



6-1999

Teaching and Learning Relations Journey of Experience and Meeting

Susan May

Dolores Furlong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

May, Susan and Furlong, Dolores (1999) "Teaching and Learning Relations Journey of Experience and Meeting," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol13/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice* by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

Teaching and Learning Relations: A Journey of Experience and Meaning

by

Susan May and Dolores Furlong

As adult educators we often question the meaning of the teaching-learning relations we experience with students. Some of these relations evolve into friendships and mentorships, while others develop only superficially. We sought knowledge about the qualities of teaching-learning relations, which serve to create effective bonds with students, as well as those that lead to separation or apathy. Using a graduate Adult Education program as a case study, we interviewed university teachers about what teaching-learning relations meant to them.

The context of this exploration is unique. The case study is situated in a Master of Adult Education program, which has a self-directed and professional development orientation and is delivered via distance. Students communicate with faculty and one another through letters, electronic mail, telephone calls, and sometimes in-person visits. Students enter the program as adult learners who have practical experience in a diversity of adult education contexts (i.e., as health educators, community college teachers, community developers, etc.) and they participate actively in defining their programs of study. Students have a five-year period in which to complete program requirements, which they negotiate with faculty, and which include development and completion of a learning plan and portfolio, a critical review of literature, an action research project, and a thesis. To accommodate the circumstances of part-time learners, students are required to be on campus only once for a three-week orientation; subsequently they work from their home communities for the remainder of the program.

The majority of students reside in Canada, but many are hundreds and thousands of miles traveling distance from the campus, faculty, and one another. Despite this geographic distance, and the fact that students do not work in cohort class groups, faculty observe that a community of learners forms. Students are proud of their affiliation with this particular program and often make efforts to converse with one another, whether in-person at professional conferences, or through various forms of correspondence. For example, Kay wrote to her advisor about how "this program has helped me to realize how dependent I am on people and how important the interchange of ideas and the building of community are." The majority of students overcome the pitfalls of fear, discouragement, and isolation frequently resulting from individualized distance learning. While not all students become active members of this community, many do form strong bonds of friendship and establish professional associations which extend beyond program graduation. These interactions are not confined to academic discourse, but also encompass social and professional conversations, as well as shared problem-solving in topics related to political agendas in the workplace, and how to effect social change.

The primary role of faculty in the program is that of student advising. Except for several 3-week orientations each year, faculty primarily work with students one-to-one, by providing advice, support, resources, and ongoing feedback/critique on proposals, assignment drafts, and thesis work. Faculty supervise up to 50 students, although not all students are active at any particular time, and the amount of contact with students varies greatly. Faculty also encourage students (and graduates of the program) to interact together when feasible, to ensure that

students are exposed to a diversity of ideas, and learning/teaching styles. Faculty encourage students to participate in professional conferences, where they can meet one another, and faculty publish a newsletter several times a year as a forum to encourage networking and debate, to promote program activities, to welcome new students to the program, and to announce graduate achievements. One student remarked to her advisor that receiving the newsletter, "was like getting a letter from home!"

Our inquiry has been motivated by our curiosity about the depth and significance of learning that students attribute to their engagement with faculty in this self-directed context. It is typical for students to graduate from the program extolling the virtues of their teachers, confirming their commitment to lifelong learning, identifying a transformational educational experience with a global view of issues, and remarking on their increased expertise as both learners and educators (May & Furlong, 1997).

As a grounding to this article, we supplemented our personal experiences of the program and the teaching-learning relations inherent in it through open-ended interviews with four faculty members (of whom Susan was one). We name the other teachers Daniel, Karen, and Chris and note their experience in this teaching context ranges in duration from one to twelve years. We also drew upon students' personal experiences and observations as recorded in selected letters and documents sent to faculty members over the past six years. We engaged together in a reflexive, collaborative process, continuously negotiating meanings with each other.

