

Dr Barry Golding is Associate Professor in the School of Education, University of Ballarat, a regional Victorian university, and a researcher in adult and community education.

Barry Golding's and Soapy Vallance's lives and work trajectories have recently intersected, in research and practice respectively, at the Donald Men's Shed. Barry, with family roots in Donald, is introduced in a parallel journal article. Soapy, as the Coordinator of the Donald Learning Group, is also a key figure in the development of the associated community men's shed and a respected mentor to many other shed-based organisations in north-western Victoria. We attempt, in the dialogue of our narrative, to share our contention about the value of researcher and practitioner collaboration and the importance of valuing people, practitioners and place in learning and research narratives.

Contact Details

*Dr Barry Golding, School of Education, University of Ballarat,
PO Box 663, Ballarat, Victoria 3353*

Tel: +61 3 53279733 Fax: +61 3 53279717

Email: b.golding@ballarat.edu.au

“Do the thing you think you cannot do”: The imperative to be an adult learner in order to be a more effective adult educator

Janet MacLennan
University of Puerto Rico,
Río Piedras

Despite the fact that we are learning more and more about the particular challenges and possibilities of teaching adult learners, we may still be overlooking – or forgetting – some of the most fundamental aspects of what makes an effective educator of adults. This paper addresses this oversight by reminding adult educators of the imperative of being adult learners to gain continuous new insights into their craft. The reader is taken on the author's own journey of realising and enacting this imperative.

You gain strength, experience, and confidence by every experience where you really stop to look fear in the face... You must do the thing you think you cannot do. (Eleanor Roosevelt)

The best learners – people for whom learning a skill comes entirely naturally – often make the worst teachers. This is because they are, in a very real sense, perceptually challenged. They can't imagine what it must be like to struggle to learn something that comes so naturally to them. Because they have always been so successful in their learning, it's impossible for them to empathize with learners' anxieties and blockages. (Brookfield 1995: 62)

This paper serves two purposes. First, it is a call to educators – and to adult educators in particular – to look fear in the face and do the thing(s) you think you cannot do in order to be the teacher you should be. The second purpose is to address the potential fallout caused by any adult who attempts to meet this call: I will explore the particular challenges for an adult to learn something that they are convinced they cannot learn. In order to explore these particular challenges for adult learners/educators, I will take you along on my own personal journey of learning the impossible as an adult. During these travels, I will juxtapose my own learning struggles and roadblocks with my substantial successes in learning: I am a tenured university professor, a proven 'best learner' in Brookfield's terms, but, as I discovered, a highly inept learner when it came to looking my fears in the face. In this way, I will expose the intricacies that comprise each of us as learners, I will expose general misconceptions about skilled or 'best' learners, I will expose general misconceptions about who are the best teachers, and I will expose the power of perception as it works (or works against) us all as adult learners/educators.

Why would a person be convinced that they *cannot* learn something? Are we not by now aware that we must be lifelong learners, that we learn throughout our life experiences, not just in a formal academic setting such as high school or college? But when you have *never* been able to do a certain thing, and you have substantial years behind you during which you have *never* been able to do that certain thing, it is not a stretch to conclude that it must then be impossible. That one

thing is different for each of us – it could be algebra or speaking in front of an audience or standing up for yourself at work or playing basketball or riding horses, of which you are terrified. Although that one thing (or maybe more than one thing) that seems impossible is different for each of us, it is *important* for each of us too. As Eleanor Roosevelt asserted, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do". I somehow imagine that she was speaking directly to adults, 'grown-ups' who have become set in their ways, convinced of their inabilities, and held back because of it. But *why* must we do the thing we cannot do? My answer: to be better educators, particularly adult educators.

For me, the impossible in terms of my learning has always had to do with the body. I was one of those academically gifted students who, throughout every single year of school from the beginning of my formal education to the end, dreaded nothing more than gym class. If the activity required movement with an object that was roundish and rolled, I could not do it. Let me rephrase: I would fail miserably and, more often than not, publicly and embarrassingly as well. Picture this one instance from my high school years: during a game of volleyball, I stopped paying attention, unable as usual to actually effect any kind of hit that would get the ball back over the net. It was just then that the ball came from nowhere, hit me forcefully on the head, and bounced smoothly to one of my teammates. Besides being embarrassing, this event seemed to be a message from the universe trumpeting, "For God's sake, don't try to actually *play* the sport – just stand there and you'll do a better job!"

