ways in which practitioners understand and make sense of what they do. Teachers' perceptions of their experience suggest a surprising degree of constancy and similarity among different adult educators practicing in widely differing contexts and settings. When we say that teaching often looks similar across different settings, we are referring primarily to the way it looks from the *inside*, from the perspectives of those who are the teachers within these different settings. From one angle we admit that teaching looks quite different depending on contexts (Pratt, Kelley, & Wong, 1999). Yet, from another angle, one that focuses on underlying structures and processes, it seems to look surprisingly similar even in widely differing educational contexts, diverse cultures, and in different time periods.

Similar structural patterns across different contexts of teaching in adult and higher education are evident in a "general model of teaching" (Pratt & Associates, 1998). In addition, process issues may also be similar. Although instructional dynamics and processes often vary considerably, participant perceptions and behaviors tend to reflect concern for two fundamental issues - authority and intimacy (Bruffee, 1999). Issues around authority suggest concern for power and control, and are core to understanding what it means to be teacher-centered versus learner-centered. Intimacy defines the teacher's approach to establishing and fostering collaborative relationships with and among the participants, and a sense of community within the learning setting.

Additionally, despite years of attention to professional development that aims at significant change in the practices of teachers in adult and higher education, at a fundamental level, surprisingly little has changed in the ways teachers teach. Practitioners often complain that such professional development efforts lack specific suggestions, are good in theory but too time consuming in practice, will not work with the learners they teach, or fail to take into account the

constraining organizational contexts of one's teaching. Teaching ideas, such as integrated instruction, collaborative learning, and critical pedagogy, which fundamentally challenge the dominant foundationalist perspective in education (Bruffee, 1999) are, if seriously considered at all, often co-opted into existing frames of reference (Dirkx, Amey, & Haston, 1999; Richardson, 1996). Broad, conceptual approaches are scuttled for specific and concrete strategies that can be used on Monday morning. Adoption of new techniques by teachers seems largely a process of further enacting their existing theories or beliefs. Something about teaching makes fundamental change in teaching practice very difficult to accomplish.

If action arises from our beliefs, lack of change might be attributed to failure to address a teacher's core beliefs and theories. Several observations, however, make problematic the idea that what teachers do arises from how they think about what they do. When asked about their teaching, practitioners often revert to relatively simplistic explanations. For example, almost all the teachers we talked with said they wanted to help adults learn. When asked what it means to learn, however, many responded by saying they had not really thought about that question, or they revealed relatively simplistic notions of learning. Many teachers in adult basic education reflected in-depth understandings of the complex social, economic, and emotional issues their students faced. Yet, they adhered to largely academic conceptions of their role, which were devoid of the very things that informed their understanding of the people whom they taught (Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992). For these teachers the idea of emotions entering into their role was simply beyond the scope of their work. In another case, teachers in a proprietary college demonstrated a clear awareness of the complex and often contradictory demands placed on them by underprepared learners, the college, and society at large. Yet, they defined their instructional roles largely as subject matter experts charged with developing mastery of content as the measure of their students' learning (Gray & Dirkx, 2000).

These observations lead us to wonder what guides teachers' behavior, beliefs, and their decision-making across the diversity, complexity, and uncertainty of different landscapes universally called 'teaching.' What might help us understand underlying patterns of constancy and seeming resistance to change? Such curiosity has led us to explore a deeper, more emotionally-based aspect of teaching. We have begun to explore the possibility that teachers' beliefs and actions might reflect more fundamental, emotional issues that are constitutive of the practice of teaching. We refer to this as the archetypal nature of teaching. Is it possible that the practice of teaching may be guided, informed, and shaped in a fundamental way through the presence of archetypes?

### The Practice of Teaching as Archetypal

While the idea of archetype is more commonly encountered in literary and film criticism, several scholars have used it to think more deeply about education in general and teaching in particular. For example, numerous references are made to a "teacher archetype," characterizing a kind of universal person recognized across space and time who responds to a "call" and embarks on a hero's journey (Mayes, 1999). In describing how teachers come to construct an ideal, Cranton (2001) refers to the archetypes of the Good Teacher and Bad Teacher, arguing that the notion of the authentic teacher is a manifestation of the Jungian archetype of the Self. In addition, the discourse on teaching in adult and higher education reflects numerous mythological themes, such as "mentor" (Daloz, 1986; 1999), great mothers (Dirkx, 1986), healers, warriors, visionaries, and tricksters (Bean, 1966). These themes may be understood as outward cultural

expressions of the inner and unconscious influence of archetypes (Stevens, 1982; Whitmont, 1969).

