

Welcoming spirit in adult literacy work

By Mary Norton

In 2004, I enjoyed a sabbatical from my work in an adult literacy and education program.¹ The sabbatical provided me with time and opportunity to explore arts based approaches for holistic learning, including spiritual learning. While preparing for my sabbatical, I happened upon an article by Leona English (2003) who described spirituality as including:

a strong sense of who one is; care, concern and outreach to the other; and the continuous construction of meaning and knowledge.

Reading Leona's description was a "lights on" moment for me as I thought about the importance of community  and meaning making in my workplace and in other adult literacy programs. As I read more theory and research on the topic and looked back on my own and others' practices, I began to understand spirit-full learning in relation to the themes of creativity and wholeness, connection, meaning, and change.

It is now 2007. In the time since I wrote this article, I have talked, listened, read and reflected about the idea of "Welcoming Spirit." Life experiences, a research project, and engagement in expressive arts have prompted shifts in awareness and understanding. I thought I might revise or "update" this article, but I've realized that a new piece of writing is in the incubator. So I post this article with an invitation to question, challenge and help us all extend our understanding and practice about welcoming spirit.

Elaine (a former literacy practitioner from Toronto) has started the questioning process. In reading the article, she took a "'problematic' approach that 'deconstructs' words/concepts that are often 'taken-for-granted' as good or bad. Elaine's comments and my response are included to encourage further comments. I have also included some new references at the end,

Creativity and wholeness

A few years prior to 2004, Moon Joyce², a singer, adult educator and artist, facilitated a two day residential retreat for participants from the program where I work. On the first day of the retreat, Moon drew thirty people together in song. The next day, during a creative writing workshop, people readily wrote and rose to share their writing. I became curious about how singing seemed to have prepared people for writing and sharing and began to explore the possible connections between singing and learning. 

In a *Drawing out the self* project, Judy Murphy and I (2001) explored how music, movement and art-making invite women into learning. During the project, participants joined in singing, reluctantly at first, but gradually with more and more comfort and joy. I have observed that singing and music making brings people together, lifts spirits, moves us into our emotions, and opens us to making connections with ourselves and others.  In this way, music making and singing invite us to bring our whole selves—our spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, social and aesthetic selves³ — into teaching,

learning and knowing. Bringing our whole selves is not something that has been widely encouraged in education, as cognitive or intellectual learning continues to have priority over other ways of knowing. Hundreds of years ago in European history—which is my ancestry—knowing was more emotional, more internal and more connected to the natural world. A person knew something by being deeply and intimately connected to it. 

Aboriginal people in Canada and indigenous people around the world have more recent memories and practices of these ways of knowing, and aboriginal literacy workers in Canada have done much in recent years to reclaim and integrate cultural holistic practices in aboriginal education.  In non-aboriginal contexts, the literature on adult education suggests an emerging interest in spirituality and learning, perhaps in reflection of the growing interest in spirituality in general.

In an overview of adult learning theory in the last 100 years, Sharon Merriam (2004) describes how early research on adult learning focused on intelligence, information processing, memory and cognitive development in adults. In the middle part of the 20th century, the focus shifted to the concepts of androgyny (adult learning, compared to child learning), self-directed learning and learning that changes our perspectives. She says that the most recent additions to adult learning theory focus on the role of emotions in learning, the body as a site of learning, and the relationship between spirituality and learning. She suggests that these developments can help to expand our understanding of the holistic and complex nature of adult learning.

Connection

In the literature on learning and spirituality, “connection” has to do with connecting with people, connecting with nature, and / or connecting with a transcendent force. One of the cornerstones of literacy work, particularly in community-based settings, is building community and creating ways for people to connect with each other.

In the early days of contemporary literacy work in Canada, Elaine Gaber-Katz and Gladys Watson (1991) undertook research and wrote a report about community-based literacy in Toronto. In interviews and conversations with teachers, tutors and learners in three programs, they found that community building is one of three key elements of community-based programs.

In her research with women in literacy programs, Jenny Horsman (1990) found that

Women spoke over and over again about how important the social aspect of the program was....Some interacted only with the tutor who came to their house. Others, in groups, spoke of the group becoming like one big family (p. 217).

Perhaps such references to “family” reflect desires to be in a supporting, caring community. Learning programs often provide needed community and places for connection. Building community means creating ways for people to connect with each others and to start having a say in how things go. But in what ways do our programs

promote connection that makes room for spirit? I think that much of this has to do with who and how we are and how we relate with each other.

In a peer tutoring project at (Norton, 1997), tutoring partners developed what Carl Rogers (1980) would call “person-centred” relationships in which people were genuinely themselves, non-judgmentally accepted the other person in the relationship, and exercised empathetic understanding.  One of the peer tutors talked about how she felt that it helped students to know that she had been through similar experiences: “When I have a problem I talk to them and it seems like they listen and they understand” (p. 15).

As I looked back at those observations, it seemed to me that the peer tutors were practicing compassion. When this word came up for me as a prompt while writing with some women, I wrote:

Working [here] inspires compassion. Many people who come to [here] offer their love and themselves.  They are role models. At the same time, there are others who for all kinds of reasons, have shut themselves off from others. Who knows what hurts have caused the walls to go up? But, by being around others who show compassion, those who live in walls sometimes find the walls going down too.

