

Educational Mindfulness: Embracing Vulnerability

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Abstract

This essay considers the enhanced educational value of faculty embracing vulnerability through mindfulness. Understanding how collegiate educators reflect on their repertoire of experiences is important because they are willfully considering how they should proceed throughout their career, thus possibly leading to more meaningful and effective teaching practices. Although research on exploring vulnerability practices of lived experiences in higher education teaching and learning has increased in the past decade, there is still much to be explored. When collegiate educators purposefully embrace vulnerability while reminiscing about their repertoire of experiences, it ties the connections to their consciousness and empowers to dismantle harmful patterns and rebuild best practices. Empowerment gives way to vulnerability, which adds greater value of the educators' constructed reality.

Keywords: *vulnerability in educational practices; educational mindfulness; best practices; lived experiences*

Introduction

“Success is seductive. It can make one complacent and inefficient and stale.” —Robin S. Sharma (2016)

While the term “andragogy” has been used since it was coined by Alexander Knapp in the 1830s (Knapp, 1833), it was Malcolm Knowles who, in the late 1960s, popularized its usage for English language readers (Knowles, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005). As Knowles began developing this approach, it spread over the next two to three decades. Knowles conceptualized andragogy as being premised on four crucial beliefs (self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning) of adult learners that have distinct characteristics from the assumptions of adolescent learners (Knowles, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005). As envisaged by Johann Friedrich Herbart (1896), the educational philosophy of pedagogy underlined the relationship between society and personal development, whereas the principal approach of adult learning is specific to the theory of andragogy. Foundationally, both andragogy and pedagogy are identified as methods and practices of teaching; however, there is an inherent difference between the two terms, as adult learning presents certain benefits and challenges to educators that are distinct from those experienced when teaching children.

Researchers frequently ponder their frustration with methodological approaches. This frustration may often manifest through behavioral outcomes such as andragogical staleness or the exhibition of compulsive preoccupation. They may sometimes also blame the student population for retention inadequacies (Land et al., 2016). For example, how often do we, as educators, bemoan that the student population of today is considerably different from that of a decade ago? Indeed, this is true; the physical world and those who live in it (sociologically) are constantly changing. Therefore, as educators, we must pause and consider not only who the learners truly are but also the kind of society in which we live today. Time is essential and must be invested wisely; carefully set aside time to allow a sense of realization.

The author offers this reflection for educators with the hope that they will internalize it and use it to scrutinize the staleness of past experiences while shedding new light on professional practices. It has been postulated that adhering only to traditional andragogic techniques may limit faculty potential (Banta & Blaich, 2011); not only does this hinder student learning, it might also stall faculty advancement (Fendrich, 2007). When educators purposefully select reflective practice as the lens through which to look into the world of traditional education, the nature of this insightful technique will offer a means of dismantling (i.e. vulnerability) (Kelchtermans, 2009) and reconstructing (i.e., teaching new patterns) best practices to advance instructional techniques.

Engaging in Reflective Practice

The foundational theme of reflective practice is that of returning to an experience, examining it, and drawing out what was gained in order to guide future situations (Kolb, 2014). As a result, educators can routinely understand and practice reflection in their professional lives and careers (Schön, 1984). This, in turn, may lead to a sense of educational mindfulness, meaning that educators could become more acutely aware of their daily practices as purposeful

actions aimed at both personal and professional growth. Often, educators view themselves as being personally distinct from their professional practice; mindfulness, however, allows an integrative perspective from which the educator exercises a holistic approach to their authentic self. This, in turn, leads to a sense of educational mindfulness where educators blend the process of professional and personal experiences into practical application.

A recent exploration considers how collegiate educators, by means of “conceptualizing academic vulnerability” (Jackson, 2018, p. 232) of the authentic self, revealed potential considerations that were advantageous in the course of professional practice (Jackson, 2018; Wise, 2013). Jackson’s study further accentuates how faculty emphasize their independent journey of discovery, which was by no means without trial and tribulation; it was a sustained dismantling of instructional styles to rebuild educational performances that scaffolded their andragogic advancement. Just as the needs of learners change and vary, so too do the needs and skills of the educator, thereby emphasizing the evolving nature of educational practice.

