The Role of Forgiveness in Adult Learning and Education

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Abstract: Adverse experiences can initiate angry and negative emotions and if not addressed and resolved have the ability to impede learning. Forgiveness counseling gives learners and educators a way to extinguish the power of these hindering emotions and thereby enhance learning.

From the first birthing cry to the last drawn breath, humans are bathed in emotion. Emotions first appear in the prenatal setting. For example, babies in utero will suck their thumbs or umbilical cords for solace (deMause, 1997). A loud noise will frighten the unborn causing them to react with a jump or a kick. Learning begins in unprotected emotional innocence, an exercise of curiously exploring the environment, seeking comfort, and avoiding discomfort. In a perfect world, children are nurtured and encouraged to satisfy this primal curiosity in a safe learning environment. If this happens, learning becomes a challenging adventure, where risks may be taken and ideas tried and tested (Dirkx, 2006; Perry, 2006). A lack of success is not seen as failure but is encouraged as a learning experience. It is in an emotional setting that most learning occurs (Dirkx, 2001, 2006; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton 2006; Wolfe, 2006).

When encouragement is lacking or has been non-existent, either in the family or in educational settings, learning becomes black and white, a matter of right and wrong. Failure then leads to judgment. Not knowing the correct answer and being made to feel stupid can change learning into a stressful and shameful experience (Perry, 2006; Wolfe, 2006). The shame, psychological pain, or trauma caused by these events can leave learners feeling angry and resentful, believing that they are inadequate or stupid (Perry, 2006). These feelings can continue long after the initial anger experience (Fitzgibbons, 1998; Perry, 2006; Reed & Enright, 2006; Sukhodolsky, Golub & Cromwell, 2001). Anger is then carried into adulthood and, if not recognized and resolved, can be displaced and manifested as underachieving or disruptive learners (Dirkx, 2006; Enright, Knutson, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007; Fitzgibbons, 1998; Perry, 2006). The result is often an angry, negative and/or fearful adult learner, which leads to the resistance or rejection of learning and the educational process (Britzman, 1998; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

Forgiveness counseling is an effective tool for breaking the cycle of anger, anxiety, resentment, and depression in adult samples (Enright et al., 2007; Fitzgibbons, 1998; Gambaro, Enright, Baskin, & Klatt, 2008; Lin, Mack, Enright, Kran, & Baskin, 2004; Reed & Enright, 2006). Fitzgibbons (1998) reported in his practice that “the psychotherapeutic uses of forgiveness have resulted in a significant diminishment in the emotional, mental, and physical suffering” (p. 63) with reported benefits of a sense of freedom, a reduction of stress, resentment, and anger, along with a sense of physical and psychological well-being (Fitzgibbons, 1998; Coyle & Enright, 1998; McCoulough, 2000; Reed & Enright, 2006; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). This reduction of stress, resentment, and anger can have a positive impact on the student’s affect and motivation to learn (Dirkx, 2001; Gambaro et al., 2008; Knutson, Enright, & Garbers, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which learning about forgiveness and forgiveness interventions might contribute to, and enhance, the adult learning experience. To do this, the ways in which emotions, primarily anger and resentment, can impact learning are

described. Second, the concept of forgiveness is presented—what it is and what it is not. Finally, implications for teaching and learning, as well as suggestions for further research are explored.

**Emotions and Learning**

Much of learning occurs in a powerfully emotional context which can inhibit or stimulate learning (Dirkx, 2006). Educators have long known that students with a negative affect, who react with anger or resentment, are poor learners. Fitzgibbon’s (1998) found that anger is established in early childhood, and is “a natural response of the failure of others to meet one’s needs for love, praise, acceptance, and justice, and it is experienced daily in the home, school, community, and place of employment” (p. 64). Essentially, anger is dealt with in three ways: “conscious or unconscious denial; active- or passive- aggression; and forgiveness” (p.64). The usual method of dealing with anger in early childhood is denial. The result is that most people bring a significant amount of unconscious anger into adulthood.

The following story illustrates how internalized anger and resentment can impact learning.