I think that as we practice compassion, we learn to look behind some of the ways of being that get in the way of connection, and we create space for learning about ourselves and our purposes in relation with others.

Meaning

It is common practice in literacy programs to focus on learners’ goals or purposes for learning when they start the programs, and to assess progress in relation to individual goals. However, learners often start to find their purpose as they engage in literacy programs and learn more about themselves. In their research, Elaine and Gladys found that:

learners discover more about themselves—more about how they learn, what they want to do, and who they are as people... (p. 42).

Katharine Childs (2003) describes how the Language Arts program in her adult education agency revolves around the questions: “Who am I?” and “What do I value?” She says these questions were chosen because many learners in the program have never been asked either of those questions before, nor had they had to answer them. Katharine maintains that once we can answer those questions, we can get down to the real business of education—getting ourselves ready and fit to lead our own productive lives.

The literature on spirituality and learning suggests that answering the question, “Who am I” *is part of*, rather than a prerequisite for, the real business of education. Answering the question is a process that can go on, whether the question is asked directly or not. Journaling, story writing and story telling are familiar ways that we can write and re-

write our lives.  Frank Kazemek (2003) suggests that stories and poetry, in all their forms— oral, written and sung—belong at the heart of literacy programs because they “help us develop both a particular kind of emotional and spiritual sensitivity and depth and openness to our fellow human beings” (p. 69).

Beautiful, nurturing environments for learning also invite spirit and support meaning making. Research and practice about addressing the impacts of violence on learning have explored ways that such environments support learning for all (Morrish, Horsman and Hofer, 2002; Violence and learning: Taking action, 2004). Too often literacy programs find themselves in sterile spaces, but we can bring in beauty that welcomes people and affirms their value.

Drawing and other arts-based approaches also support meaning making, as they enable us to go inside and access other ways of knowing. Art-making can support self-understanding, a search for meaning, personal growth, self-empowerment and healing. As one participant in the *Drawing out the self* (2001) project said: “I like drawing pictures. It became clear in my heart.”

In the *Drawing out the self* project, Judy and I used art as one way to explore themes that came up in each session. On one occasion, a woman told a story about a doll with two faces that she had had as a child. Her story prompted a discussion about the faces we show to the world and the faces we have inside. This in turn led to a mask making activity, in which we explored our inside and outside faces.

The various sets of masks tended to show smiling, happy faces presented to the outside world, with other faces on the inside. Through this art making, related story sharing, and connecting, some women began to shift in their understanding of themselves.

Change

For as long as I can remember, the topic of change has been an ongoing debate in adult literacy education: is the work about individual change or social change? When I started in the field, I was very much at the social change end of the continuum. Along the way, I’ve come to believe that the two can go hand-in-hand, and that personal change and social action can come out of and weave back into connecting and meaning making as people share stories.

In a recent project at the Centre, a group of women were researching resources and services for people in literacy programs. As they identified resources, some women told about leaving abusive relationships and one woman’s story led to another. The group posed questions such as “Why do women stay in an abusive relationship?” and pooled their knowledge to come up with answers. They talked with counselors and visited shelters to find out about available resources for women living with experiences of violence. Eventually the women developed a script, which they presented at a conference, in workshops and with staff in some social services agencies.

For some of the women, working on the script was a way to make sense of their experiences; presenting the script was a way to break silences about violence and to tell other women they did not have to live with violence, that there were resources available. And in making the presentations, some women began to re-see themselves as strong, capable women.

For some, a desire to reach out, to be connected with others in a larger context, to make a difference, has to do with spirit. Recent writing in the adult education field has pointed to how spirituality was one motivation for the work of adult educators like Paulo Friere, Miles Horton and Moses Coady (Groen, 2003). All of these men saw education as a way to work towards more just societies.

In literacy and adult education, we have a legacy of working towards social change, and as we work in that direction we may find ourselves in the margins between the realities of what is and the hope of what could be. Working in the margins poses challenges but also holds possibilities. One of the possibilities is to create environments for teaching and learning that support wholeness, connection, meaning and change. In doing so, we may find possibilities for spiritual learning, and for teaching and learning from the heart as well as from the mind.

[Join in](#) Elaine and Mary's discussion about welcoming spirit into the literacy classroom. Share your views: www.learningandviolence.net/forum/

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Global Declaration of Soul in Education
<http://freespace.virgin.net/caduceator.clh/Declaration.htm>

Passageways Institute
<http://www.passageways.org/>

¹ This writing is excerpted from a presentation I made at the Ontario Literacy Conference during my sabbatical year. Thank you to Sue Follinsbee for suggesting that I be asked to speak at the conference, and to the conference organizers for extending an invitation to speak on a topic of my choice. In this writing, I have chosen not to name my workplace, as I want to focus on and discussion of the ideas I am exploring. At the same time, I want to acknowledge and thank the many, many people along my way, including colleagues and learners who have helped me be open to the topic.

² For more about Moon's work, see: Joyce, V. M. 1999). (Singing a spider woman's song. In Turner, J., and Rose, C. *Spider women. A tapestry of creativity and healing*. p. 243 – 253. Winnipeg, MB: J. Gordon Shillingford.

³ Holistic practices and the “whole self” are frequently described in terms of body, mind, emotions and spirit. I favour a description that also includes “social” and “aesthetic” as aspects of self. See <http://members.iinet.net.au/~rstack1/world/rgn/integration.htm>