



Can “Becoming” Be Taught?

DREW EAGAR

Over the last three to four years, the Business Department has dedicated a significant amount of effort towards improving the learning taking place among our students. While these efforts have been promoted and supported by our department chairs, most have been initiated and carried out by smaller groups of motivated faculty wanting something better for their students. Many of these faculty have invested a substantial amount of time exploring, researching, studying, praying, pondering, trying, failing, and succeeding in different learning approaches. They have trained in the Socratic Method, the case method, activity-based learning, discovery learning, and other pedagogy in order to give themselves a broader set of tools to improve their teaching and their students’ learning.

One of the targets of our innovation efforts has been the Integrated Business Core (IBC). We’ve spent the last two years formulating and implementing changes meant to continue improving the learning in this already popular and successful twelve credit hour program. We have been making fascinating and helpful discoveries in the areas

of intrinsic motivation, student engagement, just-in-time content delivery, and other teaching and learning concepts. One of the more interesting and possibly most innovative areas we’ve been working on is “becoming.”

KNOW, DO, BECOME

While we were in the middle of our pedagogical explorations, President Clark gave the talk in which he presented the idea of knowing, doing, and becoming. As a discovery group that message resonated with us. We all felt fairly proficient at teaching content that checked off the “know” box, and we also felt that the business department as a whole did a good job at helping students “do” a lot of their learning through activities that encourage real-life application of the concepts, thus facilitating deeper learning. But the idea of helping the students “become” something was intimidating. We understood that by encouraging the first two elements, we also encourage the third; however, many of us had seen that even helping students with knowing and doing did not always lead to them becoming something different. The learning can still glance off and not be adopted into their lives. They learn it deep enough to pass the test and then they make room for more “knowledge.”

We were looking for a tool that would allow the faculty, and, more importantly, students, to get a relatively accurate assessment of changes that were taking place in their everyday lives.

Also, how do you measure becoming? What kind of instrument could you use to assess it? Is a semester really enough time to expect to see any kind of measurable change in who a person is? Could they even begin to make these changes? These and dozens of other questions continually peppered our conversations for several weeks. On numerous occasions the group decided not to pursue this too literally but to comfort ourselves with the supposition that if we were helping the students know and do, then becoming would follow automatically. But none of us could ignore the underlying opportunity to directly help a student become more than they currently were, to help them become a better disciple of Christ or a better innovator or to better lead with a small “L” or to become someone that “adds value wherever they go.” We could not pass up the opportunity to create an environment that would promote this, despite having no idea how we would possibly do it.

So, of course, we decided to try.

After several rounds of exploring tests students could take to demonstrate becoming, we could not settle on an effective and reliable way to assess this using a traditional “test.” Most tests are designed to test knowledge, not “becoming.” We then explored more subjective assessments that the instructors could perform through observation. But we had seen, through experience, that many students act differently around professors than they do in their normal everyday circumstances. So instructor evaluation would be challenging. We were looking for a tool that would allow the faculty, and, more importantly, students, to get a relatively accurate assessment of changes that were taking place in their everyday lives; changes inspired by the curriculum they encountered in the IBC. We were also looking for an assessment that the students would trust. If they didn’t trust the becoming assessment to be accurate, they would not make the mentally and emotionally difficult efforts required to achieve change in thought patterns or behavior. Our personal experience had taught us that many times students trust instructors to deliver accurate content, but may not trust instructors to accurately assess something as personal as “becoming.” We needed an assessment tool that was reliable, observant, honest, and legitimate from the student’s perspective.

THE INTEGRATED BUSINESS CORE

That is when we realized that we already had useful tools in the IBC that a typical class doesn’t have. In the IBC students are divided into functioning companies of about fifteen students each and those companies are further broken down into three teams of five students each. These companies and teams form semester long cohorts that work together in four different simultaneous classes – twelve credit hours of classes. In addition to the classes, these same teams also ideate, create, open, run, and finally close a real money-making business during the semester. They work together minimally 36 hours each week. So these are not the typical non-committal, superficially engaged study groups we sometimes see in our other classes. With all the ordeals IBC students go through together in just the first three weeks of class (they struggle through three days and two nights camping together at the university’s Badger Creek facility during week three), by the end of the semester, they act much more like a band of brothers and sisters than a study group.

By the end of the semester, they act much more like a band of brothers and sisters than a study group.

The cohort configuration, the difficult group challenges, and the time spent working together have the combined potential to create an unprecedented level of trust, candidness, and charity among group members. This, we realized, created the perfect measuring tool to gauge becoming. Students in these peer groups have an extremely accurate ring-side view of each of their peers. These students saw their peers at their very best, at their very worst, and at every increment in between. Additionally, students seem to understand that they can’t fool their peers – they especially can’t fool them for 36 hours a week. This



had the potential to lead to a different level of honesty and openness among group members. Also, we assumed that the observations and opinions of one's close and respected peers, with regard to areas of personal growth, would carry more credibility than that of a more distant instructor.

"BECOMING" OUTCOMES

The areas of becoming we were measuring came from several of the IBC course outcomes. These four "becoming outcomes" of the IBC, distinct from more quantitative and functional skill outcomes, are: 1) acting as a disciple of Christ in a business setting, 2) leading in groups as a small "L" leader, 3) innovating, and 4) taking initiative. Each of these outcomes are further clarified by descriptions of behavior that exemplify the outcome. For example, under the outcome "Acts as a disciple of Christ in a business setting" there are descriptions such as "I am humble, easy to be entreated, and strive to improve" or "I use appropriate humor and language", while under the outcome "Innovates" there are descriptions such as "I perform well in ambiguous situations and don't disengage when the next

steps are unclear" or "I find ways to test and prove new ideas." Under the outcome "Leads with a small 'L'" are descriptions like "I provide honest feedback that builds others in a loving way" and "I counsel with others before making a decision" and "I care about the success of others as well as my own." Finally, under the outcome "Takes initiative" are descriptions like "I look for better ways to do things", "I do not procrastinate" and "I focus my efforts on things I can do something about rather than on things beyond my control."