The Journey Metaphor

Our exploration revealed that the images teachers and students use to describe the educational relationship change significantly over time. However, depicting learning as a journey into the meaning of life experience is a recurring theme. The concept of a journey is not only employed by students, but also by faculty to denote the holistic and synergistic nature of the learning experience and the integration of the personal and professional. It describes the grandeur and the episodic nature of self-directed learning, as well as the key roles faculty members play in helping students traverse through uncharted territory.

Using a journey metaphor suggests several elements: a moving forward in terms of learning and development; an exploration of the unknown that is comprised of purpose; relationship-building within a political and cultural context; a developmental process involving a beginning, middle, and end; and an engagement in planning and decision-making involving elements of unintentional learning. In this article we invite readers to accompany us on an educational expedition in which teachers and students recount their experiences through story.

Starting Out: The Beginnings

Students typically define themselves at the beginning of their studies as adult education practitioners in a relatively narrow field of practice. Rarely is their primary identification as that of learners. Teachers, however, view students not only as practitioners, but also as learners having a diversity of learning styles and a broad range of confidence levels ranging from petrified to overconfident. Initially, teachers invite students to engage in a self-assessment process that encompasses personal and professional needs within adult education as both a field of practice and a field of study.

Teachers describe two primary expectations students have of their studies. Susan provides two examples as documented from student correspondence. In one case Andrea remarked that she wanted to obtain “a piece of paper with my name on it!” while in another case Kent described how he entered “the program to learn, to challenge myself, and to get better at facilitating processes of popular education, not to obtain an academic piece of paper that would help me in some sort of career climbing exercise.” The task of teachers is to negotiate a learning program with students which both fulfills students’ expectations and accommodates institutional requirements. During this process, students are encouraged to “expand their horizons” and to explore the terrain of adult education broadly and critically, before prematurely focusing on particular objectives and projects. Although students are given time and space to engage in this work, teachers at this stage initiate conversations and contact.

From the very beginning, teachers encourage students to understand self-directed learning as a complex concept with controversial meanings (Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1992). Teachers told us that through discovery, experimentation, critique, and reflection students learn that self direction constitutes a developmental process. It requires negotiation with teachers, capable management of resources, and contextualization.

In her reflections on teaching, Karen told us that adult learners come to this program with life experiences which have raised significant questions for them. They embark on a journey into the unknown with their advisors seeking to find meaning in their work and professional activities. By accompanying them, teachers ensure that the teaching-learning relation is dynamic, reciprocal, and mutual. We teach and learn about the subject, each other, our relationships, and ourselves as individuals. The degree of interaction and the depth of insight gained by each is shared and encourages growth. According to Karen, working together with faculty creates a milieu where we enhance the meaning of our individual experiences. Some students interact with faculty several times a month, whereas others have infrequent contact, depending on their particular interests, needs, levels of motivation, and commitment to succeed.

Teachers noted with interest that not long after students begin studying they typically question both their decision of selecting a self-directed program and their abilities to be successful. One student, Alma, wrote about how “internal debates have raged. Why do I not take a traditional path? I occasionally yearned for the ease of courses where all is assigned, where progress is steady, and where deadlines are external, where feedback is speedy.” Although students come to the program knowing their course of study will involve self-direction, only once they engage in the process do they begin to understand what is involved. Myra related how “at the beginning of the program I found the switch from traditional learning to self-directed learning to be a quantum leap. Since my practical initiation I find that it has taken me through some interesting academic paths and psychological struggles before I finally internalized the concept.” Teachers find it ironic that students often expect “to be taught how to be self-directed.” It is not unusual for students to request teachers to tell them what to do and to assign reading and projects. Candy (1991) reminds us, in this regard, that it is false to assume that adults are naturally self-directing. Instead, teachers observe that students’ confidence and abilities to be self-directing vary significantly depending on life experiences, maturity, and available resources.

