This chapter invokes the spirit of Sophia as metaphorical guide and describes a path for educators and practitioners that can assist in the recovery of wisdom in the face of increasing pressures of measurable outcomes within the field of lifelong learning.

Searching for Sophia: Adult Educators and Adult Learners as Wisdom Seekers

Wilma Fraser, Tara Hyland-Russell

“It’s real, you see,” they said; “it’s so much more real than the stuff we normally deliver.” These words encapsulated the enthusiastic responses of a number of adult educators and trainers who attended a workshop offered as part of a larger conference on the future of adult/lifelong learning by Wilma’s Department of Post-Compulsory Education and Training at her university in the United Kingdom in 2009. Wilma (Author 1) was one of the organizers:

I was also giving a presentation, and was surprised when I entered the room that it was already full, with others at the door asking if I “could just squeeze another in.” To many of the participants our names meant nothing; my session’s success was due to my title: Wisdom and Adult Learning.

The room was, quite simply, bursting, both with numbers and with anticipation. The session went well; Wilma drew energy from the expectation of the crowd and generated an atmosphere that beat its own rhythm between input, discussion, exploration, and analysis. Wilma showed a picture of the two hands in Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* (Figure 1) from the Sistine Chapel and asked participants to reflect on what exactly was being passed from God to Man in that iconic, forever-held moment of connection. Wilma revealed the rest of the picture—and the woman in God’s embrace. Eve? Surely not, at the moment of Adam’s genesis; then who might she be?

Art historians Hall and Steinberg (1993) argue this figure to be none other than the feminized personification of wisdom (*sapientia*), also known as *Sophia*, and her half-hidden nature reveals much about her contested
presence in prevailing Western discourses. This argument is supported by theologian Karen Armstrong, who notes:

In the third century BCE, a Jewish writer personified the Wisdom of God that had brought the world into being. He imagined her at God’s side, like Plato’s demiourgo (2009, p. 79).

In the days following Wilma’s presentation, three participants told her how they had incorporated the teaching of wisdom within their own tutor training sessions—gratifying to hear at the very least, but especially within the tutors’ contexts: training bricklayers, Royal Engineers within the Army, and members of the police academy. Wilma’s colleagues explained that they had felt impelled to take a risk: They wanted to share some of the energy created in the conference, but they could not have anticipated the welcome with which their words of wisdom were greeted by their student tutors.

This chapter explains the genesis of such enthusiasm in an effort to understand what inspired those participants to seek a flame and draw on its light to illuminate some of the shadows of their own teaching practices. We invoke the spirit of Sophia as metaphorical guide for an ongoing reclamation of wisdom spaces and heed her challenge to current articulations of, and emphasises upon, skills and competence-based outcomes, which we believe are constricting our teaching and learning spaces. Our working definition of wisdom is a stance of openness, embracing possibility and multidimensionality. Wisdom is broader in scope than cognitive knowing and includes aspects of the sacred, divine, intuitive, and experiential. Our notion of wisdom finds echo in the words of Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1990), who stress the paradoxical nature of wisdom’s pursuit:
What all the ancient thinkers seemed to realize is that without wisdom, ways of knowing are constrained by a tragic paradox: the clearer the view they provide, the more limited the slice of reality they reveal (p. 29).

In other words, we argue that many of our educational processes are so limited by outcome-based imperatives that we are in danger of limiting education’s potential for multidimensional and real learning. As Jarvis reminds us:

> It is generally recognised that (the word education) may be derived from either one of two Latin words, “educare” or “educere”: the first means “to train” which implies to prepare a person to take their place within the structures of society, while the second means to “draw out,” which places more emphasis upon the person and the process (as cited in Fraser, 1995, p. 43).

We urge the reclamation of that second emphasis on the person and the process. To reduce the purpose of education to the training needs of the market place lays waste to our opportunities for growth, transformation, and wisdom. Our thesis is based on a belief that we must challenge those taken-for-granted skills-based emphases that underpin so many of our current teaching practices, so that we can nourish the kind of openness and drawing out that fosters wisdom.

We first examine wisdom within adult learning paradigms. Next, we explore key metaphors of knowledge and wisdom which leads to a third section on conceiving wisdom spaces and then conclude with the implications for adult education.

**Wisdom Within Adult Learning Paradigms**

Writings on wisdom within adult learning paradigms have tended to draw upon psychological accounts that emphasize a developmental model embracing life’s trajectories. Edmondson (2005) notes:

> It is among psychologists (rather than philosophers or sociologists) that research during the last quarter-century has re-focused on wisdom as uniting forms of intelligence that are acquired and developed during the lifecourse. This work echoes ancient approaches to practice-oriented forms of wisdom, and has seen thought, feeling, morality and experience as combined in wise discourse and decisions (p. 343).

