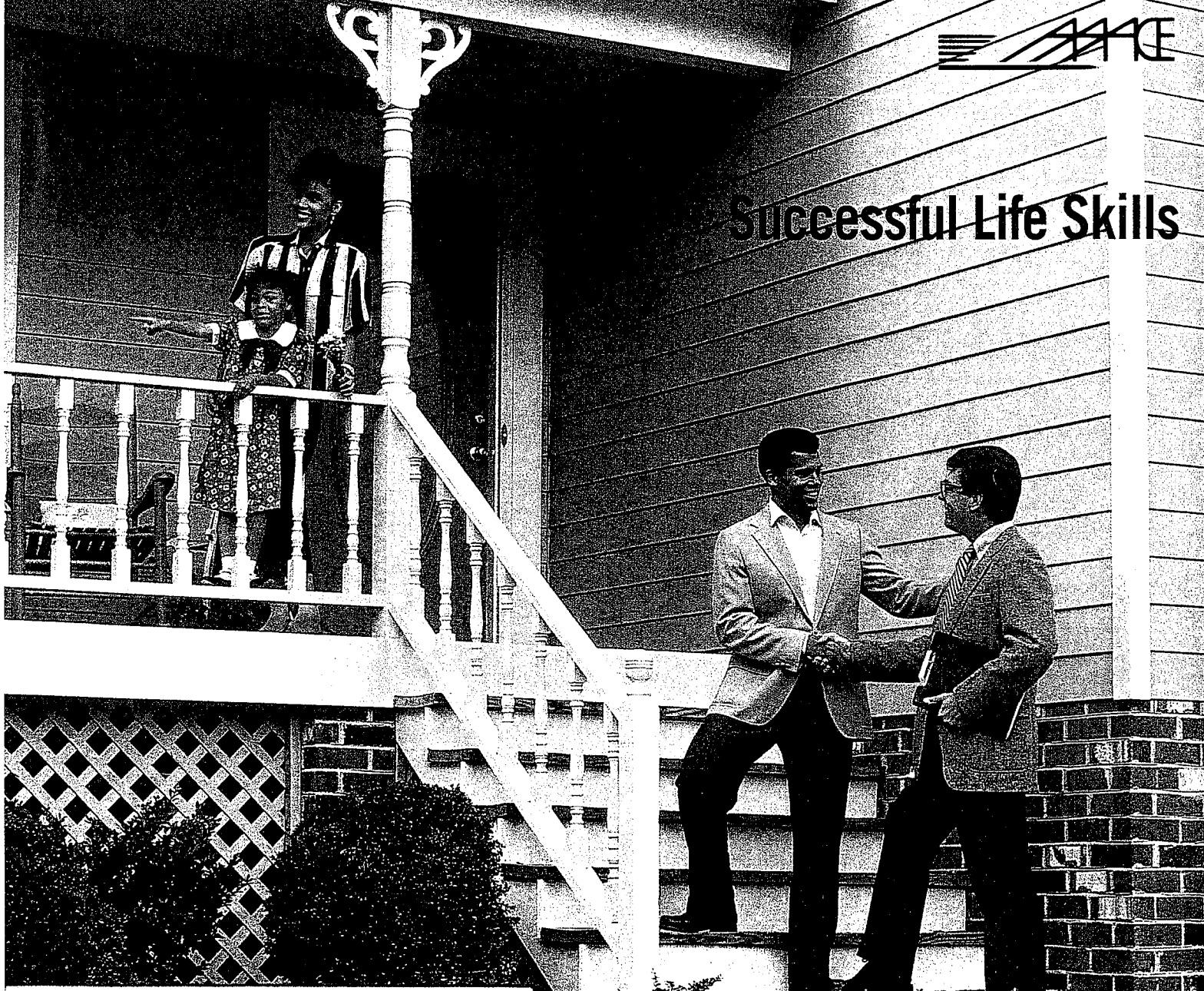


ADULT LEARNING



Successful Life Skills



FOR SALE

SOLD
REALTORS

Vignettes of Teaching Disadvantaged Adults

For five years I was fortunate to be a teacher with the Alberta Vocational College's Regional Programs for Adult Upgrading. These programs (still in place) are administered from the Edmonton AVC campus. They serve just under 500 students in fourteen different locations surrounding Edmonton: places such as Wetaskiwin, Whitecourt, and Edson.

