

10-1-2009

## The Death of the Professor: Dialogue Education's Learning Focus

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### Recommended Citation

Driscoll, D. M. (2009). The Death of the Professor: Dialogue Education's Learning Focus. *The Journal of Extension*, 47(5), Article 25. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol47/iss5/25>

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**October 2009**  
**Volume 47 Number 5**  
**Article Number 5TOT2**

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## **The Death of the Professor: Dialogue Education's Learning Focus**

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**Abstract:** Are your learners happy with their experiences in your workshops and classes? Are they learning? The Dialogue Education approach is a unique way of designing educational experiences for Extension audiences. It was developed by Professor Jane Vella and inspired by the works of Paulo Freire, Malcolm Knowles, Kurt Lewin, and others pioneers of adult education. Design questions focus on the needs of the learners and promote dialogue among participants. Principles such as safety, respect, immediacy, and sound relationships enhance learning. Extension educators can structure specific learning tasks that allow learners to connect new information to their lives in meaningful ways.

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With a 25-year history as a county Extension educator, you might assume that I have picked up some effective educational techniques along the way. I have, but in the past year, the way I think about developing educational programs and teaching them to adults has taken a turn for the better. I have entered the world of Dialogue Education, and there's no turning back!

As Extension educators, we spend a lot of time developing and distributing content. While we are busy showing our PowerPoint presentations or sharing our knowledge, what is happening with the learners? Are they fully engaged in learning? Are they zoning out? Are they bored? Do we as educators subscribe to the "banking" approach, where we attempt to *deposit* lots of information into the brains of our clients so they can make *withdrawals* later? (Freire, 1993, p.72).

### **What Is Dialogue Education?**

The Dialogue Education approach was developed by Professor Jane Vella of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. It is a carefully structured way to enhance learning, inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. It builds on the theoretical adult education work of Malcolm Knowles, Kurt Lewin, and David Bohm. The aim of the approach is not "teacher-centered" learning, but rather "learning-centered" learning that gets to the core of what is happening at the time of the interaction among the learners, the teacher, and the subject matter content. (Vella, 2002, p. xv) After reading some of Vella's books and a *JOE* article on the topic (Gillis & English, 2001), I attended an intensive training presented by Global Learning Partners, the training company Vella founded, to learn more.

The main theme of the approach is to change the "top-down," mainly monologue structure of teacher-learner interactions and develop an educational design that promotes dialogue, not only between the teacher and the learner, but also among the learners themselves. Getting rid of the podium, re-arranging the seating, and shortening those lengthy PowerPoint presentations can be good places to start, but the approach goes deeper.

## Design Steps

When designing educational programs, dialogue education practitioners use the common guiding questions of Who? Why? When? Where? What? and How? as starting points. Most of us would begin our planning by fleshing out answers to the last two questions: the What? (the content that we will be teaching) and then the How? (the development of the materials and methods).

In dialogue education, much more emphasis is placed on clarifying what is known about the Who? (the learners) and the Why? (the situation that calls for the learning event). Then, the When? (the time frame) and the Where? (the site) are carefully considered to be sure that there is enough time to cover the materials adequately and that the meeting space is conducive to dialogue among the learners. Many Extension educators, myself included, give in to the urge to cram as much information into the allotted time as possible. In the dialogue education approach, educators are encouraged to pare down the content significantly, or negotiate for a longer time span in which to teach it.

Another design question that is added in this approach is What For? This question encourages the educator to develop achievement-based objectives using action verbs. An example of an achievement-based objective might be "By the end of this workshop you will have critiqued three methods to use when making major financial decision." Finding appropriate action verbs has helped me to apply different methodologies that increase dialogue in the groups I teach.

## Learning Tasks

A core concept of the Dialogue Education approach, and the answer to the How? design question is the development of learning tasks. Learning tasks are not necessarily activities or games, although they can include those. Vella states that "A learning task is a way to structure dialogue. It is an open question put to members of a small group, who have been given all the resources they need to respond." (Vella, 2001, p xiii) Vella confessed that it took her a long time to move from *teaching* tasks to *learning* tasks. When she was preparing *teaching* tasks, she was not inviting dialogue, but rather, was structuring her monologue.

Learning tasks usually include four components:

- A way for the learner to access their previous knowledge about the topic,
- A way to introduce new content,
- An opportunity to immediately use the new content in some way, and
- A way to connect the new learning to the current life of the learner.

The ability to write clear open questions is a necessary skill for the development of learning tasks.

## Principles of Effective Adult Learning

In addition to the concepts described above, here are some of the principles that are emphasized in Dialogue Education work (Vella, 2002, p.4):

- Needs Assessment: participation of the learners in naming what is to be learned.
- Safety in the environment and the process.
- Sound relationships between teacher and learner and among learners.
- Sequence of content and reinforcement.
- Praxis: action with reflection or learning by doing.
- Respect for learners as decision makers.
- Immediacy of learning.
- Clear roles and role development.
- Engagement of the learners in what they are learning.
- Accountability: how do they know they know?

Learning more about each of these principles has helped me clarify my goals for any educational program I design.

Paolo Freire once said to Jane Vella "Only the student can name the moment of the death of the professor." He meant that if a teacher is in dialogue with a learner, but the "learner still sees the teacher as 'the professor' with whom there is no possibility of disagreement, no questioning, no challenge, the dialogue is dead in the water." (Vella, 2002, p.20). Vella suggests that "the professor herself can in fact name the moment when she realized that she too is a student, learning from the adults in the highly structured dialogue she has designed." (Vella, 2008, p. xxi). By dying as "the professor," I am beginning to develop exciting new ways of structuring learning experiences for my audiences while enhancing my joy in teaching. I invite you to join me in exploring the Dialogue Education approach. Your learners will thank you.

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