The emphasis on wisdom’s path over the lifecourse has led, in turn, to recent work on wisdom and gerontology (Randall and Kenyon, 2004) which draws upon narrative framings and assumptions similar to those discussed in adult education (Rossiter and Clark, 2007). Indeed, this is in line with many cross-cultural constructions of the wise elder or sage. However, such constructions rely, as Edmondson (2005) suggests, on the integration of
“thought, feeling, morality and experience as combined in wise discourse and decisions” (p. 343).

What we are arguing in this chapter is that the potential for such integration, and therefore for wisdom, is itself based upon the kinds of discourses within which thought, feeling, morality, and experience are articulated and explored. And it is our contention that educational discourses are being reduced to mainly emphasize forms of knowledge that lead to economic competitiveness and not to wisdom. Trowbridge’s (2007) analysis of major policy reports in the UK on lifelong education supports this view and he notes that, despite the rhetoric about lifelong learning, “There is little social support for accomplishing tasks such as deepening self-knowledge, achieving ego-integration and -transcendence, and gaining wisdom” (p. 165). The paucity of support for deepening self-knowledge has resulted in a reduction in formal education settings in the West that draw on integrated forms of knowledge that can lead to wisdom.

This is not to suggest, however, that education has been reduced to skills-based outcomes solely in response to economic factors. The pedagogical pursuit of wisdom has not simply fallen foul of “the relentless tendency to reduce education’s purpose to employability” (West, 2010, p. 328). On the contrary, Edmondson (2005) views the contemporary demise of wisdom spaces as due to an increasingly less relevant religious worldview for the majority of people and a cognitive model of psychology that dominated the 20th century. To this we would add the shift in emphasis towards greater attention upon reason and rationality, what Dirkx (2001) calls the “rationalist doctrine” (p. 63). This shift in emphasis towards reason and away from faith arose in part during the Enlightenment period and was accompanied by diminished attention to the deeper meanings that our souls and spirits might seek and by increased attention on “factual information and the use of reason and reflection to learn from experience” (Dirkx, 2001, p. 63). Such deeper meaning, we argue, requires thought that is both complex and integrated—thought that cannot be packaged as items of skill-sets but that is imaginative and metarational. But how might we encourage such a shift in attention, which could assist in the recovery of wisdom and in the spaces where *Sophia* might be nurtured, nourished, and encouraged? How do we develop teaching practices where wisdom stories might be told and heard? Part of the answer is found in the language we choose for our teaching practices.

**Metaphors of Knowledge and Wisdom**

Metaphors profoundly shape our language and the ways in which we perceive the world. Hill and Johnston (2003) go so far as to assert that “reflecting on the effects of the language choices we make as adult educators is perhaps a deceptively simple yet the most transformative action to undertake”
It is likely because of its deceptively simple nature that we often disregard the ways that our language use shapes our theories, our ways of becoming as people and teachers, and our teaching practices. Metaphor is a powerful tool, and once we acknowledge that power, we can begin to see how the nature of the language that describes our current educational discourses can have such limiting effects. As Abbs (1979) cogently argued over thirty years ago:

The instrumental view of education is recorded faithfully in the mechanical metaphors and grey abstractions of current educational discourse . . . The effect of such language is to numb the mind . . . It is not an accident that many of the metaphors, dead as they are, derive from mechanics . . . from military manoeuvres . . . and from behavioural psychology . . . It is the language of stasis, leaving education without a subject, without a history and without a future (pp. 11–12).

The gray, static language of mechanics and military is a far cry from the dynamic potential for meaning-making that we see inscribed in our image of Sophia. For us, Sophia offers resonance, energy, and potential: “She is, in fact, the learning process itself. She calls us to a life of seeking understanding of the world in which we live” (Cole, Ronan, and Taussig, 1996, p. 23).

Metaphors actively forge connections between our inner, personal meanings and the outer contexts in which we live our lives. The theoretical models we use not only inform our thoughts but actively shape our behavior and practice. According to Richardson (1997), “We become the metaphors we use. We construct worlds in our metaphoric image” (p. 185). This is our challenge as adult educators: If we want learning to offer transformation, energy, and a future, we must find ways to engage our students in vibrant metaphors of learning that provide multiple options and growth for both educator and learner and that animate perceptions of learning as active and agential.