A typical regional program has about fifty students, two instructors, and some part-time clerical help. Most of the students, for various socioeconomic reasons, can be classified as "disadvantaged adults." The day-to-day running of these programs is similar to the old-fashioned one- or two-room schoolhouse.

Since there are only one or two teachers onsite, teachers must be generalists and be able to work independently. Teachers in regional programs must also be extremely flexible and learn to walk that fine line between being a mentor, as a fellow adult learner, and being a boss who essentially has the authority over most aspects of the class *and* the students' futures!

Students, too, must be more independent and flexible and be ready to become an integral part of the successful operation of the class. However, their help, like so many other aspects of a regional classroom, is not formalized. It just happens out of necessity and under the guidance of the teacher.

For example, students assist other students as peer-tutors and counselors, and they even become the coffee-makers and janitors of the classroom!

These features of self-reliance, on one hand, and close community support, on the other, often give the regional programs their greatest strength. They also offer both tremendous challenges and great personal rewards for the instructors. I have captured some of my most memorable experiences to show what I mean.

An Afternoon in Court

I sat in the uncomfortable bench-seat of the local courthouse. Looking around, I found that I was surrounded by most of my class. The scabs and bruises of a violently broken nose and roughly lacerated forehead and cheek were being bravely displayed by one of my female students. Her husband stood charged with assault.

The verdict: guilty. Ten days in jail for an unrepentant young man who had nearly beaten his wife to death and had since threatened to kill her. The judge announced that he had no choice in giving a jail-term because this was the third time this young man had stood before the court for similar charges.

Outside, we crowded around our beaten classmate. Wiping away a few tears, she said to me, "Don't worry, Marv, I'm not quitting. I'll be back in class tomorrow. Thanks for coming."

At the End of the Day

"This has been a long, tiring day," I said, as I lounged about the small reception desk. It was near the end of the first month of the term; all the classes were full and running well. But I was exhausted and in the mood to feel sorry for myself. And then — he came in the door.

He wasn't just big — he was huge. Too soon this massively built Native fellow with long crow-black hair was standing in front of me; I felt smaller than my 5'8" frame. But then a surprisingly gentle voice came from him; "I want to go to school," he said. "O.K.," I fumbled; "all you have to do is fill-out this application and we'll put you on our waiting list."

I handed him the form, which he took. But then, as he was trying desperately to straighten himself up to his full height, his head dropped low. "I can't read," he said.

A Friend on the Reserve

It was my last day on the Reserve. I had been teaching a small class of sixteen adults who were upgrading their Math and English skills. I looked through the long, narrow windows of the ancient church/schoolroom to the seemingly disorganized, and muddy townsite of run-down bungalows, dogs, and small children. One by one, people came by the old schoolhouse as I packed-up my books and things. I was pleasantly surprised

to hear — for the first time — something of the thoughts of my students and other community members.

I began to grow more and more amazed at how much everyone knew about me and my class! Prior to this day, I had an almost overwhelming despondency, thinking that I hadn't really done anything here. The students and community seemed to be a closed, quiet group that I hadn't been able to penetrate.

Just as I was getting ready to leave, one of my students came in. She appeared nervous as she said, "You are coming back, aren't you?"

I started to explain how the funding was temporary, and so on. It was a dull story to which she listened, expressionlessly, and patiently.

After I had run out of things to say, she continued, "Everyone's talking about how much Kelly has changed. You know, his cousin killed himself last winter, and you're the first person he's really talked to since then. I think you should stay."

And just as Kelly came through the classroom door, she quickly, discreetly added, "You're the first friend he's had since then."

