



Voice Advocacy and a Case for Fail or Figure-It-Out Experiences

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In March of 2018, five students and I slid our cell phones and drivers' licenses through the thin slot at the base of the clear plexiglass window. We signed our names and noted the reason and time for our visit. The correctional officer slipped visitor passes back through the slot. Then, a case manager emerged through a brown metal door and greeted us. She steered us down an undecorated hallway to a room filled with 7-8 heavy rectangular tables and a multitude of folding chairs. The room was light despite the lack of windows.

A supervisor soon joined us. His orientation was brief. Thanks for submitting your information for your background check and for visiting us at Idaho Department of Correction's (IDOC) St. Anthony Work Camp (SAWC). Please remember, don't share any personal information today. Know that you're safe while you're here. You're allowed to use pens and paper. Some of the guys who wanted to be here are out working under supervision. The rest will be here shortly. They're looking forward to talking with you. If you'd like to have two students per table with the guys, that's fine. Thanks again for being here with us.

We waited for a few minutes before men emerged from the hallway and started to break off toward the tables in groups of three or four. The racial demographics paralleled those of most any Eastern Idaho community: primarily, but not exclusively, white. I watched my students greet the men warmly, shake their hands, and introduce themselves. Once everyone was seated, students asked questions that spurred conversation. I was relieved to see they weren't thrown by sleeve or facial tattoos or frequent cursing.

We were there representing VOICE Advocacy, an informal organization that students and I created to make significant experiential learning opportunities possible. VOICE Advocacy tries to create the relevant work experience demanded in almost every entry-level job posting and desired by almost every graduate program selection committee. VOICE grew rapidly though, and we are now fortunate to be a program of the Research and Business Development Center.

But last winter we had none of the benefits of that affiliation and so lacked a clear organizational foundation. Still, VOICE had been asked by the Reentry Director at

Idaho Department of Correction to organize a community conversation on successful reentry. Before we could generate any authentic dialogue, we knew we needed to walk a mile in their shoes, to understand the challenge of reentry from the perspective of the individual being released after spending time in prison. We needed to listen.

That day, the men began to talk. Students took them seriously and they took the students seriously; students treated them with respect and they treated the students with respect. They told us stories of the crimes that landed them in prison; stories of addiction, recovery, and relapse; and stories about dreams disrupted and fears unfaced. They talked about families they hoped to rejoin and jobs they hoped to obtain. They talked about accountability and the potential for change. They talked about stigma and mental health issues and the lack of formal education, about parole officers and counselors and role models. I listened to my students asking follow-up questions, venturing further in to this world within a world. They were careful to maintain the nonpartisan tone essential to any public interaction VOICE has. I watched them taking notes about everything from the housing and employment resources the guys knew they'd need upon release, to the childhood experiences some of them identified as the start of their downward spiral.

Those men trusted us, and to me, trust is always a gift. As they filed out of the room over an hour later and headed down the hallway, several turned back and said, "Thank you all for listening to us today." A few requested, "We hope you can be our voice at your community conversation." It surprised me how deep their simple comments reached. The feeling was strong, and I recognized its natural return when different class members and I engaged in similar listening opportunities at IDOC's Idaho Falls Reentry Center (IFRC) and Pocatello Women's Correction Center (PWCC).

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Preparation for a community conversation involves research, extensive community outreach, strategic writing, and visual design work, as well as plenty of event planning and management. IDOC is the third largest state agency. Idaho's prison overpopulation is a critical issue and results, in part, from our roughly 35 percent recidivism rate. VOICE's community conversation was going to be highly visible and substantively complex. It would receive both broadcast and written media coverage. In addition to IDOC, our invitations and posters featured logos from community partners including the cities of Idaho Falls, Rexburg, and Rigby. IDOC is a priority partner. An innovative, exciting future re-entry training project VOICE was planning depended on the success of this conversation.

My students were stressed. There was nothing hypothetical about this project. Their work would be visible for the entire community to see. I didn't hear anyone grumbling about grades or tests. Rather, they all had a feeling of being pinned to the wall. This thing was happening whether they liked it or not. They had developed empathy for the men and women we'd interviewed. Reentry was no longer an abstract issue. It concerned people they'd come to care about, each with a unique story and engaged in a momentous struggle for freedom. Some would actually succeed. Our community conversation could contribute to creating an environment in which that success was more possible. If the students

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weren't sure how to do something necessary to make the community conversation work, they had two choices: fail in public, or figure it out and problem-solve. If they became frustrated with each other, same thing: fail or figure it out. As with the interviews, I was in the trenches with my students. I made outreach calls too. I delivered invitations and drafted sentences and filled out attendee name tags. When I hit a snag or the momentum suddenly pivoted, I faced the same choice they did. Either fail or figure it out together.

