Learning Requires Sacrifice

What is ownership? Webster dictionary defines it as the “state or fact of owning something”(Pfaffenberger, 2003). It can also be defined as “act or fact of possessing,” also “that which is possessed” (Online Etymology Dictionary).

From a behavioral standpoint, personal ownership has internal motivators, which promote us to a higher level of engagement in the learning process. This ownership is directly related to the amount of sacrifice required to obtain this “possession.” For example, if someone gave you a car, what level of care would be put into this gift as compared to a personal purchase with your own sweat equity? The human tendency is to manage more carefully those things for which we have made sacrifices. “People tend to retain, protect, and build resources, the potential or actual loss of which are seen as threatening” (Kozan, M.K., Oksoy, D. & Ozsoy, O., 2012)

The Lord taught this principle to Oliver Cowdery, who, though prearranged permission to translate, was unable to do so.

“Do not murmur, my son, for it is wisdom in me that I have dealt with you after this manner. Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right.” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:6-9)

Is ownership for personal learning any different? Do students have the capacity to own knowledge according to their own understanding? Does this ownership translate into deeper, more active learning? Two possible answers might include: 1) If we own something, it has a personal connection to us and therefore greater meaning, and 2) If we have paid a price for this knowledge, it has a greater impact on our behavior and how we apply this new knowledge.

Surface Versus Deep Learning

Education is an investment in time, energy, and expense. Students deserve more than a surface learning experience. As faculty, we are in a position to help new knowledge move from a surface or cognitive level to the heart, where deep learning takes place.

Simply stated, deep learning involves the critical analysis of new ideas, linking them to already known concepts and principles, and leads to understanding and long-term retention of concepts so that they can be used for problem solving in unfamiliar contexts. “Deep learning promotes understanding and application for
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life. In contrast, surface learning is the tacit acceptance of information and memorization as isolated and unlinked facts. It leads to superficial retention of material for examinations and does not promote understanding or long-term retention of knowledge and information” (Houghton, 2004).

How do we create ownership in learning? Six points to consider when trying to create a deep level of ownership in learning:

- Helping Students Find Their Voice
- Creating Trust in the Learning Process
- Peer Preservation—A Hidden Leverage in Motivation
- Small Group Discussion
- The Reflective Journal
- Faculty Finding their Voice

Helping Students Find Their Voice
The first point of creating ownership in learning is to provide opportunities for students to find their own voice. Students gain ownership in “their perspective” when they are allowed to share their ideas with their peers. The number of students who do not have a voice on basic issues confronting them in a modern world is surprising. For example, when a group of students were asked their position on immigration, almost all unanimously answered, “Whichever answer is going to be on the test.” This is a typical response for students learning from a behavioristic approach. In a behavioristic approach, the students file into the class like empty vessels waiting to be filled. This learning approach is actually very passive in nature as the student waits to hear the voice of the instructor who is considered the expert. It is a difficult environment to facilitate deep learning because students are seldom given a chance to share their voice with their peers, but if they do, it almost always echoes the core philosophy of the teacher. The teacher’s expertise becomes the voice the students hear and to ensure students revere that voice, they are given exams, quizzes, and other assessments, in essence forcing the student to own something that is impossible to own.

Advocating for the teacher to be silent, or to be unengaged with the student is not the direction that a faculty should take. Teachers need to be more trusting in the students’ capacity to discover their own voice. Truth is truth and each of us must discover it for ourselves. Joseph Smith taught this in his search for truth as expressed to his mother, “I have learned for myself . . .” (Joseph Smith History 1:20, Pearl of Great Price).

Creating Trust
Our students bring to our class experiential learning that they have spent decades developing. Their voice is there, but it is latent, and requires an environment where it can spring forth and bear its fruit. It is to a faculty’s advantage to see the students not as they are, but as they can become. There is value in trusting the student to “pedal his or her own bike,” so to speak. Teachers must trust students enough to let go of the planned agenda so they (the student) can build their own. There is a tendency for faculty to instinctively answer students’ questions. Faculty need to train themselves to allow students to answer to ensure they get the opportunity to reflect and critically problem-solve on their own. There are times, however, where the student's voice needs direction from the faculty. For example, David Ward from the English department at Brigham Young University-Idaho, recently shared an experience where a student expressed that she did not like Beethoven and she
didn't need to, in order to appreciate today's music. “I’m entitled to my own opinion,” said the student, to which David responded, “You are not entitled to your own opinion, you are entitled to your own educated opinion.” This is a profound principle where the teacher helped the student understand that there must be ownership in their voice. Students that learn to take a position are naturally confronted, even in their own mind’s eye, as to why they have this opinion. As wisely pointed out by David Ward, you can have an opinion, but it will better serve you if it is an educated one, not something without thought or consideration.

Trusting in a student’s voice doesn’t negate the influence of the professor; rather, it is facilitated by the instructor, so the student learns from their understanding and thus creates a deeper level of ownership in learning.