Both teachers and students have to cope with this adjustment and transition from other- or teacher-directed to self-directed learning. Teachers we interviewed spoke of initially being supportive and affirming of not only students and their abilities, but also of the learning processes involved in the journey. Initially, teachers spoke of listening to students’ stories and of engaging

them in conversation. Teachers also spoke of sharing their stories and expertise with students and of welcoming and inviting them to collaborate in their learning enterprises. As noted by bell hooks (1994) by sharing narratives of their experience with students, teachers discredit the myth of teacher as “all knowing and silent interrogator” (p. 21). Frequently at this initial phase of the journey, teachers share experiences of other students as a way to demonstrate that learners are not traveling in isolation.

In this way teachers promote community-building and assume roles as travel guides and map makers. One student, for example, wrote that “I viewed the orientation facilitators as mapmakers; people who would reveal a new world in which I might choose a direction to explore.” They also attempt to ensure that students have the equipment, resources, and information they require in order to undertake the journey. Reading material about adult learning principles, teaching-learning relations, and the critical practice of adult education are resource materials that students value highly. Daniel noted, for example, that Taylor’s (1987) article about the disorientation and disequilibrium stages of self-directed learning is reassuring to many students. Teachers invite students to engage in “conversations” with authors and many do. For example, Kathy remarked that “once I started to speak, the words of Adrienne Rich and Muriel Rukeyser kept me company.”

Many students, however, are not just disoriented by the learning processes they experience. They also worry about whether studying by distance will be lonely or alienating and are troubled by the potentially “lonely spaces and lonely places” in which they may find themselves. They also question their abilities and sometimes suffer from self-doubt and “the imposter syndrome.” One student wrote about how she “struggled with the fear of failure and with little demons who whispered seductively in my ear ‘why are you doing this?’” Another student spoke of “fear of my inability to do graduate work, to be able to articulate what it was I wanted to work on, and to be able to speak—to break the silence of my socialization that women’s words are not academic, not valuable.”

Students frequently are curious and afraid of the unknown and the uncertainty that this educational experience presents, yet they choose to take up the challenge. Teachers at this juncture undertake to establish and negotiate effective working relationships. Although they avoid being directive and controlling, they take responsibility for setting some boundaries in order to assist students, establish focus and direction. This process involves encouraging students to read broadly and to understand learning holistically and not in the cognitive domain exclusively. The teacher by being invitational and responsive to students’ implicit stories, also attempts to engage students in making meaning through experience. Chris told us in this regard:

It is difficult for learners to place their daily experience in a broader context. An educator can help the learner by reframing the learners’ questions and doubts about the significance of their personal experience in a larger context. This may be done by mapping out the learning process and identifying the learners’ current stage by naming the issues raised by the learners’ questions.

In many instances, teachers undertake this work by raising “politically contentious questions of voice, relevance, and authority” (Brookfield, 1993, p. 232). Teachers indicated they tried to be both encouraging and stimulating by posing critical and thought-provoking questions designed to generate ideas, uncover assumptions, politicize and contextualize issues, and clarify thinking.

The Middle Stage of the Journey

As students' journeys unfold, tensions unfold for students and teachers. Typically, students struggle with both understanding the complexity and diversity of the "big picture" in the adult education field and with establishing a useful and sustainable focus to satisfy their learning interests. It is a difficult and emotionally-charged experience for some students, as illustrated by Kate in a letter she wrote to her advisor.

As you can see I have not vanished from the face of the Earth! I am still down here struggling to decide where I am going with my work. I have gone through many stages in the last year—ranging from complete despair to elation... I felt that I had entered this program to increase my confidence levels by increasing my competence. But I have to say, I think it has done more to destroy my confidence than any other task I have taken on! I've now decided that maybe this was all part of my learning process and have made up my mind to give it another try.

In this way many students come to understand that they are "in process" as self-directed learners throughout their learning journey, and that a measure of trust in their learning processes and in the teachers they are working with is required. Related to this issue is a continuing tension between self-direction and teacher intervention. Teachers struggle to gauge when and how far to "push" students with respect to critique and depth of understanding. Chris told us that teachers also grapple with "reading between the lines" and "listening for what is not being said" in students' communications to them. Frequently, teachers depend on intuition to guide them. What is particularly problematic for teachers, however, is interpreting and dealing with nonverbal communication signals from distance students. Some students fail to communicate with teachers after returning home from orientation and never progress past this initial point. Teachers continually question why this happens and whether they can do anything to prevent students' journeys from ending before they actually begin.

