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Towards an Understanding of What it Might Mean to Research Spiritually

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Abstract: This paper reports on a two-year funded seminar series in the UK. This highlighted two distinct ‘locations’ of spirituality and the need to recognise different ‘ways of knowing’ when working in this field. It also raised questions about what it might mean to research spiritually.

Introduction

This paper draws on the authors’ experiences of, and subsequent analysis of data derived from, a seminar series entitled *Researching spirituality as a dimension of lifelong learning*. Funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council [Ref: RES-451-26-0008], the series took place over a period of 27 months. It comprised six one-day open meetings, each with approximately 24 participants, and five one-day meetings of seven members of a core group.

The seminar series was set up as a discussion forum and was not, of itself, a research project. However, key issues arising from the discussions were captured in written records which were subsequently circulated to participants for verification, comment and agreement that the contents might be used anonymously in any future publications. Feedback was extremely positive and included, somewhat surprisingly, a number of lengthy personal reflections and forms of creative writing. The records and responses now provide a rich source of data which has been subjected to a preliminary analysis to identify themes. Perhaps more significantly, the ethos of the seminars and the nature of the responses have caused us to question not only issues associated with researching spirituality but what it might mean to research, and work, spiritually.

Background

The seminar series was first proposed in January 2003 because, despite an explosion of popular interest in spirituality that is now widely acknowledged (e.g. Forman, 2004; Tacey, 2004), little had then been written about it in the context of adult education, especially in the UK. Our proposal was informed by newly-emerging work of this nature in North America (e.g. Dirkx, 1997; English & Gillen, 2000; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Tisdell, 2000). Recognising that spirituality is a highly contested concept, we started from the view that: “Human beings are essentially spiritual creatures because we are driven by a need to ask ‘fundamental’ or ‘ultimate’ questions ... to find meaning and value in what we do and experience” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 4). We also associated spirituality with the capacity to be fully alive and connected to every aspect of existence, ranging from inter-personal relationships to the global environment (Capra, 1997; Heron, 1998; Hunt, English, Fenwick, Tisdell, Tolliver & West, 2001; Palmer, 1993). We recognised that some people seek guidance and resolution in such matters using religious teachings and traditions (Fowler, 1981); others within a humanistic framework that is often shaped by principles of social justice (Van Ness, 1996, refers to ‘secular’ spirituality; and Berry, 1988, to ‘public’ [action-oriented] spirituality); and some may reject the language of spirituality altogether but espouse what might nevertheless be called ‘spiritual values’ in their lives and work through their commitment to, and care for, others (e.g. English, 2000, p. 30, refers to ‘Care, concern and outreach to others [as] integral aspects of authentic spirituality’; West, 2001, explores this in relation to the professional practice of family physicians in inner-cities).

Process

Participants in the seminars were self-selected: approximately half came from universities, including lecturers and researchers in education, management and medical education; others were based in schools, colleges, youth work or voluntary organisations; some were adult students; approximately 10% were affiliated to church or other religious organisations. Preliminary information made it clear that the purpose of the seminars was not simply to examine and generate research about spirituality but to explore reflexively participants' personal experiences and understandings of spirituality: a process that accords with what Griffiths and Cotton (2005) call 'practical philosophy'.

The open seminars all had the same format. We began and ended with a one-minute period of silence. Although not made explicit, the intention of this was three-fold: to create a sense of stillness in order to enable participants to 'drop the baggage' they brought individually into the room and thereby to enter freshly into the collective activities of the day; to signify the importance of working co-operatively, valuing the presence of others and giving them full attention; and to acknowledge the silence (sometimes called 'deep peace') out of which activity arises.

The first session (usually of at least an hour) was designated as 'a space for all participants to introduce themselves and their particular interest in the seminar'. This was followed by a presentation from an invited speaker and a general discussion on 'How (if at all) does "spirituality" impact upon participants' own learning and/or work?'. In the afternoon there were two more presentations, often on work-in-progress, including that of members of the core group. In small workshop groups, participants were subsequently invited to make connections between issues raised during the day and their own practice; and to suggest how the work of the seminar series might be taken forward. There was a final plenary session for feedback from the groups and reflections on the day. Throughout, participants were encouraged to observe ways in which their own understanding of spirituality was supported or challenged by the on-going discussions and, where appropriate, to share these observations. We felt that this process honoured our intention to make the seminars genuinely participative and, therefore, congruent with the understanding we had articulated in proposing the seminar series: that spirituality is associated with 'interconnectedness,' 'a search for meaning,' and 'situated experience.'

There were five closed meetings of the core group. Their purpose was to direct, monitor and reflect on what happened in the open meetings; and, drawing loosely on Heron's (1996) model of co-operative inquiry as well as on notions of auto/biographical learning (West, 2001), to explore members' own personal narratives and understandings of spirituality; how these were interacting with the seminar series itself as well as with each others' stories; and with what implications for members' professional practice and personal development.

Findings

Our own 'lived experience' of the seminars and core group inquiry, as well as a preliminary analysis of the records of, and responses to, these events, suggest that participants' spiritual perspectives may be broadly categorised as either 'transcendental' or 'transpersonal'. The former acknowledges the mysterious, an 'outside' of the known and knowable universe which nevertheless penetrates and animates that universe; the latter does not admit the possibility of anything *beyond* the known and knowable but operates at a subtle level of inter-subjective experience (see Figure 1). In both, Fleming and Courtenay's (2006, p. 126) finding that "spirituality was repeatedly explained or described in terms of connection" was strongly

supported. Significantly, however, many participants spoke of the difficulty of sustaining *any* sense of connection in everyday work contexts where time pressures and external demands often seemed to result in fragmentation of tasks, relationships and/or aspects of the self. As one participant put it, with rueful acknowledgement from several others in the group that this also applied to their respective workplaces:

“In our institution there is a lack of risk-taking, completely manic management and total demoralisation – the whole situation is fairly desperate!”