This article does not attempt to resolve the path of professional development for higher education; rather, it aims to convey the means by which vulnerability may provide sustainability in an evolving academic environment. For the purpose of this article, vulnerability is defined as a state of “purposeful awareness” where educators are driven by the intense desire to disclose their experiences for the purpose of change. For this reason, the desire for transformation has many opportunities for educators to reflect on their own capabilities; that said, educators must first buy into the fact that teachers need to expose themselves (dismantle) to rebuild through vulnerable exposure. It must also be noted that at the heart of personal and professional development is the philosophy of always learning and learning in all ways (Mezirow, 1990). This simple principle embodies and drives the educator as a lifelong learner and also creates socially responsible thinkers for a world that is in constant flux. Said differently, the value of vulnerable exposure is a natural rhythm: As we learn, it is natural to constantly expose ourselves. It is an inherent or innate capability that you wholeheartedly believe in—a form of secular belief.

Embracing Vulnerability in Andragogical Practice

“Choose the great adventure of being brave and afraid.” —Brené Brown (2012)

How society values—and thinks about—learning influences activities of daily living and helps us validate our decisions. When people acknowledge themselves as learners and, for all practical purposes, “the educators,” they subscribe to creating an ambience of empowerment through quality questioning, authentic inquiry, and inclusion. Society affirms parents and teachers as the shepherds of education (Bryan & Henry, 2012). However, to fully engage with our roles as leaders and guides, educators need to identify and capitalize on the ability to embrace vulnerability in order to scrutinize their repertoire of “styles” and to reconstruct through an alternate lens for the purpose of addressing and advancing professional practice (Kelchtermans, 2009; Zembylas, 2003). Embracing vulnerability is arguably an opportunity to explore the self; facing self-fear and anxiety, and then, opposing change, may bring an array of challenges and the sense of unsettlement for the educator. Resisting change becomes habitual and forms comfortable barriers that “undoubtedly take precedence over their willingness to accept change” (Zimmerman, 2006, p. 239). Understanding why collegiate educators allow

vulnerability to influence professional practice is important when considering how educators proceed throughout their professional career. Additionally, awareness of the tensions between complacency and vulnerability affords educators the opportunity to uncover individual anxiety and ignorance. While complacency is easier than self-openness, this exposure offers change that in turn aids in dismantling practices that have been entrenched; this is commonly known as “unlearning.”

An educator’s ability to deconstruct learning patterns is central to their ability to transcend philosophy, assumptions, and beliefs that have been established in their inner consciousness as real and true (Dede, 2005; Wink, 2005). When an educator avoids exposure to vulnerability, they limit their learning and creativity, which in turn contributes to academic staleness. For example, when developing my lesson plans, it is essential that I put myself into the role of the students and view the lesson in its entirety from their collective perspective. Although this cannot be completely conceivable, it does offer me the opportunity to interact with the content through the lens of the students. When the educator brings their own lived experiences to the course content and assignments, they too become familiar with how the student will “live” through the educators’ lived experiences and through their own. This exploration invites me, as the educator, to become improvisational, allowing for and capitalizing on change and adjustment to the course content and setting an academic environment. This form of unlearning is considered a process of uneasiness. When educators unlearn learned certainties, it causes a feeling of vulnerability (Dede, 2005; Wink, 2005), but it is this restlessness that allows one to stretch academic boundaries and “images that rationalize” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 62) fresh academic techniques. Doubtless, it is an ongoing psychological struggle but, driven by my desire to develop professionally, I accept this transformation. However, at times, I find myself stagnant in the murky waters of this process. Rattray (2016) guides me, suggesting that time and effort are key components during this “uncertain liminal phase” (p. 73). Thus, I willfully continue the practice of unlearning, which offers me an actual cue to reflect upon; this reflectivity of self becomes normalized and encourages creativity. My hope is that once creativity is encouraged, autopilot will take control and academic staleness will be suppressed, offering utility and progression.

“I Never Changed. I Just Learned.”

Even in its most stridently narrow context, the quote “I never changed, I just learned” (author unknown) implies that as time passes and each academic year unfolds, we positionally change in the sight of students, administrators, and colleagues; however, we are not completely changed in our role as educators. When we, as educators, identify with the quote from our own experiences, others may see a “change,” but they merely see it superficially, which is poor judgment because the “change” runs so much deeper. This quotation means that I need to pay attention, become more self-aware, stop drinking the Kool-Aid, and challenge myself to examine—through open-mindedness—what is happening as I develop professionally.