**Spiral as Generative Metaphor of Wisdom.** As an outgrowth of the metaphorical image of Sophia as wisdom, we concur with others (Kegan, 1982; Bateson, 1994; Tisdell, 2003) in suggesting the spiral as a generative metaphor of development. As Tara (Author 2) has discussed elsewhere (Hyland-Russell, 2001), the spiral nautilus can be a profound metaphor for the deepening awareness and integration of one’s personal, relational, and cultural stories. The spiral nautilus shell is constructed as a series of chambers that lead deeper into further chambers, spiralling around the inner self. Yet the chambers also open outward, connecting the inner creature with the surrounding sea. Using a spiral metaphor for wisdom learning processes provides a model through which to evaluate and mediate among conflicting discourses and social pressures, not least of which are the current economic paradigms, and values the wisdom that emerges from one’s personal and communal journey. Here we find an echo with the work of feminist theologian
Catherine Keller, for whom wisdom “at least as practised in the indigenous and biblical traditions, is irredeemably implicated in the sensuous, the communal, the experiential, the metanoic, the unpredictable, the imaginal, the practical” (in Deane-Drummond, 2007, p. 176).

**“Waiting on” as Metaphor for Wisdom.** Not only literal and metaphorical spaces facilitate the development of wisdom but also the attitudes in which we approach learning. Our pedagogical stances have great capacity to foster the kinds of spaces in our classes where aspects of “our [and our students’] unique wisdom stories” (Randall and Kenyon, 2004, p. 342) can be nourished and encouraged. Urging alternatives to the heavy certainties that characterize much adult learning and teaching, we suggest, instead, the kind of careful attentiveness so evocatively captured by McGilchrist (2009):

> The stance, or disposition, that we need to adopt, according to Heidegger, is one of “waiting on” (nachdenken) something, rather than just “waiting for” it; a patient, respectful nurturing of something into disclosure, in which we need already to have some idea of what it is that will be. George Steiner compares it to “that ‘bending toward’ of spirit and intellect and ear” to be seen in Fra Angelico’s Annunciation in San Marco (p. 152).

It is this sense of attentiveness that we also want to encourage in our classroom practices. We urge the fostering of environments where *Sophia* might find welcome and expression: a waiting on wisdom that both creates an expectation in teachers and students for wisdom and actively shapes their learning practices to make wisdom possible.

We see a certain irony, here, in Michaelangelo’s placing of the female figure in the *Creation of Adam*. If we concur with Hall and Steinberg (1993) and their suggestion that she is the personification of wisdom, her framing within this section of the painting has always been overshadowed by the iconic image of God’s hand linking with Adam’s. Perhaps it is time that wisdom came out of the shadow of God’s embrace and claimed her place at the heart of the educative process.

**Conceiving Wisdom Spaces**

We need to conceive and foster the physical, mental, emotional, and moral spaces for wisdom learning. Deane-Drummond (2007) draws from Aquinas’ notion of practical wisdom to suggest wisdom-infused learning that is oriented toward the common good and that fosters *citizen virtues*, an active and full responsibility to family and the public sphere. How then can we both imagine and sustain spaces that support learners in their pursuit of introspection, reflexivity, and the development of wisdom? Each of us offers an example from our own practice.
Wisdom in the Radical Humanities. In a study of Canadian Radical Humanities programs for marginalized nontraditional adult learners, Tara and her research partner Janet Groen argue for the “power of humanities education to create a reflective space in which students can develop critical thinking capacities” (Groen and Hyland-Russell, 2010, p. 39). This reflective space is far less common than the short-term vocational or training programs usually prescribed for low-income people (Cunningham, 1993) but also is far more effective in promoting the kinds of metarational thinking and imaginative consideration of self in relation to the world associated with wisdom-seeking. Though it would be reasonable to assume that low-income or homeless people need, first and foremost, practical skills to escape poverty, Tara’s experience teaching, administering, and researching Radical Humanities programs has instead shown the value of a wisdom approach.

Time and again the marginalized adult learners report their previous referrals to yet another skills-based program intended to lead them out of poverty: budgeting, computer skills, or job retraining. Yet, despite their willing, if not eager, participation, the low-income learners did not find any appreciable benefit to the skills-based programs. To their amazement, however, when exposed to studies of ethics, history, or literature through one of the Radical Humanities programs, they began to evaluate their values against social norms and to assess the structural mechanisms that had impoverished them. They were able to imagine new possibilities for their lives based on the stories of self and other in relation to the metaphorical worlds that they encountered through the humanities. Students found far more freedom through engaging in the dialogic space of the humanities than they did in upskilling programs designed to liberate them from poverty. In the words of one participant, “skills-based programs don’t require critical engagement, but memorization of tasks. Humanities involves your whole self and requires thinking about how your viewpoint and life relate to others and the world. It makes us think of things we couldn’t imagine before” (Tracy Ray). Participants’ experiences suggest that real and transformative learning comes not from mastering another set of narrowly defined skills, but from an ongoing process that actively integrates private and public, known and experienced, practical and imaginative.