Several weeks after our visit to SAWC, it was time for the event. As the evening unfolded, I again had the pleasure of watching students conduct themselves as professionals in an intimidating, complicated situation. The Bennion Student Union Building multipurpose room (generously donated for the event by Idaho State University) was alive with the sound of voices engaged in deliberative dialogue. Over 150 people attended, including the Director of IDOC, the Executive Director of the Parole Commission, the mayor of Idaho Falls, and other elected officials ranging from the regional director for U.S. Senator James Risch to state senators and representatives. Law enforcement and parole officers, prosecuting attorneys, adult education specialists, and peer-support and other community service providers all brought insights to the table conversations. Family members of individuals currently incarcerated, former offenders, victims, and even a handful of residents of IFRC who had been released under supervision to participate in the conversation all added powerful

perspectives to the critical, problem-solving discussions.

VOICE team members designed the language framing for table discussions, prepared surveys and infographics, and served as support facilitators assisting the professional facilitators we had invited to lead each table discussion. Some VOICE

team members stood beside large pads on easels taking notes throughout each of the four 20-minute conversation rotations. Others took notes while participating in the table discussions. Research and strategic communication are key to the success for such an event. It is no small feat when dealing with complex and emotionally provocative issues to direct the conversation in a way driven by problem-solving rather than a competitive, partisan agenda. Reducing misinformation and maximizing the exchange of useful information while reducing the influence of opinionated, ideologically-toned expression is challenging at best.

That night the students nailed it. They were no longer pinned to the wall. Given the choice to fail or figure it out, they'd risen to the occasion and everyone in attendance knew it. Having once figured it out, they could do it again. They had seen a high-stakes project through from start to finish. They knew every aspect of preparing a strategy and implementing it, and they had the portfolio material to prove it. In short, they had positioned themselves to be employable.

The other day, I was reading "Top 5 Characteristics of Interns and Entry-Level Employees," which appeared in the February 2019 issue of YFS Magazine (a respected resource for young professionals and entrepreneurs). The writer identifies five characteristics critical for individuals crossing over from classroom to workplace: initiative, positive attitude and eagerness to learn, adaptability, professional communication skills, and critical thinking. Every semester, VOICE team members exit the classroom and enter, or rather are thrust, into fail or figure-it-out situations. As students figure out how to complete VOICE projects with excellence (and so far, they always have), they rapidly cultivate each of these traits.



Watching students succeed on this level has been one of the most satisfying aspects of my many years as a university faculty member. Whether at our three suicide prevention community conversations, or at our opioid addiction, adolescent mental health, or aging conversations, I have witnessed the same level of respect and empathy as I watch students interact with individuals in emotional pain or battling some misfortune. It feels like a privilege every time.

And every time, for whatever reason, it takes me back nearly 30 years to the Monday afternoons I spent in a windowless, basement seminar room discussing deconstruction, new historicism, Marxism, feminism, and an array of other literary theories. It was my first 600-level class, literary criticism, and although I should have spent more time pondering the wisdom of Stanley Fish, I did begin thinking hard about the communities in which meaning is created and shared. One day, our professor, almost as if he were speaking to himself, posed a question: “Do you think if we invited the average guy at the mall to sit in on our class, he could even understand what we’re talking



about?” He had been leading a discussion on “Araby,” and I had been busy musing about Mangan’s sister’s braids, and porch lights at dusk, and the various longings of childhood. I had taken every class I could from this young, staunchly Catholic professor. He deserves credit for some of my most important learning. But the question he asked that afternoon is the only thing that locked verbatim into my memory. It’s important, because it articulates exactly what I don’t believe education is about.

Maybe my passion for VOICE Advocacy’s ethos and projects grew directly out of that day. Maybe not. But either way, I wish students from every department at BYU-Idaho could participate in our projects. It’s amazing to see the empathy and empowerment our educated, professionally prepared students can generate. ❖

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