Each of the four becoming outcomes had a list of six to eight behavioral descriptions as described above. We first would ask the students to take a self-evaluation of these behaviors and then prayerfully consider which of the behaviors they felt they most needed to work on. We would then ask them to choose three specific behaviors to target from each of the four outcomes. We hoped that by allowing them to choose the specific behaviors they would work on, it would be seen as a more personal choice rather than an imposed requirement, and would therefore be more likely to be internalized.

“BECOMING” ASSESSMENT

In order to assess progress, we designed a questionnaire that a student would give to the peers they felt were able to effectively observe these specific behaviors. Again, we would leave the choice of evaluators up to the student, hoping that they felt more autonomy and personal investment in the evaluation. The questionnaire would be administered using a ten point Likert scale across each of the twelve behaviors the individual students had chosen. The questionnaire would be given out at two-week intervals to gauge changes in the target behaviors. We also made a seemingly risky decision to not make these evaluations anonymous. We had seen the occasional negative attitude that anonymity engenders, and decided to see if the students could find a way to lovingly give difficult feedback to their peers. Once the evaluations were returned back to the person being evaluated, we would allow time for them to ask clarifying questions of the evaluator.

As we were designing this evaluation exercise, we identified several potential problem areas that raised significant questions. The first was how to help the students take the exercise seriously and really decide to attempt significant, personal changes in attitude and behavior. The second was how to prevent them from causing harm with unrestrained criticism and do serious emotional damage to each other. Unfortunately, in prior semesters, when faculty attention was not focused on these issues, overly aggressive business students would create an unfriendly, even hostile environment in their companies by being unthoughtfully critical. This we wanted to avoid. Finally, we wondered how to encourage students to provide meaningful, helpful feedback, and to have difficult but beneficial conversations in a spirit of love and assistance.

We leveraged some of the existing structure of the IBC to overcome these potential problems and create additional materials and activities as well. The choice to create a closely bonded team, rather than just a study group, was our strongest tool for resolving the three above concerns. These students had helped push and pull each other over 15-foot walls, dragged their camping gear in sleds in sub-freezing weather, endured each other's snoring, and cooked and ate together for three full days. They already really cared about each other's well-being, mental, physical, and spiritual. Most of them would not want to hurt anyone on their team, intentionally or unintentionally.

To further ensure they really cared enough to fully engage in the becoming process, we would add several activities and discussions to the curriculum designed to convince students to willingly and openly ask for feedback on their performance in the targeted areas, as well as to teach evaluators how to give feedback in a constructive and loving manner. In these discussions we would openly promote the charity and concern that would be necessary to properly conduct the evaluations.

With these additional preparations, we started our first round of evaluations in Winter semester 2013.

RESULTS

The results of this three-semester experiment have been intriguing. In the first round of these evaluations, we held our breaths and prepared to immediately terminate the activity if it looked like any emotional harm was occurring. Not only were our fears allayed, we were also humbled by the Christ-like love and humility that students demonstrated during the first round and every subsequent round of this exercise.

As an example of the growth we have witnessed, our first semester there was a well-mannered young man that received a low score (5 out of 10) for the chosen behavior “I use appropriate humor and language” under the “Acts as a Disciple of Christ in a Business Setting” outcome. The score was given to him by a close team member, and he was surprised by it. During the allocated question time he approached the evaluator and, in a humble rather than an argumentative tone, asked for clarification on the score. His evaluator reminded him of a story that he told the prior week that was inappropriate and not in keeping with the other standards this young man maintained. The evaluator specifically told him it was not in keeping with someone who had served a mission and regularly attended the temple. During a group de-briefing discussion that took place the next day this young man thanked his evaluator publicly for having the courage to reveal a blind spot he had regarding an area of his behavior that was important to him. He vowed to never repeat an inappropriate story or use inappropriate language. His evaluation scores regarding this behavior improved dramatically over the next three evaluations. A year later, this student has reported to me that he still remembers the lesson he learned that day and



Not only were our fears allayed, we were also humbled by the Christ-like love and humility that students demonstrated.

that it has continued to help him better align his behavior with his beliefs.

Another example of the effect these evaluations have on behavior came in Spring semester 2013. A young man received low scores from all three evaluators on “I act without having to be asked or coerced” under the “Takes Initiative” outcome. He had always perceived himself as a proactive person and was surprised by the low scores. When he individually asked his evaluators to help him understand the low scores, the evaluators were able to describe multiple instances where the young man either didn’t take action when it was obviously needed and was obviously his responsibility or shirked the responsibility completely. Again, in a group debriefing discussion the next day the young man expressed deep gratitude to his evaluators for showing him an area of his behavior he was not aware of. From that day on, he was consistently the

most proactive member of his company and his scores improved dramatically in these behaviors for the next three evaluations.

These are just two examples meant to illustrate how the process works in action. Since the first round of evaluations in Winter 2013, we’ve had approximately 70 students go through this process. While it hasn’t worked perfectly in every case, and there are individual circumstances and personalities that have to be taken into consideration, the vast majority of students that have gone through the process have made measurable and meaningful progress at becoming better in their chosen behaviors. They seem to internalize the feedback that is caringly, carefully, and honestly given by their peers. This experience indicates to us that there is indeed a way to create an environment where becoming can be fostered, measured, and even achieved. 🌻