Wisdom and Adult Learning. We began this chapter with reference to Wilma’s workshop on Wisdom and Adult Learning. One of those participants celebrated the challenge that the session presented and shared his applied insights with Wilma as part of Wilma’s current research into wisdom and adult learning. John retired from the police force after thirty years’ service and attaining the position of Detective Chief Superintendent. He now teaches within the Department of Post Compulsory Education and Training at Canterbury Christ Church University (United Kingdom), where his roles include national teacher-training for the police force. He talks of the environment that pervaded the police service before he left and connected that environment with the current situation in adult education:
A lot of the issues were the management mantras . . . “value for money,” “efficiencies,” “economies,” “more for the same” and “the same for less” and it appeared to me that we were actually beginning to lose focus from what we were here to do and we very much got into instrumentalist sort of policies, and works, and targets and performance which skewed a lot of the real purpose of policing. But the thing that surprised me is that some of the things that I railed against in the police force, I still rail against today [in education] because the aims and objectives, the intended learning outcomes, the lesson planning is so defined they’ve actually lost the plot of what they’re here to do.

As an antidote to the prevailing loss of focus, John now includes Wilma’s slide of Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, and for every cohort of learners, he posits wisdom as an alternate way of learning and teaching. When Wilma asked John how he defined wisdom, he illustrated wisdom teaching by describing how a trainee tutor he was observing had been adhering closely to the mandatory lesson plan and then abruptly shifted to respond to the students and offer a more open stance by illustrating the lesson through her own experience. “Halfway through the lesson she binned it and she told a story—she told a story of her own experience that related to the subject . . . and she had those people in the palm of her hand and so much learning took place and it’s that sort of thing that I think is wisdom” (John). Of course, John is not suggesting that simple storytelling is all that is needed for *Sophia* to take her place center-stage; rather, he is noting the importance of placing the story within the felt experience of the teaching/learning exchange. While this might appear as no more than common sense, John’s argument, and ours in this chapter, is that too much of our educational practice is increasingly confined within the restrictive metaphorical world of the skills-based marketplace. Such limitation will, inevitably, restrict the imaginal spaces within which the seeds of deeper learning might grow and mature.

**Conclusion**

We believe that it is indeed possible to create wisdom spaces in adult education, in spite of the pressure to have measurable outcomes. Burdened by what we perceive to be a profound disjunction between the delivery of packaged units of learning and the opening of the mind and soul to greater knowing that cannot always be predicted, we posit a view of wisdom that concurs with Abbs’s definition of “Education [as] to do with educing, with releasing, with liberating” (1994, p. 15). The emerging work in Adult Education on spirituality and authenticity is encouraging theoretical and pedagogical spaces for *Sophia* to enter the classroom. We can pay heed to the metaphors and discourses we use in our teaching, research, and scholarship: We can deliberately choose language that resonates with the possibilities of intuition and wisdom, rather than relying on reductive metaphors relating
to the marketplace. Thus, the very act of invoking or inviting Sophia into our educational discourses can confront and speak back to the power of the prevailing and limiting narrative framings.

Central to our endeavors, and crucial to any criterion for success, we must also strive to confront the mindnumbing limitations of our current pedagogical emphasis on certainties and outcomes. We urge, in contrast, an attitude of attentiveness and encouragement towards the potential for unknowing as both antidote and opportunity for change: We can “wait upon” Sophia through our attitudes. We need to reclaim the circle, the spiral, and learn to tolerate the uncertain, the unknown, the unpredictable. As Edmondson notes, “It is a perennial feature of wisdom . . . that it eschews dogmatism or certitude” (2005, p. 342). If instrumentalist, consumerist, or bureaucratic forms of rationality become dominant rationales for social worldviews, the idea that a life should in any way make sense becomes less and less of a possibility. And it is because of its power to help a life become meaningful that the pursuit of wisdom is so crucial. We are reminded of the poet Keats’s urging for the ability to live in “negative capability, that is when a man (sic) is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (from a letter to his brothers dated December 21, 1817, quoted in The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English, Ian Ousby, ed., p. 672). Paradoxically, we are more likely to encounter the wisdom of Sophia if we are willing to abandon rational certitude and embrace a stance of curiosity and openness, what we could call “unknowing.” We ignore Sophia’s call at our peril:

You who are waiting for me, take me to yourselves.

And do not banish me from your sight.

And do not make your voice hate me, nor your hearing.

Do not be ignorant of me anywhere or any time. Be on your guard!

(Hymn of praise to Sophia, from The Nag Hammadi Library, in Simon, 2004, p. 222)

References


Wilma Fraser is a principal lecturer of post-compulsory education at Canterbury Christ Church University, England, U.K.

Tara Hyland-Russell is an associate professor of English at St. Mary’s University College, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.