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I Know More Than I Thought I Did

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I Know More Than I Thought I Did

My office is a confessional of sorts. As a director of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), I hear anxious, regretful, hopeful histories of undergraduate adult learners who are petitioning college credit for knowledge acquired in their workplaces and personal lives (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017). They have a myriad reasons why they do not have their bachelor's degree or why they did not pursue or complete the traditional, high-school-to-college trajectory, reasons all well documented in adult learning literature (Tenant & Pogson, 1995). A common rationale is that they will get their degree later in life. But faced with life realities, the goal is put off, continuously. Fulfilling adult responsibilities is indeed a full-time occupation. Acquiring an education can seem adjunctive until the lack of one becomes a barrier to life's sustenance or soul. Vignettes of their life histories and manifestations of the imposter syndrome represent common, but private layers of adult-learner narratives. They state such things as:

“I partied too much in college. I don't know if I can do this now.”

“No one at work knows I don't have a degree. What will they think when they find out?”

“I can manage multi-million dollar accounts but I don't know how to write a paper without bullet points.”

“I am a first generation learner. I have a lot to prove.”

“I'm being passed over for promotions.”

“I'm proud of having been a parent all these years, but now what?”

“I have this nagging feeling of being less than.”

“I've lost a lot of time, including myself.”

When I listen to my adult learners, I hear echoes of my own persistent narrative: “Sooner or later, someone, if not everyone, is going to figure out that I am not smart enough and that I am also not worthy, and then what?”

The Imposter Syndrome

The imposter syndrome is common, yet rarely talked about in the academy. Who wants to admit they feel like an imposter? Authenticity, a relatively full disclosure of one’s personal truth, holds a highly prized value in narrative theory and autoethnographic research, both embracing the study of one’s self in culture (Tisdell, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 1996). However, self-disclosure can be perceived as risky in the academy and the job site for obvious reasons. Academia is an enterprise where intellectual prowess is both process and product. Careers are typically built on leveraging brain power, not personal authenticity and transparency.

If someone had looked in a crystal ball when I was a child, even a teenager, and predicted that I would achieve two master degrees, a doctoral degree, and become an international educator and researcher, let alone graduate college, I would have thought they confused my crystal ball for another. My pedigree has humble roots that I thought I needed to hide well into adulthood. Yet, over time, these roots and my willingness to take risks have become calling cards for my work as an educator, researcher, psychotherapist, artist, and a lifelong learner. Paradigm shifts such as this, from concealment to transparency, unworthy to worthy, are accompanied by powerful stories. Rarely have I encountered adult learners who do not have a big story behind their return to education, myself included—an adult learner’s “hero’s journey” (Campbell, 2008). Adult learners, by virtue of life experience, come to the classroom with complex professional and personal narratives. Tennant and Pogson (1995) depict education and making

use of these stories as a means of responding to some experience of meaning making, not just professional practicality.

What Did I Get Myself Into?

Adult learners returning to school for undergraduate degree completion now comprise the larger percentage of students in college compared to their traditional counterparts of 18 to 22 year olds (NALC, 2017). Petitioning proficiency credits through Prior Learning Assessment is an appealing option for many adult learners, offering an opportunity to meaningfully and economically accelerate degree completion while validating college-level learning. In order to meet academic standards, PLA learners at my current institution become their own subject of learning in a three-credit course called Assessment of Prior Learning. Eligible learning is fit into a viable academic plan in which “experience is the adult learner’s living textbook” (Lindeman, 1961, p. 7). Reflection is the model. Writing case studies of experiential learning for each course is the vehicle. A portfolio documenting college-level work and life learning is the product. To many adult learners, PLA is a radical, nontraditional, and welcome option for degree completion. Nationally, in a dramatic increase of interest, PLA is recognized as a viable pathway to strengthen America’s economy by expanding educational opportunities for working adults (NALC, 2017).

