

Book Reviews

Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach

(Revised Edition) By Jane Vella

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Reviewed by
Liz Gilpatrick

What do quantum physics and Orff Schulwerk have in common? On the surface it may be difficult to imagine any relationship between two such seemingly diverse fields of

study. But a closer look at the energetic interactions described by quantum physics reveals a familiar pattern echoed by the activity in any dynamic Orff Schulwerk classroom: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts; the activity of each part affects every other part simultaneously; a change in any one part results in a change to the whole; each part relates to the whole in a unique way – and more. Because Orff teachers experience these types of interactions daily, it's a short leap in language to substitute human actions for parts and wholes.

Schulwerk teachers at all levels value this sort of energetic exchange in their classrooms.

Those who teach Orff to other teachers may find an elegant model for training them – in Jane Vella's book. It is a model that embraces the very interactions we value. But her model looks and feels very different from the old top-down structures many of us experienced during our own elementary and secondary education.

Vella encourages us to engage in dialogue and constant reflection with our adult students, and proposes a guiding structure built on the following 12 principles: 1) needs assessments; 2) safety; 3) sound relationships; 4) sequence and reinforcement;

5) praxis (action with reflection); 6) respect for learners as decision makers; 7) ideas; 8) giving equal attention to the mind, emotions, and muscles in our teaching; 9) immediacy; 10) clear roles; 11) teamwork; and 12) engagement and accountability.

Each of the 12 principles is examined in its own chapter using a device as effective as it is old: storytelling. And what stories they are!

Vella has taught adult trainers in every corner of the globe, often under extraordinary and dangerous circumstances.

Once, while in El Salvador, Vella and her local training colleagues were held at gunpoint briefly. While in Nepal, a class was held in a tumble-down cow shed that had been lovingly swept clean and made ready by students. While at work in numerous African countries, she communicated successfully with those who spoke no English at all by using

conceptual illustrations and plenty of hands-on learning.

These rich stories are not there to entertain, but to inform and instruct others in the use of the principles and structures that Vella and her colleagues have developed. She has drawn on the work and the writings of other leaders in the field of personal and organizational growth and change, particularly Margaret Wheatley, Joseph Campbell and Paulo Friere. Each chapter is rich with stories, research references, lucid explanations of complex concepts and examples of applications.

Teaching adults effectively – even in the Schulwerk – is not the same as teaching children. Those who are searching for better ways to engage adult

teachers in the Schulwerk will find Vella's book a valuable resource that will inform and strengthen their instructional practices using principles and patterns of the natural world. I think Carl Orff would approve.

