



Tales from Zorba: Orienting to adult learning

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Adult Learning Commentary Number 16, 27 June 2001

Teach me to dance./ What, you boss?/ Yes!/ Come on then!

When the reserved British visitor to Greece meets and is enchanted by Zorba the Greek, he imagines becoming like Zorba: fierce, audacious, galant, gleeful. His imagination fuels his orientation to learn Zorba's way of being, beginning with his dance. As he joins arms with Zorba and the Balalaika begins its slow introduction, he learns the first steps of the dance and gains a sense of the freedom and risk they contain.

The current concern for adult education to re-name itself 'adult learning' shifts responsibility for learning from the educator to the learner. Adult learners are now to be seen as responsible for their learning according to their own priorities and resources. The trouble with this individualistic view is that not every person who could benefit from learning is necessarily disposed to pursue it. People orient to learning due to personal and social factors.

Orientation to learning refers to the moment when people actively turn towards learning as a realistic option. People orient to learning because of a felt compatibility between the imagined do-ability and benefits of the learning processes and outcomes, on the one hand, and their own values, desires and feelings on the other. When popular discourses are full of economic rationalism, competitive individualism and consumerism, what powerful catalyst could inspire people to orient toward a compassionate and democratic learning? What might make people personally transform and commit to community ideals?

Catalysts generating an orientation to learning don't necessarily come from educators, who are often not in the picture at this early stage of a learner's journey. An intense and challenging experience from whatever

quarter has often served as the catalyst for a person to become oriented to learning. Witnessing unselfish service can spur a person to learn about healing, caring or community development. Watching footage of the wharfies strike in Sydney inspires a group of students to learn about labour relations and industrial advocacy. Many experiences shape the imagination and the heart and can generate an orientation to learning.

Many educators have long seen the importance of the cultural action of the arts in generating dispositions and orientation to learning. As Maxine Greene wrote of the writings of Ralph Ellison, the Afro American novelist: "It is not that the artist offers solutions or gives directions. He nudges; he renders us uneasy; he makes us (if we are lucky) see what we would not have seen without him. He moves us to imagine, to look beyond." Which returns me to Zorba.

The British visitor to Zorba's island (like those watching the film) is oriented to learning his dance through the enchantment he feels in Zorba's company. The visitor opens his heart and becomes oriented to learn from the master just as adults everywhere can orient to learning by allowing themselves to imagine and to be enchanted.

Great works of art can challenge people to greatness, open us to ennobling possibilities, and invoke a strong and honest orientation to worthwhile learning.

Educators need to begin their educational action by paying attention to and dialoguing with the learning orientation that participants have brought with them to their learning. A mean and minimal orientation cannot generate great learning. And for dedicated educators, like Zorba with his dance, great learning is really the only thing worth doing.