As my adult learners and I start exploring the concept and requirements of petitioning credit for workplace experiential learning, it does not take long for concerns about agency and self-efficacy to start surfacing. Before embarking on writing case studies to validate their experiential knowledge, they write a Learning Autobiography as a first reflective dive. The Learning Autobiography introduces them as a learning person, creating an integral link to their case studies. Reflecting on their personal and workplace learning histories, they introduce who

they are, including impediments to and support for their development, not only as learners, but also as generative human beings. The critical thinking requirement is clear. “The integration of former and new learning will not happen without learners engaging in critical reflection on their learning experiences” (Brewer & Marienau, 2016, p. 3). Secrets and worries about their capacity to fulfill the critical thinking and reflective first-person writing requirements are soon disclosed. Each semester I also hear some variation of the private lament that they are sure everyone else is smarter than they, especially the fresh younger employees with their newly minted degrees, despite their own years of grounded, experiential learning. As Dewey, a foundational educational philosopher and reformer, noted, it is cognitively demanding to think and feel one’s way to new understandings of life experiences and overcome deeply engrained perspectives and assumptions (Brewer & Marienau, 2016). No amount of rational assurance is persuasive enough, nor, as I have learned, is it respectful. The realization that one has undergone significant experiential learning, and then situating it in an educational context, is an impactful experience. As an advisor, I have learned that an empathetic and kind voice is a far more effective tool than either persuasion or reassurance of their capabilities and potential. They need to go on this journey and uncover their capacities themselves with compassionate and wise guidance.

As my advisees sit in my office, they read over my shoulder a predictive quote, declaring a brain-based and culturally rooted concept of transformational learning: “A mind that is stretched to a new idea never returns to its original dimension”¹ (Taylor & Marineau, 2016). Before leaving my office the adult learners are on their way to a journey of discovery. However, what they will discover is unknown to both them and me. An anticipated disorientation has

¹ This quote has been variously attributed to both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

begun, starting as a tiny challenge to their perception of themselves. The Prior Learning experience is fertile ground for transformative learning; the kind of learning that has potential to change perspectives and create portals for new ideas and practices (Mezirow, 2000). PLA has potency also because adult learners have the opportunity to identify and reflect on their “big story” (Tennant & Pogson, 1995) and their experience of integrating seemingly disparate personal and professional learning in the development of Self, considered here as an archetypal experience of the psyche as a whole (Jung, 1969).

Like me, adult learners are riddled with the imposter syndrome. The way they constructed or have been told their stories has left a lasting imprint on their learning history and feeling of agency and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). They feel, and often are, vulnerable, for indeed, the world is not always a kind, understanding place. But they are also brave. Becoming an adult learner is an encounter with ghosts that haunt educational memories. Education requires them to confront identity and power shifts. They take multiple risks as they navigate from experience to experience, course to course, and credential to credential. Completing a degree is hard work and takes guts on many fronts. Every time adult learners state “I learned” and “I know,” and provide evidence of their learning in their case studies, they are claiming their place in the world of knowledge. While they may feel like “strangers in a strange land of higher education” (Taylor & Marienau, 2016, p. 27), they have already begun a journey as lifelong learners by virtue of their acquired learning, persistence, and fortitude. The journey may feel harrowing at times, but it can also be exhilarating and rewarding. I know this well. I understand my adult learners’ potential, as well as their fears of inadequacy and exposure. It is my story, too.

My Story

In empathetic spirit and the style of writing a PLA Learning Autobiography, I now unpack my own narrative in the form of living inquiry research as an adult learner who became an interdisciplinary educator and evaluator of Prior Learning Assessment. Living inquiry is a qualitative research practice in which knowledge is constructed in everyday encounters through experiencing and processing the world (Springgay, Irwin, & Leggo, Gouzouasis, 2008; Diaz & McKenna, 2004; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). Living inquiry portrays certain kinds of knowledge to evoke empathy needed for instigating change and for providing insight into circumstances that are not best portrayed through statistical and scientific methods. I am aware that even after decades of education and credentialing, I feel vulnerable, like I am shedding protective cloaks of persona. I ponder how my students feel creating their experiential portfolios for analysis and evaluation, peeling back and exposing layers of experience and hard won knowledge. My own adult learning story reveals encounters with risk taking, choice and consequence, unexpected turns, failures and celebrations, some explicit, others written obliquely between the lines and chapters of my life. A learning autobiography exemplifies a form of narrative theory as a multi-faceted means of exploration, telling a story, highlighting the voice from within (Tisdell, 2003). Stories touch our hearts and put a human face on the world of ideas but sometimes this can feel terribly exposing in higher education. That is why we construct personas that mask not only our vulnerability, but also our authenticity. What is true for me is also true for my students.

