



Commentary

Creating beautiful learning spaces for adults: how the world of the child and the adult learner can intersect

Evonne Phillips

New Zealand Tertiary College

This article makes links between the world of early childhood education and the adult learning environment and reflects on ways in which teachers can make adult learning environments inspiring places where people can relax and engage with their learning. It aims to motivate teachers of adult learners to think more about the physical environment in which they teach and proposes some ways in which teachers can create stimulating spaces that will engender wonderful learning experiences for adult learners.

Informal curricular

“Learning environments cannot be considered neutral. They tend to have either a repressive effect or the ability to strengthen learning...” (Belanger, 2003, p. 81). As a former early childhood teacher and current teacher of adults, I appreciate Lewicki’s (cited in Belanger, 2003) ideas on the pedagogy of place and how our physical environment – nature, places, streets and buildings – carry informal curricular.

The world of early childhood education, I believe, has an intrinsic understanding of the pedagogy of place. It has long held the environment to be crucial and has developed the concept of an environment that can stimulate enquiry, focus learning, and enable children to make links between their home and their centre in order to feel comfortable and at ease. Early childhood teachers know that the simple layout of their room will either help to develop the children’s learning or work against their best efforts to provide a peaceful and effective learning environment. So, what can teachers of adults learn from their early childhood counterparts? How can early childhood knowledge be of advantage to adult teachers working in an entirely different setting?

For teachers of adults, the physical environment within our classrooms often seems to be the least important area for us to focus on. Most of us teach in well lit, comfortable spaces which have plenty of room for all. But do our classrooms carry their own curricular? And if they do, what is that curricular? What does my learning environment say about the value I place on my learners? How have I conveyed the sense that their learning is important through the physical environment? How can I begin to understand the informal curricular carried within my classroom and use it to my advantage?



Environmental conduits for learning

The Reggio approach to learning has been developed in Italy in the years since World War Two. I believe it has many things that adult educators can learn from, despite the fact that it was developed for young children. Reggio centres are places of beauty with space to capture the soul and delight of learning. Loris Malaguzzi, who was instrumental in the development of the Reggio philosophy of education for young children, believed in creating beautiful spaces that could act as a third teacher – a kind of conduit for learning – and allow a sense of wonder and curiosity to continue to develop, and be enhanced, in the children. He believed that “space has to be a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes and culture of the people who live within it” (Malaguzzi, cited in DeViney, Duncan, Harris, Rody and Rosenberry, 2010, p. 81). I wonder how far our adult learning environments go towards this goal.

It does not matter whether we are old or young, we are all influenced by our surroundings: “[y]our excitement and energy intensifies when you walk into places of inspiration” (DeViney, Duncan, Harris, Rody & Rosenberry 2010, p. 20). In adult education, we have sometimes overlooked aesthetic sensitivities, or seen them as being too costly, too time consuming, or of little importance to the overall end result of qualifying grades – something we all want to see our students achieve. We have, perhaps, overlooked something very important, such as the power of the environment to create learning stimulation, enquiry, conversation, inspiration and discovery. Vecchi, cited in *Understanding the Reggio approach*, states: “We must not be afraid of making schools that are too beautiful; care and attention to the environment should not be regarded as educational waste or a non essential aesthetic adjunct” (2009, p. 41).

Sometimes our adult learners seem to have a less passionate approach to learning than their child counterparts. Learning has become a means to an end, or even something to be endured. Sometimes they are simply scared and overawed by this new thing called ‘tertiary study’ which many have never engaged in before. Perhaps the very beginning that we make in uninviting rooms, without anything to inspire, works against us more than we realise. For example, how often in our preparations for teaching adult learners do we include the realm of natural beauty, or focus on the connection of mind and emotions? We focus intently on the content of our learning sessions, but if information is not conveyed in an environment that is conducive to learning, dare I say we are wasting our time?

Next time you walk into your classroom, try to look with fresh eyes and see the informal curricular in your environment. What does the room look like? Is it restful and inviting? Do people begin to talk together and connect when they enter the room? Is there anything that will be a feast for the eyes, or will soothe the soul?

We can learn so much from some of the great thinkers who have contributed to the development of educational practice over many years. Friedrich Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, was a person who loved nature and was inspired by it. He saw the spiritual realm in the beauty of plants and trees; and “he remained in intimate communion with nature until his death” (Brosterman, 1997, p.16). Froebel believed in an holistic approach to learning, where no one aspect was more important than another and all was interconnected and linked



(Brosterman,1997). He believed in a complete unity of mind, body, spirit, and soul – all combined for a simple yet complex unity.

