

Audio Transcript of Allan Quigley Recording

Section 3: What is our role?

Hi.

When I was teaching adult basic education in 1973-74 in Fort McMurray Alberta, at that time called Vocational Preparation, or Voc Prep, the campus was housed in interconnected mobile units, or trailers. It was then an Alberta Vocational Centre, not yet Keyano College. The town itself was basically a frontier town on the verge of becoming the centre of the famous—some will say—infamous, Oil Sands.

I was teaching Social Studies at the AVC, which I talk more about in the other Voice-Over in this same section. Over the course of that first year, I reworked the curriculum I was given to include a section on exploring career options.

Why?

Because, the social studies curriculum I was given seemed to assume our Voc Prep program would effectively “feed” students to the campus’s trades programs. We were basically supposed to vocationally prepare our adult literacy, Voc Prep learners, to move from our trailer to another trailer to join into one of the AVC’s trades courses. As I saw it, learner’s opportunities were all within these trailers. In effect, prepare to “Choose what is offered.”

Having no idea of who Malcolm Knowles was, or what learner-centred teaching meant, as discussed further in section four of this guide, I perhaps naively set out to adapt the social studies curriculum to focus a lot more on learners’ felt needs and less on the perceived needs of the AVC staff and the curriculum I had been given. This by the way was in my second year at the AVC.

Because the one area that my students said they wanted to talk about most was what kind of opportunities they would have after this social studies program, and because many of them were not wanting to be welders or carpenters or heavy equipment operators, I began working closely with the Centre’s counsellor, whom I will call Ed.

Together we gave my social studies learners interest tests and aptitude tests, such as they were then. So they could think about and talk about other possibilities for their futures.

We had shelves built along our classroom wall where we had catalogues and brochures from colleges, business schools and universities in Alberta and Western Canada for our students to browse.

We also arranged to have our learners spend a few days off campus if they were interested and/or showed an aptitude for other careers beyond the campus trades. And those interested in the trades courses could visit those programs in the other shops and trailers if they chose.

With help from Ed, I arranged placements for learners who wanted to go to local businesses so they could see what it was like to work in, for instance, the local radio station, or the local drug store, or the clothing store, or the art store, or on one of the many construction sites in the town or out at the growing Oil Sands site. In that case, their observation visit was under the supervision of a Canada Bechtel or Syncrude supervisor. In those days having student insurance for these things was not as stringent as today. Things seemed to be going well...but...

Here's what happened,

One day when the students were away at the various vocational programs or local sites, a teacher I will call Wayne, confronted me in the hallway. Wayne taught reading. And was great at it. But he asked me: "Why are you messing with the students' minds?"

From his viewpoint, his job was to teach reading. Nothing more. As he believed, adult students like ours should be left to decide their own future by themselves.

Just my getting involved with the counsellor—whom some considered a weirdo in the first place—was going too far. We were "messing with the student's minds." Wayne explained to me we should be teaching what we were supposed to teach. *The curriculum*.

That was probably the first time in my career in literacy that I realized we all didn't all see our work in the same way. Quite the opposite.

By contrast—at the other end of the spectrum, and as seen in the narrative in this section, years later when I was the director of Adult Basic Education at a college in Regina, Saskatchewan, one teacher on my staff ended up having an emotional breakdown. She was so worried and concerned about her learners she was loaning at least one student money, letting others use her car and I learned that one learner in crisis at the time stayed at her house.

We are all somewhere between these two ends of a continuum. It is worth thinking about.

Differences of ideology like this can be expected among most teaching faculties. Academics at universities disagree all the time. So do public school teachers. Adult literacy education is not unique in this respect.

But, such philosophical differences can sometimes be points of real tension among teaching faculty. Problems can arise between faculty and their administration and, more often that we realize, between programs and their own funding agencies.

To explore our varied purposes in a program or institution, it is worth asking ourselves where we stand as teachers and tutors.

Let's think of it this way: if the role we play as a teacher or tutor were seen as a metaphor of concentric circles with the learner in the middle and the teacher or tutor standing at a distance in one of the surrounding circles, where would you stand? Do you see your job as being at

“arm’s length” from your learner? Like Richard? Is it our role in adult literacy education to respect learners’ right to make their own decisions? Not “mess with their minds?”

Or is your comfort level to be more empathetic. More supportive? Standing in a closer concentric circle.

I need to say, it is really important to have agreed upon guidelines for professional boundaries as discussed in this Guide. It is vital that professional boundaries be set and followed; but how much should you help your learners on a day-to-day basis?

How much should each of us get involved with our learners?

Here is an activity worth doing for yourself, or with your colleagues. If it is done at a retreat or meeting, and the results are shared and discussed, it is my experience that the program often becomes clearer in its mission. Stronger in its purpose. We see what the diversity is in our own teaching and tutoring faculty

So here is a little exercise you might try.

See how you might answer these three questions. I will read them slowly so you can write them down, and I will repeat them for you couple of times.

1. I believe *the most important purpose* of adult literacy education is to

2. I believe *my responsibility to my learners* is to

3. I believe *it is the learners’ responsibility* to

I WILL REPEAT THEM SLOWLY AGAIN.

Try to revisit these statements after you finish this Guide, and again in a few months. See if your answers have changed...and consider why.

Hoping this is helpful,

Thanks for listening.