Team sports have never made any sense to me whatsoever. Even when I applied my considerable academic abilities to understanding them, that understanding always eluded me. And although I was interested in health and exercise, and although as a teenager I was very active with aerobics, walking, biking, jogging, dancing and more, there was just something about gym class that rendered me clumsy, sluggish and completely uncoordinated, even out of shape.

I did try. At least, I think I did. But even then, at those quite young ages, I had enough years of failure behind me to believe I might never succeed at any sport or gym class-orchestrated activity. I began to joke that there was a sports gene and I just did not have it. I had gotten other blessings in my genetic make-up, but athletic ability was not one of them. This simple kind of explanation did make me feel slightly better. Still, I have always *wished* I could succeed at some sport, wished I could find one athletic activity at which I excelled, wished I was one of those students who could do it all: athletics *and* academics.

University was such a blessing: no gym class. During my undergraduate studies in Canada, I fell in love with the study of 'human' communication or communication studies. I threw myself into my academics and in the end it paid-off with a scholarship and teaching assistantship to a graduate school in the United States. I began my teaching career and slowly, gradually, learned by trial-and-error how to competently perform some of the functions of a teacher: planning each class session, asking and answering questions, giving feedback to students, facilitating discussions and other learning processes, using class time wisely, and designing the overall vision for the course. During this period, I also found myself sailing through my graduate courses. It was a lot of work, that is true, but it was as if I was meant to be doing it, as if the field of human communication was made for me.

My shame, embarrassment and failure at any athletic endeavor were now all far behind me. Or were they? Indeed, I was constantly being rewarded for the abilities I *did* possess. But I was also frequently reminded of my lack of talent with anything of the body. I guess it started as a little cross-cultural misunderstanding. You see, since I am from Canada, people I met in the United States assumed that I must love winter activities, that I lived to ski and skate. I don't like skiing,

and I couldn't skate to save my life. I was starting to feel like a very bad Canadian, a disappointment in representing my fair land.

So it happened that a friend of mine told me she was taking a course for fun: ice skating. Upon hearing this news, I poured through the university catalog and discovered that there were many recreational courses offered for small units of undergraduate credit. I was working so hard with classes and teaching, but I thought I could fit in just a couple of hours a week for something like ice skating. And this was when my journey to do the thing I thought I could not do began.

Pop Quiz: What can make a second-year graduate student nervous? Facing a roomful of 25 students on the first day of class? Possibly. Defending her master's thesis before her committee? Maybe. Taking an itsy-bitsy one-credit undergraduate course in ice skating? Definitely. Even though I was registered for the course, I almost did not go on the first day. I had to force myself to put one foot in front of the other, down the street, down the hill, across the parking lot, into the arena. The first class was merely an orientation. That meant that we wouldn't actually be on the ice until the next class. And so, for the next class – the first *real* class – I went through all of the nerves *again*, almost didn't go *again*.

I had forgotten. I had spent so many years being successful and praised in the academic world that I had shaped for myself that I had forgotten this sick feeling of dread when faced with sure public embarrassment and failure, maybe even bodily injury. Moving despite that sick feeling of dread I laced up my skates – which for the entire ten weeks of the course never stopped cramping my feet painfully – and inched shakily onto the ice, holding firm to the side boards. Not telling how long I stood there, holding on for dear life, blocking the path of other students who seemed to have no trouble gliding out into the centre of the rink. Oh yes, I had forgotten *this* sickening feeling, too: being the only one who can't do something, the one left behind,

the one holding up the others, the one who is the source of ridicule. And I had *signed-up* for this?

Well, yes, I had. So when my instructor glided past gracefully, I stopped her and – trying to keep my voice from quavering – asked, “Any pointers?” To which she replied, “You just pick up one foot at a time and put it down,” demonstrating effortlessly as she spoke. To which I replied, “You mean I have to PICK UP MY FEET?” But by the end of the session, I had done just that. Hesitantly, shakily and going nowhere fast, I had picked up my feet and moved about and not crashed to the ground. The world had not slipped out from beneath me.

I have to admit, it was weeks before I stopped dreading that class, but I kept going. I kept picking up my feet and putting them down, trying to glide, trying to speed up, trying to execute stops that did not involve falling to the ground. I even invited two friends of mine to be my buddies on Buddy Skate Day. So over time, there were only two things I still dreaded. One: the days when the instructors would get creative and try to get us to play team skating games. Was that necessary? Sure I am the worst skater in the class, but must you rub my nose in it? Two: my student from my (meaning: I teach it) public speaking class who was also a student in my (meaning: I take it) skating class.

