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Rethinking Education for Leadership

Duncan Reid

Abstract:
We are currently witnessing a crisis of confidence in leadership in all sorts of public institutions. Educationalists are uniquely placed to encourage new understandings and practices of leadership. The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility of educating future leaders through the intentional exercise of personal character strengths, in the hope that this may contribute to new understandings and practices of leadership.

The purpose of this paper is not to ask about leadership in education, or leadership for educational change—there is already a large body of research devoted to this. Instead, my interest is in whether there can be an education for leadership; whether and how education might prepare students for leadership. Leadership is often treated and exercised as an external assertion of authority, as the manipulation of people or groups of people, as objects, 'out there'. Leaders, in what I shall call this old paradigm of leadership, externalise their energies, directing them over the lives of others. But much recent scholarship on leadership offers a very different picture, amounting to what we could call a new paradigm, of what leadership might look like in the future. If leadership skills can be taught, it is this new paradigm that should inform our teaching.

Let me begin with two stories of success and two of failure in my own leadership experience. The first success and failure are incidents in the classroom; the second success and failure are incidents in organisational leadership. I propose that we understand teaching as an exercise of leadership—this is why I have included the classroom in two of the leadership situations in the exercises

Leadership in teaching:

1. Success in teaching. At the time of the marriage equality plebiscite in 2017, I was asked in a year 7 class about what I thought about the issue. My response was: 'Well let's talk about it; what do *you* think?' This led to about twenty minutes of very animated open conversation, involving the majority of students, and without me giving away my own decision as to how I'd vote (though the students could possibly have worked it out without too much trouble).
2. Failure in teaching. Student presentations of critical exegesis of passages from Mark's Gospel in a year 10 Texts and Traditions class elicited some very good presentations; but one student was simply not prepared. I said: 'Ok, just tell us what the passage is about, and we can have a conversation about it.' But it turned out the student hadn't even read the passage, and she quickly dissolved into tears. I haven't had a student respond in this way too often in my teaching career, and obviously it was not the response I was hoping for. Embarrassingly, the class was being observed by a pre-service teacher, and I had to say to him afterwards, 'this is *not* how you teach a class.'

Leadership in organisation:

3. Success in organisation. Some years ago I was in an editorial meeting with a group of colleagues compiling a collection of theological essays. We had each agreed to write a chapter, and then subject our chapters to critical review among ourselves. Not every author was able to join us for the full-weekend review meeting. One contributor, who wasn't present, had submitted a very poor quality piece of writing and we all agreed that even with a complete re-write it just couldn't be salvaged. But who was going to tell him the bad news? After we'd all looked at each other for what seemed like about ten minutes (in reality it was probably only a minute or so), I thought 'bugger this; *I'll* tell him!' So I went to the end of the room and rang him to say we wouldn't be including his chapter. He was very upset and angry, and I was the one to get the earful of just how angry and upset. But I knew somebody had to do this, and it had to be me.

4. Failure in organisation. Some year ago I was appointed to what had been advertised as a leadership position within a consortium of three colleges. Within a week of starting the job, one of the college principals (in the presence of the others, none of whom objected, and who were my employers) imposed a couple of surprising obstacles to my work, one being that I was not to go ahead with the one-to-one meetings I'd planned to have with members of his teaching staff. This effectively changed my role in relation to his faculty from one of leadership to one of administration, and redefined my role in relation to the whole consortium. But I failed to challenge these employers on the matter.

I told these stories about, or against, myself in a recent conference workshop on leadership,[1] so as not to exempt myself from the critical self-scrutiny in which I was asking workshop participants to engage. I also gave a self-analysis of my own performance in these four situations: I will come to this later. The exercises drew explicitly on participants' knowledge of their own character strengths as measured by the VIA Institute questionnaire, an instrument developed by Martin Seligman and others that enables self-assessment of one's own character strengths.[2] I asked participants to reflect on their own stories and share them in small groups. These were the exercises I asked participant to do:

Leadership in teaching

> Scenario 1. Think of a time in class when things went so well you knew you were in exactly the right job. Jot down, and discuss *which of your own character strengths you used* in thus situation.
>
> Scenario 2. Think of a time in class when things went so badly you despaired of your own ability to teach. I do *not* want you to discuss what should you have done, or what strength you should have used, but what liability of one of your own strengths did you allow to get 'out of control' in that situation. Jot down and discuss.

1. The workshop was given at the Positive Education Schools Association (PESA) conference in Geelong, 11–14 April 2018.
2. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 33–55; 413–428. See also: https://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths/Leadership (accessed 9 Mar 2018).