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“Taking the Charisma Out: Teaching as Facilitation”

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Taking the Charisma Out: Teaching as Facilitation

Abstract

The author provides a personal account of his transition from attempting to use charisma to transmit knowledge to students to removing it so that students can themselves experience knowledge as a basis for learning. Consistent with inquiry-based democratic pedagogy, the author demonstrates how he became more a facilitator of learning than its transmitter. He shows how putting charisma into unscheduled classroom inquiry rather than into the teacher's delivery can produce knowledge collectively and concurrently co-constructed in service of action.

Key words: *facilitation, reflective practice, inquiry-based instruction, charisma*

Taking the Charisma Out: Teaching as Facilitation

The Premise

Academics in higher education don't get to spend much time preparing for and then improving their teaching. Whatever assistance we get, it's likely to focus on how to make our teaching more dynamic. It's all about how to become more charismatic in the classroom.

My first person story has to do with not putting charisma into my teaching but rather taking out what little I have! This may strike my colleagues as strange and counterproductive. After learning to become more stimulating in my delivery and in my use of course materials to make my classes more active and exciting, why would I want to take out that which gives my students the best possible learning experience?

Well, my self-discovery as a teacher has suggested that the above premise may in fact be flawed. Is providing stimulation in the classroom through charismatic delivery conducive to learning? And do students learn only from acquiring knowledge or might they learn from experiencing it?

Perhaps the question boils down to what we each believe is constituted by learning. Is learning achieved, as in the familiar banking metaphor, when knowledge is transferred from one mind – typically the expert's – to another – the student's (Freire, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991)? If so, then the academy may be putting itself at considerable risk since digital technology can likely transmit content information more reliably and flexibly, potentially resulting in an ossification of the classroom itself (Perelman, 1992).

Or might you believe, as I do, that learning best occurs in the midst of practice when knowledge becomes an interactive contention among a community of inquirers who share meanings, interpretations, and ideas (Dewey, 1916)? As suggested in constructivist epistemology, the purpose of teaching may be not to transmit information but rather to encourage our students' knowledge formation and development (Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning, 1995). When given wide freedom to engage in self-discovery, students have the capacity to actively construct the necessary knowledge to make sense of their environment. Put in another way: what do we truly want our students to acquire? Do we want them to obtain a passing grade on our tests or do we want them to use texts (and discourse) to better inform their actions?

The Journey

Why and how have I changed my view about teaching and learning? It all started back in 1990 when I was on sabbatical at The Management School at Lancaster University in the UK. Although I had started to experiment with action learning prior to my leave, it was there that I learned the true power of action learning as a very unusual but actually quite simple learning methodology. Its architect, Reg Revans (1982), believed that learning results from the independent contributions of programmed instruction (designated P) and spontaneous questioning (designated Q). P constitutes information and skill derived from material formulated, digested, and presented typically through coursework. Q is knowledge and skill gained by apposite questioning, investigation, and experimentation.

So, in a typical action learning program, a series of presentations constituting programmed instruction might be given on a designated theory or theoretical topic. In conjunction with these presentations, participants might be asked to apply their prior and new knowledge to a real live project which is sanctioned by organizational sponsors and which has potential value not only to the participant but to the organizational unit to which the project is attached.

Throughout the program, the participants work on their projects with feedback and assistance from other students as well as from qualified facilitators. This feedback feature principally occurs in learning teams or "sets," typically composed of 5-7 participants, that hold intermittent meetings over a fixed program cycle. During the learning team sessions, the participants discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings, but the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions. Hence, actions taken are subject to inquiry about the effectiveness of these actions, including a review of how one's theories were applied in practice. Participants learn as they work by taking time to reflect with like-minded colleagues who offer insights into their workplace problems. In this way action learning addresses the pitfalls of conventional teaching that often overlook the need to surface tacit knowledge to make it actionable. By having peers serve as a sounding board to one another regarding the operating assumptions underlying their project interventions, students become more equipped to produce the outcomes they desire. They learn from each other how to overcome the blockages that they themselves and others erect to deter project accomplishment. Their learning is tied to knowledge collectively and concurrently co-constructed in service of action (Pedler, 1996; Marquardt, 1999; Raelin, 2000).

Equipped now with this somewhat undiscovered methodology, at least when it comes to higher education in the U.S., I came back from my sabbatical looking for venues to apply action learning within some of the formal programs with which I had been affiliated. Although I discovered a number of opportunities in management education and management development in which to apply action learning, I discovered something else. My experience with it was changing my teaching in my regular classes.