Deeply Entangled Roots

I tell my students to start their story where it is most meaningful. For me, the impetus of my lifelong learning is rooted in struggles with self-efficacy, which began in childhood. Beneath my successful, creative and energetic persona, I dragged deep feelings of inferiority into young

adulthood; a complex of misperceptions, inexperience, and lack of support for finding a trajectory in life, all of which became challenges to my experience of agency, self-efficacy, and development of Self (Bandura, 1977; Jung, 1969; Erickson, 1994).

I am an American Norwegian whose education began in a one-room schoolhouse in Minnesota farm country settled by Scandinavian and German immigrants for whom a strong work ethic was an esteemed social value, a value deeply embedded into the construct of my psyche. Wellbeing, if not survival, depended on the fortitude of families who lived in harmony with nature and each other, and who were also at nature's and each other's mercy. This community formed a certain kind of knowledge that was innate, natural, and social. My childhood was lived out in woods and farmland where nature and animals were my first friends and teachers. The many neighborhood churches provided both spiritual and social sustenance to the community at large. I studied in the same one-room schoolhouse as my father 50 years earlier, and my older siblings and neighbors before me. I learned my lessons at the "little table" while students in grades above me had their turn at the "big table" and the coveted blackboard. I learned to learn by observation and osmosis with Dick and Jane² in my learning cohort. An abandoned chicken coop on the farm, salvaged as a playhouse, became a literal, and later, a metaphoric vessel for my budding, indomitable creative spirit, and a prototype for an art studio and living inquiry research decades later (Larsen, 2010). My childhood was ideal by many standards. But I learned very early that my culture, personal and social, also had a shadow side with hidden, undesirable, and avoidant qualities at variance with esteemed cultural, social, and spiritual values (Jung, 1973).

² Dick and Jane were popular characters in texts used to teach reading in the United States in the 1930's through the 1970's.

I completed grade school at the tail end of the educational era of country schoolhouses. It was the sixties, and education reform was underway along with numerous social reforms. Little could I imagine how much I would be affected by these reforms and accompanying social disruptions. The Cold War was ominous and dominated American consciousness. Russia was an alien global Other—my first remembered experience of a social construction with which we dis-identify and fear (Bauman, 1993). Watching Sputnik silently arc across the star-studded Minnesota sky was intriguing and roused anxious questions that no one could answer. The Vietnam War, a national Other, was distant until a brother was deployed, and then it became excruciatingly personal. Racial discrimination and violence was abstract and puzzling and totally unfathomable to me. Why so much hate and disdain? I had much to learn about the construct of social identities and the neat, comfortable means by which we organize and protect ourselves in culture (Bauman, 1993). The harsh outcomes of poverty and alcoholism in my family immigration history were hidden for decades. Why so much secrecy? Otherness slipped into a vessel of familial secrecy, protecting us from the anemic construct of our own social identity. I absorbed into my developing psyche my family's and my culture's nurturing, beautiful elements as well as their wounds, unknowing, and avoidance. It was all daily intake of sustenance - healthy and unhealthy, generative and destructive, life giving and life constricting.

Riding a school bus to “town school” was a developmental rite of passage in seventh grade. But no one prepared me for learning my first big socio-cultural lesson: Otherness and elitism is relative. Every culture creates its own lower class, its own Other (Bauman, 1993). In my town of 1500 inhabitants located in the middle of farm country, the town students looked down on the country students as backward. I quickly absorbed feelings of shame and inferiority. I also learned here, as in the country school, that friends could be really mean to each other. So

adaptive was my survival behavior that I only learned to identify this bully behavior decades later when bullying became a nationwide social concern. I had to learn how to manage social survival, which I did with a strategic decision to kill everyone with a Midwest cocktail of kindness, fairness, integrity, popularity, and uniqueness, all the while acquiescing and conforming to familial, social, and religious values. It was a developmentally treacherous navigation between clique and cultural conformation, while I formed an individual autonomy in which I constructed my own social and emotional intelligence without overt guidance from adults or other mentors. I was on my own.

I suffered and loathed the unkindness bestowed on me, and it went against my forming values regarding cruelty to others. I often wished someone had taught me how to fight or at least stand up for myself. Familial, religious, and cultural norms trumped individual needs. Instead I compensated, if not overcompensated. I became a leader in every activity I took part in. I won music and speech contests. I almost failed my college prep courses, but I maintained my head cheerleader status. I became the Prom Queen.

