**Reflective Interview Paper: Dr. Jane Vella**

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**Introduction**

This reflective interview paper serves as an opportunity to delve more deeply into the inner workings of the field of Adult Education through the lens of one practitioner. The assignment is to interview an educator or instructor focusing on critical issues in the field as well as personal curiosities that have been nurtured through our coursework this semester. With eagerness, I reached out to Global Learning Partners (GLP) at the start of the semester, to see if one of their senior partners would be willing to sit for an interview. This organization, founded by Dr. Jane Vella of dialogue education, is a primarily woman-owned education consulting firm that holds the learning-centered approach as paramount to achieving their vision of, “We envision a world in which deep learning drives our collective well-being” (GLP, 2022). GLPs work globally has long been a deep well of resources and experiences and I was enthusiastic to make a personal connection with the organization. After submitting my request, I was humbled and thrilled when the founder herself, Dr. Jane Vella, replied to my email with a joyful, “Yes!”

**Interviewee**

I first encountered Dr. Vella and her ideas about learning and teaching through her books *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* (1994) and later, *On Teaching and Learning* (2008)*.*  I was intrigued by the way she spoke of power and how dialogue was an effective way to release power in education. Her practical guides and steps for educational design and for conducting needs assessments influenced much of my professional field work in community health education as well as more general learning and teaching environments. Jane was born in 1931 in New York City. She told me she was a born teacher from an early age, yet it was her life and professional experiences that led her to dialogue education. In 1956, she moved to Tanzania teaching in a variety of different settings which fostered her most formative education experiences. Over twenty years later, she returned to the United States and pursued her doctorate in education from The University of Massachusetts at Amherst and then began to teach at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. In 1981, she launched Jubilee Education center which evolved into Global Learning Partners, Inc. in 1988. Now at 91 years of age, Jane is formally retired, yet her passion for learning and education still shines brightly. Her mantra is, “The Means is Dialogue, The End is Learning, The Purpose is Peace” (GLP, 2022).

**Interview Content**

The topics around which I interviewed Dr. Vella were ones that are personally and professionally meaningful for me. Due to the way she generously shares her wisdom, experience and ideas through her books, articles, podcasts and more, I chose to draw up questions that pertain to my particular interests regarding (1) power dynamics in the classroom in cross-cultural contexts or across-socioeconomic lines, (2) learning transfer (3) managing overwhelming need. In addition to Vella’s own books, the content of my questions were influenced by my reading Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’s, *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, *Powerful Techniques for Teaching in Lifelong Learning* by Brookfield, *Learning as a way of Leading* by Preskill and Brookfield, as well as my field experience in community health education. Furthermore, I took into consideration the fact that my interviewee was a retiree, in her 90s, and I was decidedly content to ask, listen, and glean from whatever she shared without needing to stick to a linear interview experience. My pre-chosen flexibility was helpful as the interview itself unfolded in an organic manner, with Jane connecting questions with stories, other questions, ideas, laughter, insights, and punctuating it all with a sense of wonder, gratitude, and delight.

In our conversation Jane set the tone of our time together with mutuality, laughter, and a sincere interpersonal connection. I was honored that she would share from her life and this posture made for a relaxed and casual connection that felt like a dialogue with a colleague, mentor, or friend, and not what it actually was, the first conversation between two strangers. Once we arrived at the questions, Dr. Vella launched directly into the role of experience, specifically the art and science of learning from experience, not simply having lived an experience. She continued to refine not simple experience, but the role of reflection in that experience which is the heart of praxis.

As we moved to a question about how to respond to the pressures when the needs are overwhelmingly great, Jane maintained her steadiness. She knows the challenges of working in poverty environments with overwhelming health needs, yet she maintained her non anxious presence as she affirmed that you must go slow. There is no such thing as going fast when you are speaking about learning transfer, depth, or transformation. Dr. Vella then unexpectedly brought up quantum theory, saying, “the parts contain the whole!” Initially I was lost as to why she began to reference parts and wholes, but then I saw that she was communicating that when we take the time to do well in investing in the community and in the lesson, the very manner of how it unrolls is in fact a *whole* containing *part* for all that will come. Going slowly to intentionally ensure that the *part* contains the *whole* means that even with slow progress, there is essential progress. Jane’s exhortation to go slow was steeped in decades of experience. We deceive ourselves when we speed towards an end without properly delivering the parts. From quantum theory we then went to brain science as Dr. Vella shared her delight in the research and work of James Zull. In *The art of changing the brain* Zull shows on a biological level what happens in the brain as *and* how we learn. His findings were deeply encouraging to Jane as they corroborated much of her work and research from before we could see inside the brain. Jane’s humility and approach towards teaching was aptly showcased when she cited St. Augustine when declared that, “no man teaches another man anything, what we do is prepare the way for the Holy Spirit.” This notion holds substance outside of a religious worldview when we consider that any teacher is powerless to force information on a mind, but rather is charged with preparing the environment in which learners can in fact learn.