Let me offer this brief anecdote of an example of my own experiences in learning to embrace my humility and vulnerability, and develop open-mindedness. A colleague and I engaged in a psychomotor activity foreign to our discipline (i.e., suturing). During this professional development workshop, the colleague who accompanied me videotaped my feeble

attempt of an open wound suture. After the seminar, the video was placed on social media, accessible to the student population that I teach. To my surprise, I received positive feedback on my learning experience. Although a select few cracked jokes about my poor ambidextrous skills, the students expressed their “connection” with how they too experience learning a skill for the first time. This “teachable moment” fundamentally changed how the students viewed me as an educator. It also changed my perception of the students I teach. This sense of connectivity revealed the equality of learning for both student and educator. In addition, this experience also exposed my colleague’s reluctance to embrace vulnerability. The same colleague that videotaped my learning experience was not as forthcoming with her own experience, as she did not allow her attempt at suturing to be uploaded and viewed by our students on social media. Although we, as educators, may not be aware, we often find ourselves in an unceasing cycle of complacency, which is disingenuous to the population that we teach. Embracing change and freely exposing myself to uncomfortable rhetoric (e.g., my colleague’s perception of being incapable or soft) brings about anxiety. Certainly, it is easier to settle for complacency; however, our students consequently suffer during this negative educational process.

Practically speaking, I frequently ask students to share lived experiences that invite them to talk about their emotions and perceptions about the environment that surrounds them. Their contribution offers “teachable moments” when the students share their personal experiences. The class begins to uncover content in an unlikely manner where they can now personally associate with the course content and embrace its meaning through their lived experience. The overall relative value of this transferability adds to learning that extends beyond expressed objectives to authentic learning experiences.

“The gatekeepers must change.” —Prince (quoted in D’Alessandro [2009])

Educators who simply do not want to engage in change pose the biggest challenge to vulnerability acceptance (Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves, 2006). Those that “thwart any improvements that may threaten them, and use their political power to keep their life easy” (Snyder, 2017, p. 4) are those who Hargreaves (2005) describes as negative focusers. Within each educational platform, negative focusers are easily recognized; they are the stereotypical resistant educators who are candid—“the bane of administrators’ lives” (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 974). Sadly, many educators “thwart any improvements” (Snyder, 2017, p. 4). It is important, however, to emphasize that not all educators are negative focusers, but one must be vigilant; complicity thrives in academia. The times when educators were the proverbial gatekeepers of facts or the passive recipients of professional knowledge are long gone (Nelsen, 2018). In contrast, educators need to facilitate moments that examine society’s current cultural, economic, and political dynamics and expose a vulnerable learning experience around which education can function (Browne & Keeley, 2004; Gilgun, 2010). I love reading about vulnerability: learning its many uses and thinking about my own. However, when it comes down to it, a part of me just does not want to change. As a seasoned educator, I often act as gatekeeper, but I need to get beyond “guarding” the gate and learn more about the students, myself, and about my colleagues. We have all had our moments of vulnerability in the classroom; perhaps the content at hand was improperly delivered, or you could not recall an answer to a question, or a classroom activity was unproductive even though tireless hours went into preparing for it. These circumstances have left me feeling vulnerable in the eyes of my students. During these moments of despair, I dig my

heels in and hold onto why I selected the path of educating andragogic learners. Often, I feel validated only for what I have written or accomplished or produced and focus on status signaling. Instead of feeling good about trying to “change,” we could instead feel good about acting upon one’s ability to be vulnerable, even when faced with the higher status of others. We need to remember that the ethical model paradigm is not only applicable to our students, but also to us.

Conclusion

Once educators consent to the vulnerability of dismantling, it can lead to the path of reconstruction of professional practice, which moves us from a culture of participation to one of creation. This is where participation is still valued, and the role shifts to emphasizing that of andragogic learners; the practical nature of this approach affords liberation of practice that then presents a safe platform for individual vulnerability in order to reconstruct successful educational performance. Institutions of higher education are life-affirming organizations for educators, student learners, their families, and the broader community. As an ongoing process, vulnerable practice engages the global society, whereby seasoned educators help to shape the future of distinctive learning as well as the transformative and professional practices that manifest from it.

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