Agency, Becoming, and Risk: An Educational Journey

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Part of my Continuing Faculty Status (CFS) evaluation at BYU-Idaho included a classroom visit from Fenton Broadhead, then Dean of the College of Business and Communications. He came to see how I was doing as the teacher of a Project Management class. As was usual for my classes at that time, I attempted to help the students explore and discuss the issues and ideas at play within a case study.

During Brother Broadhead's visit the students were great. They were asking each other questions, discussing possibilities and alternatives with each other, and nearly did all of my work for me for the entire hour. All I had to do was moderate their discussion. I was feeling pretty good.

The written evaluation of my work came as a shock. It simply stated "You are lecturing too much." This simple statement turned on its head how I thought about my role as an instructor. I hadn't thought I had lectured at

all. Wasn't lecturing where the instructor pontificated and expected students to lap it up? What had Brother Broadhead seen that I hadn't?

Gradually I came to realize that the course I had designed severely restricted the students' agency. It was I that had decided the readings for the case and its accompanying discussion. I had tossed out the first and subsequent provocative discussion questions. I had made all the important decisions for the class. Brother Broadhead had seen me restricting the students' opportunity to realize their agency where I thought I had been allowing the opposite—agency's greater realization and expression.

A FOUNDATION OF AGENCY

Agency is a foundational doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Learning Model (Brigham Young University-Idaho, 2007). As such we cannot ignore it. Building an educational environment that enhances student agency is an important part of our role as instructors at BYU-Idaho. My experience with Brother Broadhead led me to reconsider how I had been acting in this part of my stewardship.

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Concerning all humanity the Lord said, "He that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward" (Doctrine and Covenants 58:26). Prior to this CFS evaluation, when I heard or read this scripture I understood it to say that if someone must be compelled then they are slothful, unwise, and won't get the Lord's blessings they need or want. After my experience with Brother Broadhead and a long period of deep reflection, I saw another possibility. The scripture didn't say "If someone has to be compelled." What it said was "If someone is compelled." While this

may seem a subtle difference, I have come to understand that if I compel others, I reduce their wisdom, contribute to their slothfulness, and disrupt blessings they may have otherwise received. This new understanding drove me to want to know how student agency could be enhanced while maintaining the integrity of my courses, my department and college, and BYU-Idaho.

To accomplish this I needed to expand beyond experimenting in the classroom to include exploring educational research and other sources. I found Bandura's (2001) work that illustrated the idea of expressions of agency influencing both the individual and their environment (p. 15). I also found a talk by Sister Larsen of the Young Women's General Presidency which taught

Assuming we have accepted our responsibility for learning and teaching and have achieved an increased collective capability, what am I and my students to teach each other? It is certain that teaching knowledge regarding our disciplines is needed, but is that enough? For me and what I was becoming, it was not.

Elder Oaks told a parable about "becoming" in which one character said to another, "That which I have I can easily give you, but that which I am you must obtain for yourself" (Oaks, 2000). As a professional in my discipline, I love what I do. I enjoy exploring and trying new ideas. I love sharing what I have learned and discussing implications. I love using creativity and knowledge of my

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that agency is "accompanied by responsibility and consequences" (Larsen, 1999). Eventually I found work by Ballet, Dubois, and Mahieu (2007), who proposed combining agency, interacting with one's environment, and responsibility, and then suggested that "when, through commitment and social interactions, personal responsibility is introduced, it leads to a strong version of agency" (Ballet, Dubois, & Mahieu, 2007, p. 198). They further maintained that this self-restrained type of agency leads to "collective capability" (Ballet, Dubois, & Mahieu, 2007, p. 199) in organizations and societies.

Ballet, Dubois, and Mahieu's strong agency is reflected in many principles and goals of the Learning Model. One of these states that both students and instructors "accept responsibility for learning and teaching". Another is that students and instructors should "love, serve, and teach one another" (Brigham Young University-Idaho, 2007, p. 1). These declarations succinctly express how I and my students can be more anxiously engaged and more fully express strong agency.

discipline to solve problems experienced by real people. I cannot give this love to my students, yet I hope I can help them to begin becoming this same type of professional.

In order for my students to experience love of the profession, I decided I needed to change my course designs. I started by modifying the outcomes for the courses over which I had stewardship. Previous outcomes for these courses had focused on knowing and doing and ignored other professional attributes such as self-reflection, meta-cognition, creativity, communication, and responsibility to peers.

Through pondering and experimentation I found that I needed to add course outcomes for these attributes that were coequal with knowing and doing in order to help the students see their importance. Support for these types of outcomes was then achieved by shifting my courses to have a strong agency foundation. I also had to accept the risks associated with agency (Lupton and Tullock, 2002, p. 123).

RISKS FOR ALL

Make no mistake, this change was dramatic and personally scary. Having been trained as a scientist from my youth, and being a teacher of computing I was unsure how I could measure these professionalism outcomes equitably. I was unsure if students would learn as much of the technical knowledge as they had before. I was unsure if a failed attempt would impact my ability to help not only the students that were part of the failure but also those who would come later. I was also concerned with what the student reviews of the course and my work would be.

The risks, however, were not all mine. The students also experienced risks due to the scale of the changes. Gone was the safety of defined assignments and readings with quizzes and tests to perform against. Gone were the explicit declarations of what students had to know. Gone were declarations of non-gospel truths by the instructor. Gone were many of the structures that the students were trained to depend upon by previous educational environments and experiences.

Instead the course focused on the learning interactions between students, between students and the class, and between students and myself. To accomplish this change I supplied the students with a non-comprehensive list of resources for topics, ideas, and skills the student should be fluent in if they wanted to be professionals in my field. Then, working together in self-assembled teams, the students proposed ideas for how they could use these ideas and skills to express creativity, self-reflection, communication, and other professional attributes.

For the students and myself, technical knowledge and skills ceased to be viewed as the only end of education (Kerr, 2013) and became our language of communication. We used this language to express what we were becoming. This change of view regarding technical knowledge and skills aligns with what Elder Kerr taught in his recent devotional talk. He emphasized that we should view "learning as a progressive process—that we not just learn "about" something, but that we learn "from" it—that learning is not just about acquiring knowledge; it is all about becoming the people we ought to be" (Kerr, 2013).

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Student experience 1: Initially I was scared. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. When I accepted responsibility I finally understood.

Student experience 2: I was amazed at how much I've learned this semester. I never thought I could learn so much on my own and working with my team.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

By embracing agency, educational risk taking, and complexity:

A. It is possible to deeply know the technical knowledge acquired by each student due to more frequent and more telling interactions with them along with observations of them in the classroom.
B. It is possible measure the 'soft skills' equitably. students seem to retain not only as much technical knowledge as they used to but often more.
C. After an adjustment period students desire to apply agency and risk in their educational work
D. Not only can I better assist the students in learning the technical aspects of my field but they have lifted me technically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. ☀

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