Looking at the cultural landscape of our educational environment, Dr. Vella hopes for culture change. She hopes that in the coming decades we will hear more and more about learning and less and less about teaching as she feels the attention is unbalanced in its current structures and norms. At this point in the conversation Dr. Vella cited a biography she was currently reading by Jon Meacham, called *And There was Light*, *Abraham Lincoln* *and the American Struggle*, and how Lincoln understood the need to go slowly in order to go deeply. He knew it was important to set each part right and that necessitated a slow pace, despite the extraordinary need and the clamoring voices to rush. He also understood the need to not budge on conviction or principles, while being determined to not make enemies of the American citizens.

On a personal level, Jane was deeply appreciative of this season of her life. She remarked that it is *slow and quiet,* and that is the best space for deep reflection and noticing what emerges. She has spent most of her life moving fast and being loud, yet she noted that this season is wonderful for giving her time to reflect on all her experiences. She feels like she is learning so much in this quiet, slow season. And it comes as she is waiting more than she ever did in her more mobile years. Now, waiting is an essential part of her life, it reminds her of the French word: *attendre*, which means wait, yet is connected to the idea of attention. Dr. Vella is passionate about the role of attention in learning and as a teacher she thinks that there is no learning without the giving of attention to our learners.

Years ago, she developed the Learners Needs and Resources Assessment (LNRA) and she still says it is the most critical part of learning. Paying attention to where the learners are is foundational. An anecdotal story came to her mind about a photographer named Mia who came to her home to take a photo of her for the Global Learning Partners Website. After preparing for the picture, Mia took about 50 captures at which point Jane asked, “why do you take so many pictures?” and Mia replied, “I am trying to find you.” This story for Jane was a perfect metaphor for the purpose of the LNRA as a tool in finding each individual. It is not about one question, one answer, rather, it is a multi-angle attempt to find where someone is coming from in order to journey on, together. Jane was honest about it being an enormous amount of preparation, but stressed that how we conduct, decipher, and share the LNRA is important to the success of the learning venture. And she added that humility is needed too, inviting the learner to “correct me, where am I off” can be one of the more power-sharing and healing experiences for many learners, not to mention profitable for the coming learning outcomes. Jane believes that as a teacher “you know where you are on, but you don’t know where you are off.” For Jane, the LNRA works because it is that preparation that St. Augustine was speaking about. It connects information to where the person is. Information that is disconnected is not learned.

Throughout our conversation Jane was emotive and full of laughter, exclamations of insight, joy, and wonder. And she was humble too, knowing that while she is very proud of GLP she knows they are not alone in championing a new way to think about learning.

Jane’s thoughts of power were interesting to me as she quickly defined it as synonymous with control. She spoke of being more and more aware of how powerless she is and largely we are, despite our preoccupation with control. While I appreciate her thoughts, I think my definition of power differs and has been influenced by the work of Stephen Brookfield and the awareness of power in all settings. Yet Jane was able to affirm that dialogue shares power whereas monologuing hordes it. Dr. Vella suggests the best way to manage power in the classroom is to create and promote dialogue.

Jane shared several stories that centered on crafting experiences for learners and filling those experiences with emotions. She noted the crafting experiences requires paying attention to the physical environment. Jane stressed that this matters when you are working cross-culturally as you need to pay attention to the environments that are important for the learners, not simply for you. Repeatedly she stressed that the best thing you can give your learners is experience. Experiences take place within our multidimensional world and with all our senses. She also cautioned that just because a group is not explicitly cross-cultural doesn’t mean there isn’t a culture gap. Being a student of your students will help your learners learn. This is her perspective on teaching.   
 In her early years, educational thoughts were centered on three elements in learning: cognitive, affective, psycho-motor (thoughts, feelings, actions) (head, heart, hand). What Jane is learning, and understanding more now is that the most important of these three is the middle one, the affective aspect of learning. She declared that “when you have an experience and that experience has joy, the emotion acts like glue on the dendrite or synapse allowing the learner to be able to remember it years later.” She said that it doesn’t only have to be joy, that is simply her favorite! A final very practical point was about group size and learning spaces. Jane was clear that the size of the large group was less important than the size of the working, learning group. She is a proponent of pairs as working groups because it is nearly impossible for someone to be excluded in that setting.