When my Lutheran church split over disagreements on church doctrine, power, and management of the threatening, changing social norms of the sixties, my vulnerable teenage heart, too, split over the hypocrisies and righteousness. I embraced new ideas rolling across the country because they spoke both to my needs and to the direction of the country, as I was beginning to perceive it. For that, I was outvoted as church organist because I introduced classical and modern music. I played too loud and too fast, and my skirts were too short. I learned early to recognize the impulse for individuals, families, communities, institutions, and culture to maintain stasis in the face of powerful change. Change is disruptive. Otherness is threatening. Comfort zones, social order, reigning values, and hegemony are all at risk (Freire,

2000). It took time, years, but I grew to appreciate how this experience laid down an early track for my interest in social sciences, mental health, and the arts, each with a unique angle of perception of human experience.

At The Edges

Transitions and transformations can be harrowing. They push us to the edges of our knowing (Berger, 2000). My transition into young adulthood felt somewhat directionless. It seemed clear to everyone else but me that music was my field. I was indeed musically talented and I had intrinsic interest in the arts that fueled a passion for creative expression. However, rather than relishing hopes and dreams for a generative future, I harbored a private gnawing worry in my spirit. I did not feel smart. I had already internalized a “dumb” female identity cultivated by cultural and insensitive familial norms. All through grade school, I watched my siblings coming and going from college. They all followed the implicit expectation of our intelligent and talented Norwegian immigrant mother. She highly valued education and was a lifelong learner within the bounds of her life, but could not fulfill her own longings or potential, let alone guide our processes. We were each on our own to figure things out. I studied and studied a thick academic catalog in size 9 font from the University of Minnesota that lay around the house. It made no sense to me, which seemed even more confirmation that I was not smart. My private despair rooted early. This “not smart” identity already had long, tenacious roots intertwined with all the other promising generative roots—a complex slowly choking off necessary nutrients and growth at critical junctures of development (Jung, 1969; Erickson, 1994).

I found direction when I broke several social taboos on the back of a motorcycle when I met a young renaissance man from New York City who recognized my potential and flamed a passion for adventure in me. I triggered what Jung (1969) and Maslow (2013) might identify as a

dramatic act to realize my potential and to become a whole person in my own right. Call it flight and/or a brave act of individuation. I got engaged in high school, married shortly after graduation, and moved to the East Coast, shocking everyone. They all waited to see if I was pregnant. “Good girls” don’t do this. Well, this one did. This was the seventies, and social norms were breaking all around. I found numerous supports amongst other youthful migrants to embrace my new life, and I thought little of the profound impact my life change constellated.

New Possibilities

The whole of a narrative is greater than the sum of its parts, and some experiences stand out more than others as salient and transformational. All around me swelled a cultural renaissance fueled by rebellion, accompanied by new ideas in education, politics, values, and artistic expression. I relished it and experimented with my newfound freedom. I participated in political protest marches and international volunteer opportunities, taking me as far as the mountains in Guatemala during their civil war. I found a new church on the East Coast that welcomed my talents. I directed teen groups and large-scale musicals. I was fortunate to encounter the generative, life-expanding construct of Carl Jung’s concepts in depth psychology. This became a first and fertile construct to understand human behavior, indeed, the world, through archetypal motifs (Jung, 1969). Archetypes, as universal models of people, behaviors, or personalities dynamically activated in daily life, provided a way to understand and integrate seemingly disparate parts of the psyche and human behavior. It became a reliable and expansive frame not only for my individual and marital growth, but also core structure for what later became a career that included mental health, the arts, and higher education.

While at times it was excruciatingly painful to leave my culture, I learned to recognize that sometimes, for some individuals, one’s culture of birth cannot support the individuation

trajectory of its members. When any culture is constricting, inoculated by its own standards to the needs of its members, relating to or rejecting one or many of its members as an Other, or even simply instilling a lack of confidence, then one's life choices narrow. Countless midnight conversations, novels, and movies are made of this archetypal motif. Though risky, moving out of a culture and re-centering oneself into a place of agency can be a desirable, life-giving option. "What was not modelled in the family of origin, what was not made available in the popular culture, becomes a personal task for each of us in the second half of life. Breaking the tyranny of history is a heroic enterprise and a task that confronts each of us, no matter how oppressive the past" (Hollis, 2006, p.148).