We are not, however, attempting to suggest that there is an archetype of teaching per se, or a teacher archetype. Rather, we are interested in the archetypal dimensions or dynamics of teaching. Our inquiry is informed by Jungian (Whitmont, 1969; Stevens, 1982) and archetypal psychology (Hillman, 1975). Jung felt that the human psyche was embedded within and constitutive of a broader energy stratum. From this stratum arise varying field activities, which become discernible to an informed observer through patterns of image, emotion, and drives. Jung referred to these patterns of activities as archetypal manifestations of this broader stratum of energy (the collective unconscious). Archetypes represent "unconscious predispositions to see the world in particular ways, which, when given cultural input, result in "archetypal images" (Bean, 1996). An archetype becomes activated by "situations and problems, both inner and outer, by people, emotional conflicts, maturational needs, etc." (Whitmont, 1969, p. 42). Archetypes are like the lattice around which snowflakes form. They have no inherent content but provide a structure or form. When expressed within particular social and cultural contexts, they take on specific content and form, which Jung referred to as the "manifest archetype."

While expression of our archetypal nature is considered autonomous of ego-consciousness, it nonetheless may be experienced and comprehended, to some degree by our conscious waking selves. Archetypes are manifest symbolically through certain fantasies, urges, impulses, and other forms of behaviors. At first glances, such phenomena may seem merely chaotic or like psychic noise. Through the lens of archetypal psychology, however, they take on particular kinds of meaning. The social context of teaching is often constituted by intense relationships between teacher and learner, and among learners (Robertson, 1996; Boyd & Dirkx, 1991), arousing powerful emotional dynamics, such as those revolving around issues of authority and intimacy (Bruffee, 1999). These dynamics are expressed within these contexts through particular images and symbols. These images and symbols are means through which the archetypal nature of teaching is manifest.

A consideration of archetypes invites us into the world of images in which teaching is deeply embedded. Researchers now recognize the powerful role that images play in a teacher's personal practical knowledge and the ways in which they guide practice (Clandinin, 1986; Johnson, 1990). While this research reflects a different theoretical approach to images, it is similar to an archetypal perspective in that it underscores the generative power of image within the sense-making processes of the teacher. In an archetypal framework, however, motifs and images are outward manifestations of the underlying archetypal nature of teaching and learning. Hillman (1975) stressed the importance of the image in grasping the meaning of archetypal expressions and cautioned against reducing image to concepts or allegories. The meaning of archetypal expression is inherent in the *experience,* rather than conceptualization, of the images that are its outward manifestation. The practice of teaching is filled with emotions, images, and other feelings that escape rational conceptualization. The image of the teacher as leader or authority figure, the degree of structure within the learning setting, and the intimacy of group work or collaborative learning may all serve as powerful images which connect us unconsciously with deeper emotional and archetypal issues. Images of healer, mother, warrior, hero, sage, visionary, or trickster (Bean, 1996), as well as familiar and recognizable figures, such as Father, Mother, Hero, and Child (Dirkx, 1989; Boyd & Dirkx, 1991), represent archetypal motifs that have been associated with teaching, and reveal the deeper play of unconscious emotional dynamics within teaching. While often reflecting personal issues associated with the life

experiences of the particular persons teaching, these issues also reflect a timeless archetypal quality.

## Conclusion

From an archetypal perspective, to teach in adult or higher education settings is to participate in a timeless story or myth. This perspective allows us to perceive the ways in which teaching, at a deeper, mythological level, reflects a certain constancy and sameness. When approached from an archetypal point of view, we may be coming face to face with the enduring qualities or characteristics of what it means to be a teacher (Mayes, 1999). Constancy, similarity, and seeming resistance to change may be symbolic manifestations of this underlying nature, reflecting the collective need that traditional, foundationalist forms of teaching have been serving. When we challenge this paradigm, by stressing learner-centered, participatory, or collaborative forms of learning, we are essentially challenging the myth out of which traditional notions of teaching have been constructed, and the ways these practices have evolved to adapt to and manage the powerful emotional dynamics inherent in teaching and learning contexts. These adaptations are reflected in patterns of structure and process that serve to tether teachers in a potentially threatening and chaotic sea of intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional dynamics. Approached with a conscious attitude, however, these very same emotions can help us connect in a more profound manner with the animating forces of our lives. Expressed through and embodied in powerful images and symbols, they help us begin a dialogue with the archetypes embodied in the practice of teaching.

Thus, understanding how teachers come to make sense of their practices, and how we might foster lasting change in practice may be revealed through a deeper appreciation of the archetypal nature of teaching and learning. While beliefs, theories, and personal philosophies may reflect various ways of making sense of what teachers do, they may very well be conscious, rational representations of what is essentially apprehended imaginatively.

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