



Genius

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Sometimes I get discouraged. I recognize I shouldn't, as this is the Lord's work, but I haven't fully overcome my weakness. I desire a steadfast and immovable sense of purpose; yet, at times, my view is clouded. A recent email from an alleged former student may shed light on this line of thinking:

I don't know if this is the right person but I believe I took an education and philosophy class from you in winter of 2012. If it is the right professor, I am in need of a letter of recommendation as I am apply to the master's program of teaching at Eastern Oregon University.

Where to begin? Professionalism? Capitalization? Research skills? Entitlement? How memory works? As I wrestle with the challenge of reaching individual students, I face the current reality that I miss most. Not that I'm content or accepting of that result, it's just that I have yet to arrive at a place in my personal learning journey where I am consistently reaching students as I desire to reach them.

THE TARGET

Over the past several years, as learning and teaching experts have visited campus, I've had a continual question—what is being measured? I'm anxious to understand the nature of assessed performances that would lead to a declaration of significant learning. I believe our campus community

could benefit from a robust conversation around Seymour Sarason's question, "And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?" Outcome documents, notwithstanding, I'm not confident we have arrived at a concept of deep, meaningful learning.

"I feel like a genius right now." This statement serves as a prototype of my personal learning target. Those words, or an approximation thereof, are what I acknowledge as significant learning. This particular genius moment happened in a conversation with a struggling student, as we conversed that day, our wrestle shifted from a mundane interchange of grades or requirements or word counts to growth, progression, and generativity. I interpreted the exclamation of genius as her personal glimpse of divine nature with the emerging ability to not only grapple with posed problems, but also with the capacity to find and solve her own. The significance I attach to this exchange has become a cornerstone of my approach to learning. I strive to be with students as they experience genius moments.

Lest the term genius become a distraction, consider this Webster's definition as a starting point: "extraordinary intellectual power especially manifested as creative activity." The genius moment is not a measure of worth or superiority. It is not a feeling of being greater than. It is not the need to be personally valued. Rather, it is a sensation of purposeful competence and generativity.

At the dedication of the Hinckley Building on the BYU-Idaho campus, President Hinckley addressed students with the following statement:

There is no end in sight for the good you can do. Do you know it? You are simple kids. You are not geniuses. I know that. But the work of the world isn't done by geniuses. It is done by ordinary people who have learned to work in an extraordinary way.

Elder Nelson echoed this sentiment in a BYU-Idaho devotional address. Consider the following messages woven through that talk:

You need to understand how really important you are in the eyes of your maker. Most of you do not fully appreciate who you really are. And most of you do not fully see your future potential for greatness.

The Lord has more in mind for you than you have in mind for yourself.

You faithful students here at BYU–Idaho can accomplish the impossible. You literally can help shape the destiny of the entire human family.

My learning target is a glimpse, a moment, a performance, or potentially a pattern that contains evidence of a learner’s recognition that they are builders, generators, and co-creators; evidence that they see themselves in a dimension where they are ingenious. Thus, the statement, *I feel like a genius right now*, could also be one of these student statements:

- I feel inspired right now.
- I’m feeling directed and purposeful.
- I know I will continue to grow – I must continue to grow.
- My desire and purpose is to be in the service of my God.
- I feel my capacity expanding.
- I feel more awake than ever.
- I feel I just experienced a measure of the glory of God.

For me, student messages such as these signal deep, purposeful understanding, and I consider these genius moments as a student reached.

An early pioneer in school reform, European educator Johann Comenius strongly believed in the efficacy of genuine learning. I appreciate the structure of Comenius’s *The Great Didactic*, wherein the author ventures to promise

learning results. Comenius follows a pattern of explaining a principle, followed by a series of educational deviations—the way schools violate the principle—and finishes with his position on how to rectify or return to a natural order of things. Here I attempt to employ his pattern and consider a principle, followed by deviations and rectifications.

PRINCIPLE

Soon after I began teaching at BYU–Idaho, experiences with several students altered my approach to the work. One haunts me. I remember my confidence in her ability. I was sure we had graduated a powerhouse in the educational world. I was crestfallen when, just months after graduation, I received a despairing email describing the rapid and tragic destruction of her confidence and beliefs. Systemic failings coupled with harsh realities had broken her. I realized students would need to be stronger.

Another simple exchange gave me courage to conceptualize progression beyond school tasks. In this case, a student recounted a defining experience she had while working as an Especially for Youth (EFY) counselor. As the time for parting came, she was pleased as youth showered her with praise and notes that told her how great she was. This moment gave her pause. Upon reflection, she concluded she had missed the mark. She thought, those students should be pulling away from this experience recognizing how great they are. The genius principle espouses an idealistic worldview that invites learners to extend their capacity beyond immediate school tasks. That day, I choose to follow my student to a new dimension and continue to invite others to journey with us.

DEVIATIONS

When my daughter was in grade school, I attended a parent-teacher conference and heard these words: “I don’t know what else to do for your daughter. She has exceeded target scores and I need to help other students.” Remember, I’m trying not to be discouraged. As Elder Bednar teaches, applications are often implemented without understanding of principle and doctrine. For example, it becomes easy and convenient to view learning in a particular way because the tool of I-Learn tells us it is so. Or as Thomas Paine points out, “a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right...”