**Conclusion**

As for concluding thoughts, applications, and takeaways from my extraordinary experience of sitting with Dr. Jane Vella, I have selected four distinct *seeds* of experience that I would like to cultivate more intentionally in the garden of my own learning and life. The first is deep humility. Jane explicitly referenced the need to listen and learn at various points in her professional journey. She also demonstrated a present tense humility as she professed to still be in the process of learning. This humility, that is foundational for honest observation and listening, is the heart of dialogue and has additionally allowed Jane to continue to cultivate a soft mind and heart that helps her to maintain a sense of wonder in the world. I would like to cultivate that type of *wonder*ful humility. The second seed is seeking wisdom from others. Throughout our conversation Jane was not fixated on reiterating her own thoughts and ideas, but on exploring and sharing what she has learned from others. This willingness to learn from others is an outworking of the humility I mentioned first, but it merits its own mention. Cultivating a desire and a rhythm of learning from others is a needed component for lifelong learning and enables diverse voices and experiences to speak into one’s own life. The third takeaway was her conviction and commitment to the affective aspect of learning, including her willingness to back away from previously held and taught ideas. I want to explore her exhortation to, “make joy explicit” in learning. And finally, the fourth seed is a very practical yet powerful idea of learning groups of pairs. No matter the size of the larger learning environment, if the group breaks into pairs no one is left out of the learning and therefore the highest potential for learning is released. While I deeply appreciated each minute of my 75-minute call with Dr. Jane Vella, the four seeds I reference here, I aim to intentionally introduce and cultivate in my personal and professional life. I am thankful for this assignment which provided me the opportunity to interview the extraordinary educator, Dr. Jane Vella. And I am thankful for her time and attention.

**References**

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**Appendix**

Reflective Interview Questions

1. *[general opening question]* **Tell me how you first became interested in teaching and learning? Who were some of the individuals influential in the development of your calling? What has kept you interested in it all these years?**
2. *[learning transfer question]* When thinking about learning transfer (where individuals and/or groups are walking away with new ideas, behaviors, and feelings, as well as a growing capacity to apply them), how is dialogue education effective to this end? **How is Dialogue Education an effective method when we think of learning transfer?**
3. *[learning transfer question]* The book Women's Ways of Knowing uses the metaphor of voice as a way of categorizing the development of self, voice and mind. The authors suggest that women move from voicelessness to increasing levels of voice through a growing awareness and integration of themselves and the world around them. (Belenky et al., 1997). This metaphor resonated with me and my experiences as it represents a certain progression of knowledge at increasing depth and transformation. **What is your response to this metaphor? What else would you add?**
4. *[learning transfer question]* **How would you encourage women to begin deepening their reflective learning journey to increase the depth of her learning and increase the potential of transformation?** (Background of question: Critical reflection has been a powerful tool for me as a learner and a teacher. I love Miles Horton's quote, "You only learn from the experiences you learn from." (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). I have also learned that you must build your capacity to reflect. In the contexts where I have worked, critical reflection and personal awareness are not taught nor encouraged, so at first glance it can appear that the women are not receptive or not engaged when in fact the learning circle she is participating in might be the first time she has ever been asked her thoughts, ideas, or experiences regarding a subject.)
5. *[Power dynamics question]* **What do power dynamics look like within dialogue education? How does power get distributed?**
6. *[Power dynamics question]* **How can teachers share their power in authentic ways with learners?** (Background of question: Stephen Brookfield talks about how power is everywhere and most definitely in the classroom. (Brookfield, 2013). I've been that white middle class American woman who believed the myth that equality is experienced by everyone, when in fact, I was clueless to the power I held in the room.)
7. *[Power dynamics question]* **More specifically, what is important to remember in cross cultural learning contexts? What about learning groups that cross socioeconomic lines?**
8. *[Managing Need question]* At times when the perceived needs are so great, or obvious (or time is short, or the content critical) there is a natural temptation to go faster in response to the overwhelming need. **What would you say in response to that?**
9. *[Managing Need question]* **What do you think is at stake if we do not manage this polarity or tension well?**
10. *[general, closing question]* In recent interviews I have heard you reference your excitement regarding what neuroscientists are currently understanding about the brain as it relates to how we learn. **Tell me more about what excites you about this and why? Is there another topic that is piquing your interest of late?**
    1. **What advice or recommendations would you give to someone like me who is seeking to come alongside communities of women, help them realize their potential and power, and use it for increasing peace?**