What was happening was that I was endeavoring to find ways all the more to take my teaching role out of the center of the learning experience and put it on the side so that my students could occupy the center. I didn't want to get in the way of their learning. There would be lessons of content to teach, of course, but these lessons would become most actionable when they were applied to the case or application at hand. And when I say "case," I don't mean it in the traditional business case sense but as it pertains to real-life problems in real time. We also know that real-life problems oftentimes don't arrive with pre-set solutions because the supply of knowledge may be insufficient. In this instance, learning connotes learning how to develop new knowledge to attack the puzzle at hand (Piaget, 1969; Rorty, 1989).

In the latter instance, as a teacher, I learned that I could model a process of how to approach indeterminacy or how to engage in a metacognitive process of discovery. So, there would be transmission, but not of scheduled answers but of unscheduled inquiry. Such a pedagogy would also contain what Peter Denning (1999) aptly points out to be a social function. The function is one of welcoming students as practicing members of a community of inquiry. As respected members of this community, we teachers have a role of recognizing and endorsing our younger members at the point when they become willing to use their own reflective judgment in evaluating challenges in their fields of endeavor.

Perhaps the pivotal moment occurred at an Academy of Management panel at the 1998 annual meeting. I was invited to present as part of a pre-conference panel dedicated to teaching and learning. Also on the panel was a young but master teacher who had won numerous teaching awards at his institution. He implored audience members to use drama and charisma to engage and excite their students, making learning come alive! Then, it was my turn. I announced to a suddenly solemn audience that I didn't want my students becoming excited because of my drama and charisma. I professed that I was determined to get off the stage and put charisma back into the students and into their learning, where it belongs.

During the discussion period, I was challenged by the master teacher and some audience members that I was guilty of promoting career suicide, especially since I already had tenure. Didn't I realize that my approach would lead to lowered teaching evaluations?

Fair enough. Indeed, my own teaching evaluations dipped after adopting my non-heroic approach. There are some students brought up their entire educational lives by the banking concept of learning that will see a facilitator approach to teaching as an abdication of responsibility. But over the long haul, especially for those students who can begin to see the worthwhileness of self and collective discovery, there can be an appreciation for non-charismatic pedagogy, and even those teaching evaluations can climb back to a respectable level. Can they ever overtake the performance of a skilled thespian? I would say it is unlikely, but let us ask ourselves, what business are we in?

The Change

I have biographically made the case for the teacher to become more the facilitator of learning than its transmitter, consistent with an inquiry-based democratic pedagogy (Goodlad, 1992; Brookfield and Preskill, 1999, Sarasin, 1999). This contention brings to mind a distinction that adult educator Malcolm Knowles (1980) made between andragogy and pedagogy. In andragogy, students are encouraged to be more autonomous in their actions, more reliable in their assessment of their own capacities and developmental needs, and more capable of accepting greater levels of responsibility for their own and others' actions. In andragogical practice, then, teachers would model such behaviors as tolerance of ambiguity, openness and frankness, patience and suspension of judgment, empathy and unconditional positive regard, and commitment to learning. Clearly, the opportunity to demonstrate these behaviors calls for settings that are less hierarchical than the standard classroom.

The creation of learning cells or learning teams are appropriate along these lines because such structures, along with sensitive facilitation, provide the student with a safe environment in which to experiment with others to accomplish diverse learning goals (Michaelsen, Knight, and Fink, 2002). In particular, the learning team can become a human laboratory in which students can become more aware of their actual behaviors in their group, such as exercising influence, establishing meaning, or effecting meaningful change. Moreover, learning team methodology can be applied across a range of activities, such as group writing, web-based discussions, log exchanges, simulations and role-plays, in-class problem solving, and off-campus projects (Vega and Tayler, 2005).

Our role as a teacher thus becomes much more encompassing than merely delivering content since we are either explicitly or implicitly modeling inquiry. As pointed out earlier, we would like our students to know how to construct new knowledge when faced with problems for which there is no known solution or even for which there is no known conceptual lens. Under such unpredictable circumstances, we may encourage our students to engage in what Donald Schön (1983) referred to as "reflection-in-action," incorporating such behaviors as on-the-spot reframing, re-evaluation of past experiences or precedents, or spontaneous testing of available knowledge to arrive at a solution to the immediate problem.