For students who continue on past orientation, it is at this stage that although the departure point has been clarified through a self-assessment process, the destination and route to the destination are uncharted. Chris, one of the teachers we interviewed, described this part of the journey as a swamp or bog. He told us:

I saw the learning process as a bog. I had to work with who the students were, adjust my style and approach to how they worked. The standards of the program were a beacon, but how and when to get there was the students' own path. Some students were more involved than others. Some have crises along the way. For some, it is very threatening. There is a need to collaborate with students, and with faculty, and a need to be humble in order to develop fluidity with the process that unfolds.

Teachers readily acknowledge that traversing through the swamp involves pain, pleasure, and perseverance and that the process can be a "messy one."

Despite the difficulties, however, teachers speak of the journey and teaching-learning relations involved as powerful. Frequently, these teachers remark on the "wonderment" of the learning experiences and teaching relations in the program. For example, Daniel told us about "a kind of love I've experienced in working with students. There's a very strong bond of respect and caring for who they are. It was important who they were as persons." The personal engagement of

teachers with students in the learning enterprise provides the foundation for a relationship that is unconventional in the sense of expert/novice, one that discredits unequal power relations and builds on mutual respect and shared interests. Teachers we interviewed were sensitive to a whole variety of life roles and circumstances which demanded students' attention and commitment. By getting to know students as individuals through letter writing, phone conversations, and dialogue about assignments, teachers seek to be understanding, supportive, and flexible.

Reflection is key to the students' successful navigation of this part of the journey. Sustained contemplation of practice leads to synthesis, but it is a time-consuming and challenging thinking process in which to engage. Initially, many students resist reflection and prefer to continue along as "active doers." Rather than making a paradigm shift and drawing from their own experienced wisdom, some rely on old habits of memorizing content learning. Jane, for example, wrote

the more I researched and learned the more confused and less focused I became. My response was to try to read and study more, which in turn led to more confusion. Eventually, my frustration with the confusion led me to stop reading and to put my studies aside ... I had not yet come to understand the need for reflection and integrating the knowledge into my personal, intellectual framework.

For Brookfield (1993) "the process of making reflectively informed decisions is lengthy, tiring, and often contentious" (p. 237). Students with demanding schedules and responsibilities often neglect the reflection process until they are assured of its effectiveness or until such time as they understand what the learning journey itself demands of them. Teachers acknowledge, however, that the reflection process cannot be forced and that some students engage in it somewhat superficially, choosing instead to focus on achieving particular behavioral objectives.

Over time, however, with continuing encouragement from teachers, many students begin to value and trust reflection and the insights they develop from it. Dawn wrote in this regard that:

As I continued in the masters program, my faith in my own learning process increased. I discovered that I could distinguish between the times I needed to reflect quietly and let the ideas incubate before writing and those times when I was ready to begin the process of writing to stimulate my thinking. These periods of action and reflection alternated frequently and I found I could predict them and plan my schedule to maximize my productivity.

Similarly, Beth wrote that she found the journal writing process helpful. "Already it has allowed me glimpses of my own assumptions on a variety of personal and professional issues. Reading the entries not only recaptures memories, but it also traces my learning progress." Becoming reflective practitioners is a milestone in the learning journeys of students. They are able to understand the theory/practice dialectic and to evaluate their work within a broader inquiry.

Teachers too, however, play a key role in helping students make links and connections between theory, practice, and political contexts. For example, a student remarked:

When I was translating theory into practice I was very confident and autonomous as a learner. As I reflected on the project phase, attempting to build theory from my experience, I benefited greatly from my advisor's ability to identify theoretical issues that I could not see. I continued to underrate my own experience and had difficulty seeing how it related to

larger educational issues. When my advisor identified these issues for me, I felt a surge of excitement and awe. I found it exciting to see how my personal experience related to some of the issues I read about in books. I felt a renewed sense of self-appreciation and confidence.