A Christmas Party

After eating turkey buns and dessert, we were playing Hangman using the chalkboard. It was the last day of class before

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to become “critically reflective practitioners.” Conferences and workshops are starting to address our own desire for spiritual sustenance, support, and renewal, with themes like “Lifelong Learning: The Human Component” and “A Renewal of Mind, Body, and Spirit.” The keynote speaker at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the AAACE Commission of Professors of Adult Education was Laurent Daloz, a co-author of the book *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). One of his key questions was, “In a world of overwhelming technological and human complexity, how can we help one another to see things whole and make meaning in life-affirming ways?” We need this stuff! We will be better teachers for it.

Remember the concerns about Spirituality in Adult Education that were raised at the beginning of this article? To briefly summarize some important points, here are some short answers to those questions:

- Rather than being a relatively small aspect of a very broad field, “Spirituality in Adult Education” may actually be the heart

and soul of our profession and practice.

- Although teaching religion is probably best left to religious organizations, addressing the spiritual aspects of adult life is a legitimate and important dimension of adult education.

- Yes, a lot of what people learn about spirituality they will learn in non-formal ways and informal settings. But if adult education programming is truly learner-centered, we may also help adults learn about spirituality through more formal education.

- It is true that the mandate of separation of church and state limits the degree to which publicly-funded adult education can address religion. However, given that spirituality goes far beyond religion, the funding aspect shouldn’t be extremely limiting.

- How about that “can of worms”? Yes, there is a challenge in helping people talk about deeply-held beliefs and values without letting things get out of hand. Establishing and maintaining some ground rules will be important. One of the first might be, “We respect the individuality, beliefs, and values of everyone in the class. Nobody will try to

‘convert’ anyone else to his or her own belief system.” As teachers, we have an ethical obligation to avoid sermonizing, moralizing, and proselytizing.

- Do we know enough about Spirituality in Adult Education to feel confident in our teaching? If we’re talking specifically about the religious aspects of spirituality, we certainly have an obligation to educate ourselves and to teach beyond our own belief system. We can also make good use of facilitation skills to help our students share and appreciate the diversity of religious backgrounds, beliefs, and values that are present in most of our classes.

- YES, in a broader sense, we do know enough about Spirituality in Adult Education to be confident and competent teachers. We do this on a daily basis! Our professional education and experience as adult educators encourages us to teach the “whole person,” the BodyMindSpirit represented by each learner. The spirituality of the learner is inseparable from the rest of the learner; so we will inevitably touch the spirit of the learner whenever we teach. ▲

Personal Reflections, continued from p. 9
the Christmas Break. I had been teaching a special group of young adults (sixteen to twenty-four). It was a class full of chronic truants, young offenders, and otherwise high-risk students.

I watched as these adult-looking young people laughed and gambolled, giddy with delight, enjoying our “class party.” It surprised me! These were hardened, grown-up street-kids, after all. Why were they having so much fun playing an elementary/junior-high school game?

After clean-up a nineteen-year-

old girl (who looked closer to thirty) said to me, “Thanks for the party, Marv. You know, I think I never really had a Christmas party at school — this was fun.”

In January, she was gone. She had to be hospitalized after an attempted suicide. It had been, as I learned later, her third attempt that year.

At the Gas Pump

I needed gas. The gas attendant was a former student.

Of course, I remembered him. He had been in my upgrading class a few years ago: baseball

cap, T-shirt, blue jeans, denim jacket, dark mustache (he looked exactly the same.)

He smiled broadly as he filled my tank; “Hey, Marv, how’s it going? Still teachin’?”

“Yeah. It’s O.K., I guess.”

“Hey, you know you really did something for me. I’m reading everything now: magazines, books, everything! It’s great! I never read nothing before your class.”

“Thanks. I guess I’ll see you later sometimes.”

“You bet. Stop by anytime.”

I noticed, as I drove away, that

he was still standing at the pump looking in my direction, and that his smile was still lighting up his face. ▲

— by *Marvyn Machura*

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