Al, a 65-year-old gentleman, spoke of a grade school experience. He had raised his hand and was called on to read in class. As he stumbled over the words, the class erupted in snickers and laughs. His reading became worse as his embarrassment escalated. Finally, his teacher put a stop to this torture by having him sit in the corner, his back to the class, wearing a pointed paper cap with “dunce” written on it . . . where his agony continued until recess. While Al was relating the story, he got up from his chair and started pacing the floor in anger. His breathing increased to the point that it was audible and his pulse could be seen beating at his neck and temples. Even though he now enjoys reading and is a voracious reader, he said that he never again raised his hand or read aloud in class. As a result, even though his teachers in junior high and high school encouraged him to further his education, Al never went to college.

In the military, Al refused an opportunity for officer candidate school because he believed that he “did not have the study skills to go to school” (Al, personal communication, November 23, 2008). Al is now a project superintendent on a multi-million dollar construction project, but he was well into his 50’s before he obtained the confidence to leave the psychologically safe position of the workforce for a role in management. He observed, “I could have been a hell of a good Architectural-Engineer, but I never had any encouragement . . . I will never give anyone the chance to humiliate me like that again” (Al, personal communication, November, 23, 2008). Al’s physical reaction, while relating the story, provides a glimpse into his window to see the power and strength of his anger and resentment 56 years later.

Anger can give rise to resentment, guilt, or retaliation which might be transferred to another person, or setting, either immediately, or long after the initial offense (Dirkx, 2006; Fitzgibbon’s, 1998; Huang & Enright, 2000; Perry 2006; Wolfe 2006). Fitzgibbon’s (1998) defines anger as “a strong feeling of displeasure and antagonism aroused by a sense of injury or wrong” (p. 64). If these feelings are not resolved they can internalize and fester. This may create a negative affect, anger rumination, and diminished feelings of self-esteem and self-worth in the learner. Sukhokolsky et al., (2001) identify anger rumination as “unintentional and recurrent cognitive processes that emerge during and continue after an episode of anger experience” (p. 690). Al’s history demonstrates how unresolved anger and anger rumination can direct a life and impact one’s future education. Educators are battling the psychological baggage, the thorn of anger and resentment, brought by learners into the educational arena. Until a way is found to dispose of this baggage and remove the thorn, learners will never be able to reach their true learning potential. Not only is the joy of learning impaired, irreparable harm occurs to learners in lost opportunities for themselves, their families, and their community.
The Concept of Forgiveness

Although the concept of forgiveness is ancient, it has not been systematically studied until recently. By 1997, only 58 empirical research studies on forgiveness had been done (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Since that time, a deluge of attention has been paid to the subject, as evidenced by the number of lectures given, papers written, research performed, and self-help books published. Forgiveness is just now finding its way into educational literature. Baskin and Enright (2004) define forgiveness “as the willful giving up of resentment in the face of another’s considerable injustice and responding with beneficence to the offender even though the offender has no right to the forgiver’s moral goodness” (p. 80). Forgiveness does not forget or excuse an unfair action. That action is still viewed as wrong (Enright, 1999), and the one forgiving does not necessarily give up their right to justice (Knutson et al., 2008). Rather, the act of forgiveness responds to the perpetrator with diminished anger or resentment, and with increasingly positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors even though the offender has no right to forgiveness (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2001; Knutson, et al., 2008). When forgiveness occurs, it is the person, and not the action, who is forgiven (Enright, 1999; Malcolm, Warwar & Greenberg, 2005). Forgiveness is an act of mercy to the offending person, and the gift of liberation to the one who has been wronged. Forgiveness comes from a position of strength; it is empowering. Forgiveness can start whenever the forgiver wishes, can be unconditional, releases the one wronged from the burden of anger and resentment, and may be given with or without reconciliation (Enright, 1999; Enright et al., 2007).

Antecedents and Consequences of Forgiveness

One antecedent to forgiveness is the offensive act itself and the commitment to forgive that action. The commitment to forgive has been identified as the most important and the most difficult step toward forgiveness (Knutson et al., 2008). A second is that the transgression is perceived as offensive (Newburg, d’Aquili, Newburg, & deMarici, 2000). A man sleeping with a woman who is not his wife could be perceived as a joke and laughed off unless this same act is seen by his wife. Then, it is an offense. Last, the offense must be remembered (Enright, 1999; 2001; Worthington 2005). For example, a driver who steals a parking place that you have been waiting for might produce thoughts of, “How rude!” The incident would then be forgotten as plans for the day are made; hence, no injury or need of forgiveness. Reported consequences of forgiveness include a sense of freedom and a reduction of stress, along with a sense of physical and psychological well-being (Fitzgibbons, 1998; Coyle & Enright; McCoullough, 2000; Reed & Enright, 2006; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Forgiveness has been shown to improve the quality of life (Fitzgibbons, 1998; Temoshok & Wald, 2005), and reduce anger and anger rumination (Coyle & Enright, 1997; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001.