In many departments of communication, teaching associates start out with teaching public speaking. This was around my fourth time teaching that course and I was finally starting to believe I wasn't a completely horrible teacher. I was no longer feeling sorry for my students for having to suffer through the experience of having me as a novice instructor. But seeing this one student face me in class as we discussed and practised the techniques of public speaking, and then also seeing her virtually float past me doing her little spins and tricks on the ice, I was presented with some strange-making experiences.

We teach what we like to learn and the reason many people go into teaching is vicariously to re-experience the primary joy experienced the first time they learned something they love. (Stephen Brookfield)

Of all the methods available for changing how we teach, putting ourselves regularly in the role of learner has the greatest long-term effect (Brookfield 1995: 50)

From then on, I became a better teacher. Significantly better teacher, actually, because I finally had the epiphany that many times the people who teach a subject are emotionally-speaking the worst-prepared people to be teaching that subject. Why was I teaching public speaking? Because I was and had always been good at it, and because I love the study of communication. Despite occasional appropriate and slight speech anxiety, I had always come alive in front of an audience. Many of the anxieties, fears, even panic attacks that my students referenced were all foreign to me and not accessible to me in that context. But since I had forced myself to face up to the other side of myself as a learner, the side that failed and fumed about it, I was once again in touch with a whole host of bad experiences that I had long-since blocked, experiences that I was previously unable to access as part of the teaching process. I recently re-read these words that I wrote for an assignment in my second year of graduate school:

Fall quarter I took a skating class, confronting one of my own long-held fears. The anxiety I felt as I laced up my skates was incredible. Being a graduate student is merely the act of pursuing in-depth that which we are already good at; it had been a while since I'd faced that terrible before-gym-class feeling so familiar from my school days. Consciously, I was aware of all these elements before I took that class. What surprised me was the new connection I began to feel with my own students. I can never know the depth of communication apprehension some of them feel before giving a speech, participating in group work, conducting an interview, even having an every day conversation. In my life, something like communication apprehension is really

just a lofty academic term. But I cannot leave it on that level. I must do more than imagine the discomfort of my students. I must connect it with my own discomfort in certain learning contexts, and make that connection work to their advantage as learners.

As indicated in the previous quotations, Brookfield views this process of putting ourselves regularly in the role of learner as precisely so helpful because it allows us to put ourselves in the role of other and see our practice from the perspective of other: "We see our practice from the other side of the mirror, and we become viscerally connected to what our own students are experiencing" (Brookfield 1995: 28). When you are an educator doing the thing(s) you think you cannot do, you are experiencing "crashing dissonance" (Brookfield 1995: 61), dissonance between being a learner who *can* and suddenly a learner who *can't*. I began to realise that my inability to naturally learn everything is in fact a strength as a learner and as a teacher. At the time, I did not have Brookfield's eloquent words to interpret or reinforce what I was doing, but having had the epiphany on my own, I kept it up. From then on, I sought more of the things that I could not do, crashing dissonance all over the place (and none too gracefully, I might add). Next up: swimming.

I have always loved the water, having grown-up surrounded by lakes and ocean and more ocean, but I never learned to swim an actual stroke. And little wonder: I managed to suck in and suck down what feels like buckets of water any time I put my face into the water without plugging my nose (and it's hard to swim laps while holding your nose!). Let me tell you, the front crawl becomes more of a flailing crawl when every few feet you choke and gasp your way to the surface. Why couldn't I do this? I implored my swimming instructor to help me figure out how not to ingest the entire pool upon each submersion. My swimming instructor, although talented and skilled in the sport of swimming, was less than insightful in her instruction of swimming: "You just do it", she explained to me. Of course she would say that,

she had been swimming since she could crawl and had never had a moment of failure in that context.

With the skating and now the swimming, I began to ponder and problematise the role of teacher. I made the effort to ensure that in my own classroom I was not perpetuating this situation of being the person worst-positioned to teach my students about communication. I learned to move beyond the functional duties of a teacher to focus on connecting with students and creating a learning environment that empathised with their worries, fears, and, for them, all-too-convincing feelings of can't. I shared more of myself, my failures and not just my successes. I was trying to teach them a skill, but I appealed to their minds too. If they could think they could do it, if they could dread it a little less, if they could face it and build-up successes (or at least non-failures), then everything might work together to make them feel at least competent, if not eloquent.