Notes of beauty

One uncomplicated way to re create and engender beauty within an adult learning environment is simply to employ the natural world that is all around us. I like to ensure that my physical teaching space has some 'notes of beauty.' For example, each week my room has a different table display with some beautiful natural objects such as shells, flowers, or rocks. Sometimes I will set out some new natural teaching resources, or set up a plaque with an inspirational message, and I always have some colour in the room. I believe teaching is more of an art than a science (Palmer, 1997) and I want to inspire my learners by a silent implication that life is beautiful and that they are important to me. Music is another powerful tool that can invoke a sense of relaxation and calmness, and often I will have relaxing music playing as my students begin to arrive for class. Music "conveys a sense of calmness and tranquility both for children and adults" (DeViney et al, 2010, p.51). Adult learners often have busy, full time occupations and lives crammed with all sorts of responsibilities and demands. Study is just one component in the mix. Anything I can do to help them relax and enjoy their learning sessions may make the difference between a transformational learning experience and a surface level, tick box, experience.

The natural world offers so many silent opportunities to bring beauty and delight into our learning spaces, and capture our imaginations. Collections of shells, rocks, nuts and leaves – the variety is endless – require very little, if any, money (something that often provides a barrier for teachers). All it takes is a little thought, a little time gathering materials and a heart that wants to engage with the natural realm. Photography and video can also be used to bring the natural world into the classroom. The night sky, the sunrise, the rugged coastline – "[n]ot only does nature provide an infinite supply of sensory experiences that can be integrated into all learning domains, it conveys a sense of calmness and tranquility both for children and adults" (DeViney et al, 2010, p. 51).

Emotional environments

Rudolph Steiner is another person who has had a significant influence on early childhood education and education around the world. He was a man for whom the spiritual was as real as the physical. "Steiner education is not just an education of the head, but of the heart and hands as well" (Naughton, 2009, p. 2). Again, the emphasis is on the whole person, integrating all of the senses into the learning environment (Oldfield, 2001, p.169).

Stress so often seems to be at the heart of the society in which we live – a society which is competitive, anxiety ridden and stressful. If we fail to acknowledge this with our adult learners we are doing them a disservice. Many are anxious about whether they will be able to meet the demands that tertiary level study puts upon them. Many of my students are coping with living in a completely new country, an alien environment far away from the traditional supports they have been used to. Any small thing that I can do to ease this stress and provide a space for learning is worth doing.



According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), “Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning, while positive feelings of attractions and interest may be essential for learning” (p 16). Prior to our sessions starting, as students begin to gather, I take the time to speak to as many people as possible, chat about their day and generally engage with them (McKeachie, 2006). Often these early discussions clear away anxieties and stresses, solve problems and make important connections. They create a sense of value in the learner – highlighting that they are an important member of the group and their feelings do matter. These moments can ease the mind and create an opening for learning to take place. A stressed mind is not able to engage as easily and take on new ideas, as a mind that is open, clear and inspired by the care and beauty evident in the surroundings.

The early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki, has a core component of belonging. This important principle runs through much of the document (the word alone is mentioned 23 times). “The feeling of belonging in its widest sense, contributes to inner well being, security and identity” (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, p. 54). Children need to be wrapped in a loving, warm and friendly environment where they feel a sense of deep belonging, in order for their learning and development to progress. Adults also need a warm, encouraging space in which to learn. In a research study done in New Zealand, adult university students were asked about what it was that made them stay in their institution and complete their studies. One answer that came through clearly was that a sense of belonging was a primary need for many. One student said: “I know if I didn’t feel I belonged I probably wouldn’t be able to achieve....” (Leach, Zepke & Prebble, 2006, p. 117). The emotional environment is part of the complex interplay that is called teaching. It can lead to success or failure for students and teachers alike. We need to attend to the emotional environment in our teaching rooms with the same diligence we apply to other aspects of teaching. “An environment is a living, changing system. It conditions how we feel, think, behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives” (Greenman, cited in DeViney et al, 2010, p. 111).

Conclusions

We can learn a lot from our children, and from those who teach them, and utilise this knowledge to create adult learning spaces that are beautiful, relaxing, inviting and say directly, but silently, to the student –‘you are important, you matter to me and I care about your learning.’ We can learn to re-engage all of our senses in our learning environments and think about our teaching spaces in an holistic way. We need spaces where people are deeply respected and valued; attractive spaces which speak of the value we place on our learners’ wellbeing; spaces which are calming and yet stimulating; spaces which relax and yet engage the mind. We need spaces where the informal curricular reaches out a warm inviting hand.



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