The Myth of the Teacher/Leader: Reframing the Role of the Department Chair

In *The College Administrator's Survival Guide*, C.K. Gunsalus (2006) says that "One of the most puzzling aspects of higher education is that its front-line leaders are almost always selected for qualities other than an ability to run complex organizations" (1). Department chairs make up much of this front-line in higher education. Because department chairs are positioned as the major conduit between the executive administration and the faculty, this intermediary station leads to the metanarrative that department chairs must live in two worlds in higher education (Chu, 2006, 11-22; Gunsalus, 2006, 4). Residually, the associated duality of and conflicts between these two worlds permeate the "teacher/leader" metaphor prominent in training programs and academic advice literature (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999; Sackstein, 2018; Schwarzbach, 2016).

While department chairs may not always be entirely familiar with the complexities involved in running an educational institution, we tend to be very knowledgeable about the complicated realities that teachers and students face in the classroom. As such, we are often the target of the frustrations of our students, our colleagues, and our senior academic leaders. Gunsalus agrees that the mutable nature of the role of department chair situates us in an uneasy location between our duties as faculty and as administrators, or as a "teacher/leader." So why do people take chair positions? For a number of reasons, says Gunsalus, but the more important question is, "How does one survive and thrive after taking on the challenges that come with being a department chair in higher education?" While never easy, Gunsalus indicates that there are certain conceptual tools that can help department chairs be more successful. This discussion identifies some conceptual tools that we often overlook.

The Four Frames Approach

Leadership development programs in higher education often recommend drawing upon the four frames found in *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (Chu, 2006, 6-9; Lindahl, 2013, 59). In the text, L.G. Bolman and T.E. Deal (2017) argue that we can use the four frames to negotiate complex circumstances in order to craft informed responses and more strategic decisions as administrators. The four frames presented are structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. Generally, the structural frame focuses on the logical scope of tasks, the architecture of an organization, and its units, rules, and policies. The human resources frame focuses on understanding people and their strengths and temperament within a group and the larger organization. The political frame emphasizes the impact of competing interests and values in an organization and the ways that power permeates and influences various relationships. The symbolic frame is concerned with the role that meaning, culture, and stories play in an organization in order to create a sense of cohesion, identity, and purpose among the staff.

One negotiates these frames through a process that Bolman and Deal call "reframing." Reframing requires us to shift and blend perspectives in order to see situations through the four different lenses (6, 13-15). As department chairs, reframing is not only something we teach our students to exercise, but a skill we practice in our student-, faculty-, and administrator-facing roles. However, adapting dialogism—the awareness of the multiplicity of perspectives and voices, and our responsiveness to the interrelatedness of all discourse to interpreting and creating meaning—into framing theory offers a basis for bridging the gap between our role as instructors and leaders in our respective disciplines. Ultimately, dialogism challenges the notion of the role of the "teacher/leader" as binary.

Framing as a Dialogic Tool

With few exceptions, dialogism evokes the work of philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin. Michael Holquist (1990), a Bakhtin scholar, explains that "dialogue" is the key feature and metaphor in Bakhtin's philosophy, a concept Bakhtin calls *dialogism*. Not only is dialogism the epistemology that underwrites social constructionism, constructivism, and connectivism for Bakhtin, but it is also a meditation on the mysteries of creation at all levels. It evidences the way that language resists boundaries and effectuates existence itself—for Bakhtin, the self is dialogic, and dialogue with others allows us to "author" our lives. In simpler terms, we construct meaning and ourselves by talking to other people, and our existence is collaborative, integrated, and artistic (Bakhtin, 1990, 4-27).

There are two important appreciations of framing as a dialogical tool necessary to unify the role of teacher/leader. The first is understanding that multiplicity conditions the frames that we create. This understanding of framing, or recognizing the real diversity of voices and perspectives we are faced with, provides an ability to theorize about teaching and learning, leadership, our institutions, and the larger academic culture in appropriate

frames. These disparate frames help us make sense of our intermediary standing and simultaneous, interrelated realties, while also presupposing the importance of connections and patterns in helping us understand world views and realities that are mixed, multidimensional, and sometimes conflictual (Lindstedt 2017).

Second, the linguistic impact of dialogism on leadership asks us to replace the image of the manager and leader as a scientist with that of an author (Holman & Thorpe 2003). To Bakhtin, language is a constant flow of social activity. Influenced by this idea and the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, John David Shotter (1993) claims that our thoughts frame and organize reality "in a moment-by-moment, back-and-forth, formative or developmental process" in order to help us complete life activities and solve problems (46). Words are not isolated or ahistorical, but networked by a stream of dialogic relations that add to the flow of conversations always and already in progress (Shotter, 1993, 51-52). They are psychological tools that allow us to mediate the various networks that we encounter every day. Therefore, good leaders and managers must also be good conversationalists and good listeners in order to negotiate the complex interactions and discursive systems within an organization. It is through language that we learn to manage and lead. Shotter and Cunliffe (2003) call this process *practical authoring*. It is a dialogical and a relational practice that allows us to create intelligible formulations out of chaos and the mutuality of differences. In English, we call this activity *teaching* and *learning*. Practical authoring ultimately situates the concept of reframing within a context and discourse that department chairs can recognize and use to rewrite the metanarrative that we have constructed around the idea of the teacher/leader as an oppositional relationship.

Conclusion

Hopefully this epistemological overview of framing challenges our ideas about what it means to teach and lead in higher education. The term "teacher/leader" is handy but problematic—it is rooted in the kind of reductionism that leads us to believe we have to be one or the other. Dialogism disrupts such reductionist beliefs and insists that reality is much more fluid and symbiotic. It asks us to shift from "either/or" logic to "and/both" thinking. This is the kind of conceptual lens that department chairs need in order to become "constructive mediators" of the complexities that we experience in the classroom with students and the conference room with faculty. As a noted academic leader in higher education, Clark Kerr (2001) claims that constructive mediation captures the essence of the role of the academic administrator (26-30). However, some pedagogues also see this as the essence of the role of teachers. After all, leadership is a form of pedagogy (Freire, 1990, 179). Like leading and managing, teaching is also a form of mediation between differences. We position ourselves for success when we use a dialogic lens to frame that they are at once different and the same.

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