By now I was teaching courses in interviewing and small group communication as well. No surprise, one of my students was in a swimming class at the same time as mine. Her class was actually swimming conditioning, whereas I was with all-but-beginners. As she swam steady lap after lap in the deep end, I fluttered and flailed in the shallow end. Then I would present myself as the competent professional in class.

How much does it hurt your credibility with your students to appear in public as being very bad at something? I didn't want to think about it. But at least I was out there too, just like them, trying and trying and learning and growing and failing and succeeding – all of the things I was asking of them. That had to count for something. I hope.

Because my swimming had not progressed as much as I wished in that first class, I did take a second course. This time the instructor informed me that the reflex of how not to breathe in but only out when under water was something you had to learn as a kid. Oh great,

thanks. So I was hopeless, a lost cause? Forget her. I filled my tub with cool water and practised putting my face in, blowing out steadily through my nose. If my students could see me now!

It was a good thing I learned how to swim some strokes because the next new-to-me skill that I wanted to learn was SCUBA diving. Having been introduced to snorkelling and loving the water so much, I vowed that SCUBA was something I would learn. I could not wait to be able to hang out in an underwater world. Just to get into the course I had to pass a swimming test, and I did it (mostly back crawl, mind you, but I passed just the same). However, in very short order I found myself falling way behind the other students in my SCUBA class. The way the course was structured, a student had to master some considerable skin diving skills (just fins, sometimes mask and snorkel) and, with my still-underdeveloped breath control under water, I simply wasn't getting it. Week after week I tried and tried. I began to hate nothing more than the smell of chlorine and the way it churned in my swollen belly after each class. Equal to my inability in the pool, I was also doing horribly in the theory part of the course. It had been years since I had to memorise information I did not really grasp (*a la* every science class I ever took in high school) and complete multiple choice and short answer tests. I ended up failing the theory test and never progressing enough to take the pool test.

During a meeting with my doctoral dissertation advisor, he asked how everything was going and I told him I was failing SCUBA. Some 18 years of formal schooling and half-way through my doctoral degree, I had finally found a course to fail. I had never in my life failed any academic course. Even when I wasn't good at something (gym, science, math), I still pulled out at least a B by virtue of studying extra hard.

And who takes SCUBA, swimming and skating classes during their doctoral degree any way? Also belly dancing, canoeing, backpacking and horseback riding, all new to me, all presenting their own

challenges to me as a learner. Most of the courses were offered pass-fail, with a pass equalling regular attendance. But SCUBA, that was actually a course with a grade and I had FAILED.

I am not a failure. Sure, there are many things for which I possess no talent or inherent skill, but to out-and-out fail? It was not just that I had never failed a course, it was also that I had never failed to achieve something I really put my *mind* to. But this was different, this required my body. My body was the one rebelling and sabotaging my efforts. My mind contributed as well, since the less I could do, the more my thoughts were muddled with negative clouds of can't.

I signed-up for SCUBA again. I tried to treat the situation in the way I had been taught in the academic world: To study more and harder, to research to find a solution. But the second time around, things went from bad to worse. This was when I learned that I have an actual fear of being deep under the water with no air. One of my instructors was puzzled by my particular reaction, telling me that many people discover fear and panic responses when using the SCUBA equipment (that maybe it would malfunction) but I was the opposite: fine whenever I had the equipment, panicky and incompetent whenever I had to do skin diving deep under the water.

One night, when I was practising the skills despite my fear, I became convinced I would die. I flailed to the side of the pool but still couldn't breathe through the incredible weight on my chest. The instructor just shook his head. I had never had a panic attack, and it was horrible. Even so, my main fear was that they would kick me out of the class. I talked to people about it (typical: academic consultation), but they were not helpful. "It's just in your head", they would tell me. "I know that! But how do I get it *out* of my head?", I would wail.

Finding no helpful advice, it was then that I decided that I would simply outlast my fear. My body was my enemy because it was responding to the irrational thoughts in my head. It was true that I

have never been able to conquer anything to do with my body, but I rationalised that this was different. This was not a talent I lacked, but rather a fear I could outlast. My body would not be able to sustain the energy of a panic state forever, I reasoned. I would eventually learn to perform, despite the fear.

That is just what I did. I practised, I studied, I did extra practice, and when I passed the written and skills test I was thrilled – but still not completely confident. So during the following school terms, I went every week to the pool to practise, practise, practise. The open water diver certification trip fell the weekend before my graduation for my doctorate. Graduation I did not attend. If I had, I would certainly not have felt a margin of the sense of accomplishment I felt after completing my three certification dives to earn my open water diver certification. I floated on land.