As my world expanded, I continued to lay down art-based foundations that stand firm decades later. However, my migration to the East Coast also planted me in the middle of yet another sociocultural division. I swiftly learned about East Coast/Midwest cultural biases and discriminations. Each looked at the other's social, political, ethical, spiritual, and cultural values with distrust, superior/inferior complexes, and more than a modicum of disdain, equally distributed—a condition of mutual Otherness. How was I to manage my bicultural status? My inferiority complex experienced little relief; it just shifted contexts. The appropriate young adulthood query of "Who are you?" was undergirded by "Who do you think you are?"

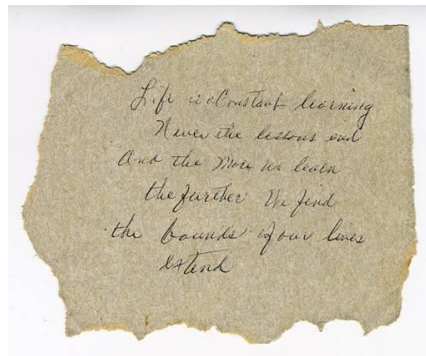
While some adult learners matriculate with a "get me out of here as fast as possible" attitude, others, like me, take a longer, slower pathway out of necessity and strategy. Tapping into valued Midwest sensibilities, I recognized my potential as a later bloomer and embraced it as a viable path in life, which garnered me time to grow up before starting a family. It also gave me time to work on a college career. However, driven by the frustration of losing time and credits through transience, and intrigued by the opportunity to construct my own learning path, I

finally took a huge risk for my “not smart, unworthy” identity. I enrolled in the Goddard College Adult Degree Program (“About Goddard,” 2018), where I participated in a century-old experiment in education—theirs and now my own. I repeatedly constructed, executed, and evaluated my own program of study, validated by an institution known for its innovative, rigorous, and student-driven curriculum. I formalized my curiosity and inclination in arts, mental health, and Jungian psychology into structured learning through reading, writing, experiential projects, and more rewriting than I had ever imagined. Despite riding nearly constant waves of fear and doubt, I worked harder than I ever had, and I successfully experienced my first encounter with academic agency, self-efficacy, and transformational learning. According to Nerstrom (2015), “Transformative learning challenges learners to interpret their own meanings rather than to adopt uncritically the beliefs and judgments of others. The process begins with an experience that prompts crucial reflection on one’s learned assumptions” (p. 8). I saw myself as a different person, a learning person, a thinking person, a creative person, a writing person. Well, if I can do this, maybe I’m not stupid. Maybe I am smart enough. Why, maybe I am even smart. Wait, what is smart anyway? What is worthiness? And who is defining it? I learned that critical thinking begets more critical thinking. It was the first time I realized that not only was I capable of more than I previously thought, but I also knew more than I thought I did.

The Long Road of Lifelong Learning

Developing an identity as a lifelong learner is a complex, multi-textured, and multi-layered experience that involves so much more than completion of academic requirements. My migration to the East Coast opened up a world of ideas and opportunities simply not afforded me in my family of origin and its culture. However, while I may have left my culture, my mother’s aching, heartfelt intone in handwritten poetry, found in her china cupboard among her linens and

life ephemera, remained a constant inspiration. I remember reading it countless times in my childhood ethnographic hunts; a found literary ruin:



Life is constant learning
Never the lessons end
And the more we learn
the further we find
the bounds of our lives
extend.

Pushing past the bounds of our lives is an act of individuation (Jung, 1969). I understand my adult learners because, like them, I have lived through complications resulting from exertions of my developing Self. Cell asserts that “messages learned early in life are adopted as truths, rarely with a backward glimpse to understand how or why they were formed” (as quoted in Nerstrom, 2015, p. 8). With the benefit of perspective through reflection as a life practice, I learned to recognize my personal, social, and cultural trajectory as part of both my national cohort and my personal individuation process. It was variously exhilarating and confusing, deeply disorienting, and yes, sometimes, even messy, just like my cohorts’. The transition from one culture to another, the deconstruction and reconstruction of belief systems, whether in developmental years, or later as adults, is typically a journey that includes disorienting dilemmas on numerous trajectories, crises of identity, and a massing of complexes; all of which can take a lifetime to untangle, if one chooses to undergo such a heroic undertaking (Campbell, 2008; Mezirow, 2000; Jung, 1969; Erickson, 1994; Maslow, 2013).

