

## Chapter 8

# Becoming an Authentic Community College Teacher

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, a study of how adult vocational educators develop authenticity in their teaching within a Canadian community college context is presented. Six participants from different disciplines, five of whom were relatively new teachers, and one of whom had considerable experience, were interviewed three times over two years. With the assistance of the participants, narratives were constructed for each educator. Three categories of issues—personal issues (such as confidence), college system issues (policies and procedures), and educational system issues (government mandated curriculum)—were identified as influencing the development of authenticity. Implications for teacher preparation and professional development within the college environment are discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is my intent in this paper to explore the extent to which the community college environment supports authenticity in teaching. Based on my teaching practice, where I regularly work with adult vocational educators in the community college setting, I was curious as to whether the nature of the teaching environment would lead educators to construct a teaching role that responded to the constraints and demands of the college in a way that still allowed them to bring a genuine sense of self into the classroom. It is the case,

for example, that community college educators often have mandated curriculum, teach technical skills that conform with industry standards, have 30 or more hours of classroom contact time per week, and have limited professional development opportunities. Yet the college teachers I taught were enthusiastic, dedicated, and caring educators. They seemed to be able to work around and with conditions that I would have thought to be serious constraints. I wanted to explore this in a more systematic way.

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## **AUTHENTICITY: BACKGROUND**

Authenticity has been defined as the expression of the genuine self in the community and authentic teaching as a process by which teachers in higher education come to know themselves and their preferences within the social context of their work (Cranton, 2001). Brookfield (2006a), in writing directly to college teachers, proposes that being an authentic teacher means having congruence between our words and actions, fully disclosing the expectations and assumptions that guide our practice, and being responsive and helpful with students. Brookfield (2006b) goes on to critique authenticity through the lens of power, pointing out that “being authentic involves staying true to one’s agenda, remaining open and honest about it, and sometimes placing one’s power behind it” (p. 11).

Authenticity in teaching is not only centered in self-knowledge. Jarvis (1992) suggests people are being authentic when they choose to act so as to “foster the growth and development of each other’s being” (p. 113). He sees teachers as consciously having the goal of helping students develop their authenticity. In other words, teachers and students learn together through dialogue as Freire (1972) advocates, and the result of authentic teaching is that “teachers learn and grow together with their students” (Jarvis, 1992, p. 114).

Authenticity is also linked with critical reflection and reflective learning. People develop as autonomous and rational individuals within their social context. Jarvis (1992) says that when people’s actions are controlled by others, their behavior is repetitive and mechanical, and this is inauthentic. Dirkx (2006) accepts that critical reflection is a powerful way for teachers to identify and understand their assumptions about the teaching and learning process, but he goes beyond what he sees as an ego-based process to bring in feelings, intuition and soul work.

Empirical research on authenticity in teaching in higher education is limited. Based on inter-

views with 22 faculty members from a variety of disciplines, Cranton and Carusetta (2004a) create a model of authenticity that includes five components: self-awareness, awareness of others, relationships, awareness of context, and critical reflection. Using the same data, Cranton and Carusetta (2004b) go on to present a developmental process in which instructors move from “beginning authenticity” to “mature authenticity” as they gain experience. Newer faculty members are more likely to look to authorities for answers and to search for methods and techniques that will help them do a “good job.” More experienced faculty members are more likely to be aware of the complexities of their relationships with students and of the difficulties inherent in authentic teaching within the social structures of their discipline, institution, and culture. These results coincide with some of Palmer’s (1998, 2004) thoughts, especially when he reminds us that technique is not the answer, and that becoming authentic is not a straightforward “onward and upward” journey, but rather an exploration, a search for soul.

## **METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

Narrative inquiry was the methodology for the study. Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information through storytelling and creating a narrative of the experience (Connelly & Clanin, 1990). It allows the researcher to include individual and collective stories in a study of the way humans experience the world—in this case, the way teachers experience becoming and being authentic in their teaching. Chase (2005) presents five assumptions that distinguish narrative inquiry from other forms of qualitative research. First, narrative retrospectively presents the participant’s point of view and meaning of the experience. Second, researchers view narrative as an active process where the narrator’s voice is recognized. Third, narratives exist in a social

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