In this way, teachers continue to collaborate and engage with students in making meaning. Teachers struggle to encourage students to construct and analyze conceptual frameworks, to share meanings, and to become comfortable in discourse and debate with other learners. In other words, the relationship between theory and practice is “negotiated by real people in real situations” (Cervero, 1991, p. 35). Through various forms of communication, particularly letter writing, students broaden their perspectives and negotiate new meanings to previously unquestioned practices (May, 1995). Teachers continually challenge students to develop voice and to appreciate the ambiguity and interrelationships found in their life and work experiences. This process involves engaging students in shared and interdependent learning relations with teachers. Both are teachers and learners in this kind of educational relationship; it is reflexive.

The Journey's End

By the time students near completion of their programs of study, many of them have made close friendships with other students, and many of them share a sense of community with others in the program. Their focus broadens from being a health educator or literacy tutor to that of being an adult educator, and they share a commitment towards improved practice. The sense of sharing an important and meaningful experience is powerful for many, and is somewhat remarkable for a distance program. For example, June wrote to Susan:

I just want to say thanks; thanks for the many phone calls and letters; thanks for being there; thanks for being you; thanks for struggling as much as you have. See you on the next stage of the journey!

By journey's end students typically enjoy documenting their struggles and achievements and clarifying and integrating personal, professional, and political aspects of their learning and work. For example, Sharon concluded that:

Travel, like education, is not neutral. When embarking on a journey we have the choice of being a tourist who imposes her needs in other countries at whatever expense to the local country or as a traveler who learns with the locals to enhance our global society. An educator reinforces the status quo or is a catalyst for social reform.

Students become comfortable raising uncomfortable questions about the purpose of education and the nature of learning transactions. Frequently, they struggle with ethical implications of the work they engage in and they recognize political agendas at work.

It is also typical at this juncture for students to articulate their personal philosophies of education as a foundation for their work in the field. Linda remarks that:

Three years later and I still wrestle with the concept of my philosophy. My latest theory is that developing a philosophy is like preparing for a long journey. My philosophy includes having a vision—a destination of sorts, using principles as a decision-making map, budgeting my time and energy, nurturing education companions, establishing an itinerary of learning priorities, and through critical reflection, creating a safe environment.

Teachers encourage students to reflect continually upon their learning and to draw upon foundational theories and experience for purposes of making meaning. Teachers both affirm students' journeys and collaborate in the process through dialogue.

Frequently, students talk about the learning process being a transformational one. For example, Jane writes:

The process and experience of my maiden voyage has yielded a self-revelation of particular significance. I have realized a "paradigm shift," a change in the beliefs I use to explain and make sense of my life's experiences. I realize now that my natural inclinations are towards "fixing," finding solutions to problems for others rather than helping them discover their own solutions. I have to make a conscious effort to maintain the attitude of a "mid-wife" teacher.

Jane is making a commitment to a learning enterprise that is collaborative, and one in which her authority is based on cooperation.

Although the role of the teacher is not diminished, students and teachers must continually renegotiate their relationship as students' levels of confidence and needs change. For example, early on in her learning journey Virginia describes her teacher, Karen, as a mentor. "I've relied on her verbal and written feedback and advice ... She is also there as a mentor to give me some tips on how I could improve the quality of my work." Over time, however, Virginia came to view her teacher as a role model for other educators wanting to encourage learner self-reflection. She writes:

Rather than assuming a directive role in giving me answers to my questions, she has promoted my self-directed learning abilities by reflecting back to me some of my questions and encouraging me in the problem solving process ... She has also been an excellent role model from which I have based my role as an adult educator and promoted self-directed learning to the students I am presently teaching.

The teaching-learning relationship develops over time, as students' confidence and abilities increase. Susan describes her role as Minnich (1983) does in terms of being both a friend and a critic to students, and of sharing an interdependent relationship with them. With increased confidence students typically make renewed commitments to the adult education field, and to continued and lifelong learning. As noted by Jim, "this is not an ending; this is a beginning."