Peer Preservation
Appropriate class structure provides students with an opportunity to not only find their voice, but the environment to prove it. Traditional classrooms that are set up with faculty as the sender and the student as the lone receiver are misguided. Even if some exchange of thought is happening between a few students, many are left in the wake of other discussions and simply float in the swells, waiting to be picked up at the next opportune time. The learning model has created a system that in essence, invites all students to engage with the instructor and all students to share and “teach one another.” The principle to address is student accountability through “peer preservation.” Peer preservation is based on the premise that, “if I am standing before my peers presenting my views, I will be prepared. If I am prepared, I won’t look incompetent.” Students who know that they will be sharing in class, either in small groups or in large groups, will have the tendency to put more effort in their preparation. This social phenomenon can be witnessed in all aspects of public speaking and houses its own internal reward system. The challenge is that most class structures are not set up to have students hold each other accountable.
Instead of using this invisible leverage, teachers resort to other motivation tactics such as quizzes, cold calls, and other creative assessments. In these cases, the reward or punishment system is external in nature and reinforces “another” voice rather than the student’s. If we want students to come prepared, reward them with their efforts and a chance to express their voice, by expressing their voice. This is the value of small group discussion.

Small Group Discussion
Students that come prepared can share their ideas and gain great voice in small groups. Small groups work for a couple of reasons: 1) They are less intimidating than large group comments; 2) They are more intimate in nature allowing for everyone to share rather than a “gutsy” few; 3) The student is given a chance to hear his or her own voice and the voice of others allowing them to build at multiple level interesting thoughts and creative ideas. As mentioned earlier, natural systems are about community and variability. Myopic views are not favorable for discovery, especially when these views are from the landing zone of those present. We simply learn differently from each other.

Groups succeed if they are organized and have structure within themselves. Role assignment is a necessary first step in small group work. A leader is assigned and assumes the responsibility to facilitate. The leader is the critical force that keeps layers unfolding before the group through Socratic dialogue. Small group work partnered with “peer preservation,” motivates students within the group to develop valuable insight that can be shared in large group discussion. Structured groups provide every member with a chance to cultivate and clarify new insights by sharing. Shared insights further develop into a group summary, synergistically fueled by each student’s contribution thus connecting greater insight and ownership of knowledge.

The Reflection Journal
A requirement for the reflection journal is that students are required to purchase a composition notebook. This notebook is simply a scaffolding to help capture personal insight, to develop key talking points, and to organize their thoughts in the event they are invited to lead a class discussion. A traditional pre-class and in-class assignment would include the following:

Definitions: The definitions serve to create a foundation or lens in which the class will be moving towards each day. Most definitions are static in nature and not necessarily reflective. The intention here is to make sure the student understands the principles at hand. These principles can be woven throughout the reading assignment, but left for the student to discover their meaning both formally and in context in their reading.

Reflective Questions: These are simply questions to help the student transition to a single, pronoun, and personal voice. These questions trigger students into a reflective mode, triggering their curiosity, and preparing them for additional reading where they will have to create their own questions and personal insight. There is a tremendous emphasis put on the students to write in first-person. Again, this first-person experience helps them gain personal voice and opinion.

Conversational Format: This format was designed with a great deal of flexibility in mind. Students are given a reading assignment with a particular focus and then the permission to, as one student wrote, “go on a rampage of writing.” It is of particular interest for the students to respond to the author in their own voice, identifying particular key talking points and insight. This flexibility in their writing is where students are given full access to their voice. Trust is reiterated in student’s ability to write what is significant and important to them. In addition, students highlight particularly insightful comments. These highlighted insights have a couple of purposes: 1) They allow the student writer to reflect upon their writing and thus identify inspired thought which in turns gives
the student great confidence as they move forward in faith; 2) They create a quick access for the students to refer to as they create further development of their insight.

The open side of their journal then becomes the in-class, working document. This is where students are invited to give insight from their own personal impressions, and from small and large group interaction. Students are given time to write on the open side and in many ways from where some of their greatest insight will come.

In order for this open side to be of value, it is critical that time is given for the student to write down their thoughts, particularly if there has been an exchange of information in either large or small groups where new insight was evident.

**Key insight:** At the end of the day, the students are given time to reflect on the most important insight they have received. This insight is an accumulation of several hours of work and should, by this point, be of greater interest to the student because they have hopefully found their voice.

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**Faculty Finding Their Voice**

In conclusion, one of the most powerful ways to help the students find their voices is for the faculty to find theirs. It is to our advantage to discover what our position is on learning and teaching. It is the ownership of our pedagogy that creates the energy and enthusiasm that transfers to our students. The same principle of ownership we invite for our students must begin with us. What is our passion and interest? What is the core principle being taught and what does it mean to me? It has been my practice over the last several years to ask no more from the students then I am willing to do myself.

As I peel the onion back on my knowledge and understanding, I find it very advantageous to “eat swill” with my students and know the effort required to create the outcomes I am attempting to have for my students. I do this by following the same preparation I ask of my students.

I, too, keep a journal where I define the terms, respond to the reflective question, and also address the authors in our reading and find agreement or disagreement. I understand the challenge of talking in first-person when our tendency is to be more general. I recognize the pain involved in writing in an attempt to unearth a particular principle or to find application in my own life. However, it is the work and struggle I go through that helps me connect with my students and also to find the value of new ideas and their personal connection to me.

I feel the thrill of listening to new insights from my students as I sit in their groups. I try with great effort to model what I am looking for. I share knowledge, but equally and eagerly share my questions and lack of knowledge. For, like them, I too am a student looking for deeper insight and greater understanding of truth. As Albert Einstein taught, “Learning is not a product of schooling, but the lifelong attempt to acquire it” (Robinson, 2010).

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