The Virtue

Having acquired in my mind the gift of seeing teaching as an orchestration of learning rather than a purveyance, I had to see if I had what it took to step outside the center of the learning. It is a difficult task because as people involved in a profession that has us spending our time studying the world, we often appear to know the answer in advance. Further, our action-oriented culture induces a "haste in wanting to know." We have a tendency, many of us, to even express our experience before we truly know it, or we insist that experience can be disembodied through mental reasoning. Yet, might we benefit from staying with an experience, even with its

indeterminacy, soaking up it presence, rather than needing to codify it for fear that the embedded knowledge would otherwise be lost (Lyotard, 1984; Arnal and Burwood, 2003)? I would espouse as much intellectual quietness as the staccato of questions and answers. Let students take in experience and reflect on the lessons available in front of their own eyes. Let them compare their experience to existing theory and determine its applicability. To allow this form of student inquiry requires the virtue of patience.

If we believe that learning arises from social interactions occurring as people engage in their practice as much as from intrinsic cognitive insight, then we ought to let students share their narratives in their own ways. If their experience were not to be conjunctive with theory, then ongoing reflection among themselves can produce new theory. They may be encouraged to ask: why is current theory not working; what am I misunderstanding; should I disclose my insights; can I actually affect the system in a productive manner; what if my knowledge is incomplete; what if there is no solution; what sources should I consult to "learn" my way out?

The Vice

I have depicted charisma as being anti-learning to the extent of advising both myself and others to give it up. But what do I mean by charisma and is it pathological in all instances? Can it not contribute to effective facilitation and other forms of learner-centered teaching (Weimer, 2002; Fink, 2003)?

The meaning of charisma comes from the Greek word translated as "gift," suggesting that charismatic teachers have special gifts to distribute. Their gifts are not necessarily physical; they are more likely social. In fact, it is commonly thought that it is the pleasing personality of the charismatic that is his or her greatest gift. So by definition, charismatics sway people and shape the future by their sheer presence and personality. But they also can be distinguished by their behavior, in particular, their ability to formulate and articulate an inspirational vision (Conger, Kanungo, and Menon, 2000). They also dedicate themselves to assuring followers of their competency, which they appear to accomplish by projecting self-assurance and enhancing their own image (Behling and McFillen, 1996).

Using this familiar definition of charisma, it is no surprise that I see it as having a dampening effect on most learning, especially on critical thinking, since it requires a level of dependence and passivity on the part of the student to bank what is being delivered by the instructor. Elmes (1994) goes as far as to suggest that the student becomes objectified under a regime of repressive charismatic expertise in which both student and teacher often unwittingly engage in a drama that sustains a point of view. The drama exists to confirm the teacher's status as expert, which ensures a collusive self-sealing defense against criticism and attack.

There are few exponents of charismatic teaching who would likely tolerate views as challenging as those of Elmes. Further, adherents such as Howell and Avolio (1992) point out that charismatics can be ethical by using their power to serve others, by aligning their vision with followers' needs, and by relying on internal moral standards to satisfy organizational and societal interests. Charismatic leader behavior can produce a sense of group collective identity and performance and heighten followers' self-efficacy (Conger, Kanungo, and Menon, 2000; Dvir, Eden, Avolio, and Shamir, 2002; Towler, 2003). Elmes also suggests that charismatic teaching can be enlightened to create excitement for classroom events characterized by inquiry, critique, and minimally two-way pedagogical communication. Using the term, "transformational," such writers as James McGregor Burns (1978) and Bernard Bass (1985) add that charismatic leaders can challenge followers to engage in shared goals and undertakings and in a search for higher meaning and moral maturity. However, unlike the critical reflective practices espoused here, transformational leadership relies on an appointed or self-designated position leader or teacher to mobilize the salutary outcomes among others who are called followers or students. But what happens when this same teacher errs? What happens when his or her students realize that they have the maturity to make decisions and create learning on their own? What happens when the environment becomes so complex that no single individual could possibly discern all its elements? What happens when the teaching is over?

The draw and romanticism implicit in the word "charisma" appears to precipitate a sanitization of the concept perhaps because it appeals to those who are attracted to an ambition to serve as special heroes in times of need. It is my view that this is the core mindset of the charismatic and his/her followers. It springs from a resolve to save others who are in a dependent state. It is not, in my view, the same concept as the extroverted personality, namely, those who demonstrates genuine excitement and contagious enthusiasm about the endeavor in which they and their community are engaging.