In Conclusion

We began our inquiry by questioning the qualities and characteristics of teaching-learning relations that promote learning and growth. Somewhat unique to our exploration was the distance context and the geographical distance between teachers and students. Learning in this setting unfolded as a personal and educational odyssey for teachers and students alike; and it highlighted the importance of conversation and negotiation as teaching and learning strategies. The transparency of the educator emerged as a key factor in creating a safe and stimulating learning environment. In other words, by "naming the processes" (Griffin, 1987), faculty operationalized adult learning principles as they engaged with students. We confirmed our personal observations that teachers can bridge geographical, philosophical, and personal distances with students by engaging in conversation, sharing stories, raising critical questions, offering critique of arguments, setting boundaries, and offering support. We also learned, however, that

relationship-building constitutes both art and science. Knowing when and how to intervene with students requires sensitivity, skill, intuition, and honesty. In distance settings, this involves “reading between the lines,” being sensitive to non-verbal communication cues, and becoming comfortable with ambiguity. Together teachers and students can construct learning milieux, which are fluid and flexible and which challenge common stereotypes of self-directed and distance learning. As teachers bridge the distances between themselves and students, so, too, can teachers and students create connections between theory and practice, personal and political positions, cognitive and humanistic learning.

Interesting issues arise from our inquiry about teaching-learning dynamics within distance and self-directed learning contexts. In cases where student journeys do not progress beyond beginning phases, we question what learner characteristics, teacher qualities, life circumstances, and academic barriers interfere. Perhaps a partial answer rests in Daniel’s correspondence to a student in which he advises that “learning in a self-directed program, such as ours, requires of all who undertake this journey a special strength, clear vision, humility, and self-discipline.” Not all students have these qualities, and some students prefer to take programs that are grounded in behavioral objectives and which can be completed quickly. We also question some common assumptions made about the desirability of both learner independence (Paul, 1990) and “high tech” delivery systems in distance education. In this inquiry, learner/teacher interdependence and “low tech/high relationship” approaches to teaching proved effective. Students spoke repeatedly about changed meaning-perspectives and of having made “quantum leaps” in their academic and professional development. And, finally, we question whether learner isolation necessarily constitutes an issue in distance education contexts (Garrison, 1992) and whether self-directed learning necessarily threatens “organized teaching” and campus-based programs (Kulich, 1991). In our experience, distance learning contexts can become sites where teachers and students collaboratively and effectively grapple with both academic and practice problems. It was evident from our exploration that the teaching-learning milieu was one in which student journeys created personal struggle, increased self-awareness, and promoted academic discourse.

References

- Brookfield, S. (1993). Self-directed learning, political clarity, and the critical practice of adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43(4), 227-242.
- Candy P. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cervero, R. (1991). Changing relationships between theory and practice. In J. Peters, P. Jarvis & Associates (Eds.), *Adult education* (pp. 19-41). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Garrison, B. R. (1992). Critical thinking and self-directed learning in adult education: An analysis of responsibility and control issues. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42(3), 136-148.
- Griffin, V. (1987). Naming the processes. In D. Boud & V. Griffin (Eds.), *Appreciating adults learning* (pp. 209-221). London: Kogan Page.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Kulich, J. (1991). Current trends and priorities in Canadian adult education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 10(2), 93-106.

- May, S. (1995). Rediscovering an old technology: Personalizing learning through letters. *Adult Learning*, 6(4), 17-19.
- May, S., & Furlong, D. (1997). Teaching that fosters professional and social development. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 16(4), 308-319.
- Minnich, E. (1983). Friends and critics: The feminist academy. In C. Bunch & S. Pollack (Eds.), *Learning our way* (pp. 317-330). Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.
- Paul, R. (1990). Towards a new measure of success: Developing independent learners. *Open Learning*, 5(1), 31-38.
- Taylor, M. (1987). Self-directed learning: More than meets the observer's eye. In D. Boud & V. Griffin (Eds.), *Appreciating adults learning* (pp. 179-196). London: Kogan Page.