In another seminar, a lecturer in a university management school said:

“I’m really interested in these connections with everyone, and with the aesthetic, with poetry. I’ve a yearning to write more creatively [but] higher education is an ever more difficult context – reminds me of the saying ‘Sleep faster, we need the pillows!’”

And a lecturer in education elicited enthusiastic debate with the question:

“How do we re-establish contact with deeper levels of what it means to be a professional educator – express a ‘calling’ and connection with what it means to be human?”

Participants frequently referred to the “*nourishing*” and/or “*inspiring*” space created by the seminars, and how different this felt from their usual working environments. The following extracts from two written responses to the circulation of records of the events are typical:

I left feeling amazed and inspired by the way people treated one another - the respect and valuing of one another which is a contrast to daily organisational life. I welcomed the opportunity to be in that environment.

And:

I left feeling very excited that I’d found a way to unite all parts of myself and my work. I discovered that the connection was ‘me’! I also left feeling inspired to draw explicitly upon my spirituality in my teaching and my research, rather than to hide it as something not ‘valid’ in academic/professional space. Hearing from other people who are doing similar has definitely increased my knowledge and confidence”.

A piece of reflective writing engaged in by one participant immediately after a seminar, noted:

The deeper the sharing, the deeper the listening, the more absolute the respect, then the greater the value and impact of the experience. It is as though, when people are gathered together, and are communicating in this way, a profound sense of the interconnection between those present is experienced.

Although the contrast between the ethos of the seminars and that of many participants’ workplaces was striking, the seminars were not simply about creating a warm fuzzy glow! Reflecting on the whole series in the final meeting of the core group, we noted that, while a surprising number of people had been willing to share and explore deeply personal and sometimes difficult issues, a capacity for detachment and critical questioning had also been evident. We had engaged, for example, with such questions as how ‘spirituality’ can be exploited by unscrupulous individuals and large-scale corporations in the interests of the ‘bottom line’; and how individual interpretations of spirituality may sometimes serve as an escape from life and its difficulties rather than to encourage a fulsome engagement with it.

Like Fleming and Courtenay (*ibid.*), we also heard considerable evidence in the stories people shared that most regard ‘spirituality and religion as distinct, yet interrelated concepts’, with spirituality often sensed as “*broader*” and more “*uncertain*” than religion. For many of our participants, too, spirituality is “a deeply personal concept involving a search for identity and meaning” (Fleming and Courtenay, *ibid.*) with which they have struggled over a long period of time. One, for example, spoke of the tensions between religion/spirituality and ‘self’, as follows:

[When I was a child] Religious belief - my understanding of myself and the world - was clearly defined; it was a ready-made jumper for me to put on and wear. Nevertheless it was not a comfortable jumper, it didn't seem to fit me, despite the fact that everyone around me seemed more than happy with it ... Only now can I see that the last 20 years have been a gradual process of establishing an emerging sense of self that rejects institutionalised religion and the clear answers approach to life. Instead I'm now happier to live with the uncertainty, the ambiguity and complexity of things.

Our experience of, and written evidence from, the seminar series endorses Fleming and Courtenay's conclusion that studies of spirituality need to move beyond questions of individual religious differences and that these could fruitfully focus on explorations of identity development (in which we would include auto/biographical learning). As another of our participants put it:

"The whole concept of spirituality is something holistic that overarches all of this – me as who I am personally, socially, private, professional and all the other people I am."

Discussion

The wide mix of academics and practitioners in each of the open seminars created some interesting tensions as participants tried not only to reconcile different spiritual perspectives but to recognise and work with different personal/professional priorities and 'ways of knowing'. Figure 1 illustrates how these may relate to one another. It draws on a model developed by John Heron which helped us, as facilitators, to deal with frustrations that arose in sessions when, for example, some people were perceived as "hijacking" a group to "talk about intellectual stuff" while others wanted "practical things to take to work tomorrow"; or when people struggled to express felt-realities and/or images to which others found it difficult to relate.

Tisdell, Tolliver and Villa (2001, p. 4) point to the way in which spirituality is implied in some racial/cultural identity models and argue that "Having access to other ways of knowing that are culturally and spiritually grounded (such as music, art and ritual...)" has implications for both transformative learning and social action. Figure 1 indicates how the 'I' that lies at the root of identity formation, and therefore of learning and action, may be embedded in understandings of spirituality. Thus, what 'I am', and a full understanding of what 'I' ultimately feel, think and do, may only be properly 'knowable' by engaging with spirituality as a felt-reality.

The current outcomes-driven, skills-oriented, consumerist culture of education, as well as of some dominant, positivistic trends in research, is clearly not conducive to such engagement. Nor is the tendency within academia to privilege 'propositional knowledge': that which is expressed through words and concepts in the public domain. Taking a 'practical philosophy' approach, the seminar series seemed to create a small space for the exploration of other forms of knowledge, of knowing oneself, and of acting in the world. Reflecting on the contrasts between its ethos and that in many workplaces, we now wonder whether the processes we engaged in to think about 'researching spirituality' begin to indicate what it might mean for an educator to work, and research, spiritually.

We suggest this requires an appreciation of both embodied knowledge and *mythopoesis*: knowing *via* the senses and the heart as well as the rational mind. This needs to be combined with an 'auto/biographical imagination', in which the lived experience of both tutor/facilitator and student, and researcher and 'researched', can be drawn on, respectfully, dialogically and reflexively. In the words of a seminar participant, to work spiritually we may need to:

"create new ways to talk and connect – 'walk the talk' so that, if you believe relationships can be different, you need to think about embodying that in your work."

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