Today, I still do the things I cannot do, my journey continues. For example, I am living the very interesting experience as a teacher of being a professor to students in their second language *while* I am learning their first language. Their ability in English far surpasses my ability in Spanish, yet many of the issues of language acquisition and practice with a second language are universal. I can sympathise, empathise, and also appreciate and admire their effort to learn in my courses in a language not native to them.

One of the subjects at the heart of the teaching of human communication is perception. I want my students to understand the process of perception, including where and how we often go wrong. I also want them to understand that differences in perception are often the source of conflict, both in our relationships and on a global scale. Our minds – although powerful and full of potential – can work against us, closing down our thinking, leading us to erroneous conclusions that we are then convinced are concrete, being lazy instead of critical, being certain instead of questioning. I share with my students stories of times when my mind has used my

perceptions to convince me that I could not do something, such as full-body push-ups when I was training for my karate lessons. Now when I have a student who feels they cannot do something – give that speech, learn to edit their mistakes in writing, give a presentation in English, change their ways of communicating in relationships – how do I respond? How many times I have felt the same way. How many times I have taken the easy way out, or at least wanted to. Sometimes the best learning hurts, I tell them. How I know this: learning cramps your feet, makes you sick to your stomach, makes you afraid for your life, makes you dread, makes you feel less, makes you feel incompetent, makes you question yourself, undermines your self-confidence. As Brookfield states: "Our experiences as learners are felt at a visceral, emotional level that is much deeper than that of reason" (1995: 31). Learning is a process of perception that requires us to replace many processes of perception already ingrained in our minds and, viscerally, in our bodies. One common process of perception: everything leads me to believe that I cannot do that.

But you must. You must do the thing you think you cannot do. Why? Because we need to be lifelong learners, we *should* be lifelong learners in a real sense, not just as some lofty ideal. And as teachers, we need to be practising what we preach, practising what we teach. We should not be allowed to grow too comfortable with what we teach, for if we do, we are much too far away from the sometimes hurt of learning to legitimately and convincingly request it of our students.

People often assume that, since I have a doctorate, I must be smart and I must be good at things. I always make a point of clearing up that confusion. After all, a doctorate only means that I have developed expertise in *one* area; for every other area and every other kind of learning I could be horribly inept. Just picture me on skates, or getting hit on the head with a volleyball. We should not let our minds become so lazy that as educators we see learners only in one way, instead of as the multifaceted and complicated intricacies most of us

are as human beings. I ask you to also picture me, today, living in the Caribbean and taking every opportunity to SCUBA dive, sharing that underwater world I love, playing around vibrant fish and turtles and rays and sharks and an occasional octopus. I did the thing I thought I could not do, but my list of the impossible goes on. And you?

“We can’t become what we need to be by remaining what we are.” (Oprah Winfrey)

Reference

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About the author

Dr. MacLennan, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Puerto Rico, is currently working on two projects: communication about sex in relationships; religion in the communication classroom. Her most recent experience of doing the thing she thought she could not do involves practising the dynamic Brazilian martial art of capoeira. Despite all her anxieties and fears, she fell so much in love with the movements and rhythms of capoeira that she found herself in the best shape of her life. Thus, in the summer of 2007 when she broke her neck in a car accident, she accredited her avoidance of paralysis and speedy recovery to this continuous adult journey of learning.

Contact details

University of Puerto Rico, College of Humanities, Department of English, PO Box 23356, San Juan, PR 00931-3356
Tel: 939-645-4148
Email: jmaclennan@uprrp.edu

RESEARCH REPORT

Community-based adult education for the fisherwomen of Rajapalyam fishing village in Tuticorin, southeast coast of India

Jamila Patterson¹, Eva Lindén², Christin Bierbrier³, Inger Löfgren⁴
and J.K. Patterson Edward⁵

^{1,5} Suganthi Devason Marine Research Institute, Tuticorin, India

^{2,3} Nyköpings Folkhögskola, Stockholm, Sweden

⁴ Lagman Linds v. 4A, 18279 Stocksund, Sweden

Rajapalyam village is located in the Tuticorin district along the biodiversity rich Gulf of Mannar coast in southeastern India. The people of this village are economically backward and most of the men are engaged in fishing. The fisherwomen of this village are less literate than the men, or illiterate. Adult education has been introduced to the women of this village in order to enhance their literacy level, environmental awareness and livelihood. Within a very short period, the women have improved themselves greatly through learning and are now demonstrating the importance and necessity of education to neighbouring villages.