Returning to the classroom, non-charismatic but facilitating teachers are not, therefore, inherently dull, solemn, or detached. They can be just as animated about the subject matter and learning process as the charismatic; what distinguishes them is their orientation toward learning. Is it their job to fill the cup of knowledge on behalf of their students or is it their job to help create conditions when their students do it for themselves?

When I think back to the transition in teaching that I made, here are examples of some of the specific changes that I recall making in my teaching:

- Instead of asking questions that had a preconceived correct answer, I probed while suspending all presuppositions about the answer that I would give so as to concentrate my full attention on the student's reasoning.
- Instead of jumping in to provide my expertise to solve an individual or team problem, I let my students offer their solutions to each other while acknowledging that their ideas would only serve to enrich my own.
- Instead of masking my lack of knowledge with an obfuscated answer, I offered my ignorance often along with a view on how we all might approach the problem at hand.

- Instead of allowing my students to downplay their experience as compared to my wealth of academic study, I reinforced the deep value of their practice-knowledge by looking for ways to make it more accessible to them and to me.
- Instead of over-preparing my lecture presentations to demonstrate my clarity of thought, I concentrated on how to introduce new material using multiple methods and entry points (Gardner, 1999) to appeal to the students' diversity of learning styles.
- Instead of requiring students to write concept-based reports from their experiences in the field, I encouraged them to journal on these experiences using their own style and idiom but prompted by questions that might induce deeper reflection.
- Instead of encouraging students to offer opinions to one another, I invited them to ask good genuine questions to bring out the collective knowledge of everyone.
- Instead of seeking consensus on a controversial topic, I expressed tolerance for a resolution of indeterminacy in order to promote ongoing reflection on the topic.

The Resolution

So now after some 15 years of transition, where do I stand on the issue of charisma in the classroom? Not surprisingly, I have developed a dim view of the role of charisma when applied to the conduct of the teacher in the classroom. Subscribing to a view so eloquently characterized as the "romantic perspective of leadership" by James Meindl (1990), I see charisma as no more than a social perception that people endow on other specific individuals to uplift their spirits. Although the charismatic's mythical qualities may not exist, they are often ascribed to the leader through either an implicit or carefully conceived orchestration by particular members of a follower community.

Unfortunately, charisma as reciprocally interconnected with followership can create dependence in social systems, be they organizations, groups, or classrooms. Do we want, be it our students or our workers, to function as dependent learners awaiting a signal from on high? Or would we prefer to offer permission - or should I say encouragement – to them to take responsibility for their own improvement and learning? Just as the corporate leader in the postmodern era of today's networked or virtual organizations needs to bring out the leadership in everyone (Raelin, 2003), the teacher is charged similarly with bringing out the learning in everyone.

My views are partially in line with recent work on facilitating student success in higher education through such practices as student engagement (Chickering and Gamson, 1987), teaching and social presence (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer, 2001; Shea, Pickett and Pelz, 2003), and teacher immediacy (Gorham, 1988; Sanders and Wiseman, 1990). These practices speak to the need for teachers to maintain close contact with their students, provide prompt feedback on their work, encourage and reinforce their contributions, and create a warm, open, and trusting environment. I don't see these behaviors as charismatic as long as the instructor acknowledges that the learning conditions can be assumed

as much by the student as the teacher. For example, it is not necessary for just the teacher to provide feedback on learning. It is also unlikely that students will immediately assume responsibility for the learning environment, given their often conventional socialization as empty vessels. Yet, we need to be careful. Teaching presence (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer, 2001), using such pervasive forms as focusing and summarizing discussion or confirming understanding, can doubtfully create the constructivist environment I have been depicting. Rather, it may reinforce, often unwittingly, the very dependence I have decried.

While arguing for discarding charisma as a personal characteristic, I feel completely at ease in advocating that we put it back into the classroom as a structural or environmental condition. Teachers do not have to leave everything behind when dropping off charisma at the podium. They still can use all the drama and excitement that can be mustered to emphasize and reinforce the value of learning to solve our most vexing problems as a society. Our students still need our resources and our encouragement to face the world when both they and we don't have the answers. And there will be times when no answer will be forthcoming. But every so often, by working together and engaging in mutual support, students can overcome by finding a solution never dreamed of before. They can enliven each other's spirits as they attempt to reach the endless boundaries of their own potential. In this generative process, charisma may be brought back in as a collective process of engagement.

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Biographical Sketch

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