The Construction of Knowledge

Adult learners are typically patterned to institutions affirming a curriculum of thought rather than what we, as smart, living, breathing beings can affirm as our own hard won experiential knowledge. Taylor and Marieneau (2016) note that adult learners do not recognize themselves as key players in constructing knowledge. “Much of their education to date has taught them how to ‘do school’ - largely to be passive recipients, do what is expected of them, and to get the right answers” (p. 29). Conversely, by experientially learning how learning occurs at Goddard College, I recognized that PLA, too, is a process during which adult learners experience an integration of what it means to construct knowledge, change perspectives, and transform what it means to experience something into what it means to learn something. Within an academic process, PLA provides a structure to examine one’s learning in a meaningful way. Learning that has already been acquired through significant experiences now seeks affirmation and accreditation, an increasingly common practice in higher education since its inception in the 1940’s (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017).

I began to take my seat in the academy long before that concept even entered my brain as another risky, thrilling, generative, paradigm-busting idea for professional and personal growth decades later. I seeded a love for learning because it was now driven by intrinsic motivation and a honed identity as a learner. I grew to love learning and the worlds, ideas, and opportunities that became available to me. My mother’s longing and prophetic words became my own and, in spirit, she continues to accompany me every step of the journey. I identified with and internalized Goddard’s pioneering spirit and its history of innovation and experimentation, growth, decline, and reemergence; a precursor to my later engagement with change processes and transformational learning. Little did I know that over a decade later my first academic

journey and credential at Goddard College would qualify me for establishing a PLA program at my current higher education institution. I know how learning occurs because I have engaged in it over and over again in my life.

Empathy and Emancipation

In this living inquiry research, as I dug into layers of memory and experience over years of academic, therapeutic, and artistic exploration, I realize that the wounding in my early developmental years provided rich ground for mining archetypal energies and powers (Jung, 1969). In everyday vernacular, my compost of crap, embedded in sociocultural, psychological, artistic, and spiritual development, is a superb source of empathy for my adult learners' learning journeys. Experience has taught me that the process of reflection in PLA is an opportunity to rewrite life narratives, no matter how challenging, while undergoing life-changing perspectives. All along, I have admired my adult learners for their transparency and longing for freedom from the oppressive perceptions they harbor. This living inquiry illuminates how my life is no different than theirs. Oppression comes in many forms. I "get" my adult learners and they feel it. Through PLA, my adult learners affirm that lifelong learning begins, not in the classroom of formal educational processes and rituals, but in the act of everyday living in our work and personal cultures, as true to our nature as is possible, while learning what needs to be learned, making meaning of its purpose, and becoming conscious of the gestalt of it all.

Each semester I bear witness to my PLA learners' marvel at the completion of their portfolios, whether face to face or online. It can be an occasion of delight and sometimes, quintessential separation as they reluctantly entrust their precious document into my care for the evaluation process. For some, it is a handover of relief and unburdening, including an exclamation and physical gesture of letting go. For others, the handover is a ritual of extreme risk

and vulnerability accompanied by exclamations of fear, gestures of hanging on, including, amusingly, not letting go even as I attempt to receive it. I hear verbal or email expressions of “This is my baby! I don’t want to let it go. Take good care of it!” In those moments, I know that I am a participant witness to a transformational declaration, a reinvention of Self into a new perspective as a generative, learning person. Their own private laments of “I am not worthy” have transformed into “I know more than I thought I did.”

This is the belief that I hold for my adult learners in a metaphoric vessel constructed out of my own experiential learning, both personal and professional: That Prior Learning Assessment is a progressive, transformational, educational process of self-growth; affirming that we, as adult learners, indeed, know more than we realize. We have been life-long learners all along. It is wonderful and rewarding to have an institution validate one’s learning and to obtain all the benefits that accompany a credential. But I, and my adult learners, know that it is also deeply satisfying to validate oneself through the reflection and meaning making that results from recognizing our own learning, emancipating ourselves from our own oppression, and having the agency to continue learning that derives from within, not without.

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