FEAR THE RUBRIC

“I’m not sure what you want.” This question in its various iterations leads us to the common conclusion that learners need more information. They could reach new heights if they had scaffolding to climb and a series of discrete tasks that would lead them to a promised land. This thought pattern leads us to outcomes, which leads us to measurements, which leads us to the mechanical transmission metaphor of education, which is so pervasive in our school culture that we assume it is true.

The rubric allows for concrete consideration of this notion. Students need to learn stuff because if they don’t learn stuff, a teacher has no purpose. The obvious next step would be to define an outcome—what we intend students to learn. How do we communicate to students what they ought to learn? We provide the outcome. They still aren’t sure what we want. We provide a learning task that will approximate the learning that we want to see. They still aren’t sure what we want. So we provide a rubric that steps them through the tasks that will need to be completed to get the learning that we want. The stepping stone just became a stumbling block if thoughtful problem finding or solving is desired.

KNOWING UNHINGED FROM DOING AND BECOMING

The campus pattern of know, do, become suggests a developmental journey toward becoming disciple leaders. Cultural critic Neil Postman argues that the average person sees no connection between information and problem solving. In other words, for most of us, in most cases, knowing does not lead to doing. This notion is captured in education by the mechanical transmission metaphor wherein learning is viewed as the ingestion of information through technical, ordered sequences. The resultant fragmented target suppresses learning for understanding and growth.

My latest stint as a member of a ward Priesthood Executive Council (PEC) may illustrate the disconnect. In this council, we often discuss home teaching. Members of one of our quorums, heavily populated with participants from the BYU–Idaho learning community, struggled to home teach. Although many of these brethren earn honor grades in their campus classes, they lack understanding of what it means to love, serve, and teach one another. To be with, watch over, and strengthen hasn’t entered their hearts.

We appear to have sufficient amounts of information coupled with severe inaction. Doing and becoming wait on the back burner.

Significant moments,
moments of shared awe,
help us reach each other.
Shared moments break
down barriers and allow
learners to be connected
emotionally, an antecedent
to powerful, deep learning.

JOURNEYS OVER DESTINATIONS

For the past decade, we have used the language of doctrine, principle, and tool as a unifying pattern across courses. This approach is designed to increase learner capacity to find answers to their own questions. Another recent student email struck me as an understanding journey:

I’m not sure if you remember, but in our exit interview you asked me why our class was so successful (a reference to a middle school class he taught). I gave you a mediocre answer that it had something to do with De Bono’s thinking hats, and good classroom management. I left agitated and knowing that there was a lot more to it than that.

This student continued with a description of a two year journey (and counting) to develop an adequate answer to the question. He was dissatisfied with tools as the ingredient to success and continues to seek sufficient understanding. Tragically, the structures that fostered this moment have been dismantled by the university. The environments necessary to prompt conversations that facilitate and foster learning journeys will, by nature, be messy and unpredictable. Our students could use more opportunity to roam.

RECTIFICATION

In a multi-age school classroom with students ranging from second to eighth grade, students were brainstorming solutions to a problem. As one of the second graders began to explain an idea, an older peer exclaimed, “That’s genius!!” Further genius was the learning environment in which this exchange took place. “At the top of the intelligence hierarchy, it’s not the genius, it’s the genius maker.” “The best leaders don’t have the answers. The best leaders have really good questions, and they use those questions and their own intelligence to bring out the genius in the people around them” (Wiseman, 2016). Glorious for me is to watch learners reach further to draw out the genius in others.

SET YOURSELF UP AS LEARNER RATHER THAN LEARNED
Sometimes students nudge me. I become the wanderer and they the guides. Recently, I was invited to a gathering lead by former students working on a summer curriculum project. I participated in a gathering of development that produced efficacious results. The process I previously taught these students was being revisited upon me, honed and enhanced.

FIND THROUGH LINES

Our educational tendency is to break things into bite size pieces. Learning, then, is to collect the scattered crumbs and somehow make meaning. We should be seeking stories, metaphors, and perspectives that provide overarching throughlines for learners. I recently spoke with the mother of a learner taught by BYU–Idaho graduates. She shared a question her son asked regarding a book they had read in class weeks before. Significant to this mother was the depth of the particular question and that the message of the book lingered weeks after it had been taught in school.

SEEK MOMENTS OF AWE

Colleagues and I speak of glorious moments. Working in classrooms, these are moments when learners forget they are in school and reverence the opportunity to generate meaning and seek higher purpose. Significant moments, moments of shared awe, help us reach each other. Shared moments break down barriers and allow learners to be connected emotionally, an antecedent to powerful, deep learning. We should consider the thought that awe will rarely be found in screens (Dallas, 2016).

THEREFORE, WHAT?

I am looking at a letter, sent by a friend, pinned to my wall. She developed a list of learning that penetrated her heart during our shared learning journey. One of those concepts is to never go back to lesser thinking. This requires courage as doubt and potential discouragement are ever at the door. Available tools, expert presentations and entitlement consistently nag. For example, even as we understand that moments of awe are seldom found on screens, we can’t break away from our screens.

My personally-flawed learning journey has brought me to this present view, a view you are invited to help hone. It’s a view illustrated by a young woman I had in American Foundations who recently showed up at my door and declared she had changed her elementary education emphasis to math. She explained math was not a strength and added “how am I going to take on the federal government if I’m not willing to take on math?” So there is the target: an ordinary learner becoming.

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