Critical Attributes of Forgiveness

When an offense occurs, the tendency is to see the offender as the action itself. Reframing is the process of changing the way the offender is viewed (Enright, 1999; Knutson et al. 2008; Worthington, 1998). Instead of seeing the offender as the offensive and damaging action, through reframing, the offender is seen as someone of worth. The critical attribute of respect is twofold. First, the person forgiving must respect him or herself and acknowledge that he or she has the right to not live under a cloud of anger, bitterness, or resentment. Second, the offender is seen as a human being worthy of respect, even though he or she has not earned that right (Enright, 1999; Malcolm et al., 2005). When the cognitive insights of reframing and respect have been mastered, it can lead to feelings of compassion (Enright, 1999, Enright et al., 2007). Compassion is what allows us to have feelings for others and to understand their misery and
suffering (Stratton & Hayes, 1998). Compassion is offered in spite of the offense, and not because of it. Caution should be taken so that feelings of compassion do not excuse the offender’s faults. This could place the forgiving person in the role of victim, which would allow abusive action to continue. Empathy is an emotional feeling of understanding and unity with another (Stratton & Hayes, 1998). According to their study on resolutions of past emotional injuries, Malcolm et al. (2005) found that empathy is essential to successful forgiveness. An important and often neglected part of forgiveness is the ability to forgive oneself. Holding onto an angry memory plays an important part of the inability to forgive oneself, so that individuals “who find it hard to forgive themselves will continue to hold angry memories” (Barber, Maltby & Macaskill, 2005, p. 259). People who still get angry while ruminating about events that may have happened long ago do so because of mistakes they have made and, therefore, are unable to forgive themselves. Barber et al. (2005) felt that addressing thoughts of revenge are crucial to forgiving others. McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick and Johnson (2001) concur that people who seek revenge are less forgiving.

**Implications for Forgiveness and Learning**

Enright et al. (2007) conducted a series of studies to find if classroom teachers, instructed and supported by psychologists, could lead forgiveness programs to help reduce anger in students exposed to poverty and violence. The teachers attended a one-day, five-hour workshop with a licensed psychologist. A forgiveness manual, books and related materials were distributed. Although two-thirds of the interventional curricula focused on learning about forgiveness rather than forgiving a specific person, the studies revealed a successful and a significant change in the level of student anger. Gambaro et al. (2008) investigated the effectiveness of a school-based, manualized forgiveness program on the psychosocial functioning and academic performance of students with high levels of Trait Anger. Trait Anger is the generalized belief of being treated unfairly by others and is accompanied by frequent feelings of anger and frustration (Stratton & Hayes, 1998). The results showed that after intervention, participants demonstrated a substantial improvement in forgiveness, and perceptions of self, as well as in their interpersonal relationships in general. Interestingly, grades in English, math, and social studies also improved across the board along with a reduction in detentions and one-day, in-school suspensions. All businesses must address the bottom line; the business of education is no exception. Historically, education has struggled for every dollar to fund programs. The question arises, “Can we afford to finance forgiveness counseling in the educational arena?” The author counters with, “Can we afford not to?” A patient with an abscess might receive the best of medical care. The wound will be lanced, drained, and appropriate antibiotics administered, but until the thorn, the original cause of the abscess, is removed the wound will never heal. The author believes that forgiveness can be the instrument used to remove the thorn of offense and allow the abscess of anger, resentment, and guilt to heal, and thus enhance learning potential.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Research with adult samples have shown that forgiveness interventions are effective in reducing anger and related emotional difficulties (Enright et al., 2007; Lin et al., 2004; Reed & Enright, 2006). Given the encouraging results in child and adolescent education, along with the improvement shown not only academically but in behavior and social interactions, more research on forgiveness interventions is suggested in the adult educational arena. Dirkx (2006a) wrote, “At various times in my own teaching, I have felt annoyed, irritated, angered, or even threaten by what students said in class” (p. 28). This statement suggests an interesting, and possibly
productive direction for future research, as unresolved anger can be displaced and erupt later (Fitzgibbons, 1998). Therefore, forgiveness counseling of faculty and the resolution of their own anger may have a beneficial impact on student learning and academic achievement.

References


