UCHENNA BAKER

8. FOSTERING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN THE CLASSROOM

An Ontological Model

Colleges and universities are being challenged to prepare students to become empowered leaders who know themselves as engaged, active participants in the creation of a future for society. Unfortunately some students are graduating from of our higher education institutions without having acquired the critical skills needed to navigate life with power. Some students are not getting sufficient opportunities for critical thinking, self-agency, and social action in the classroom. Without engaged and empowered learners, the future of education and society is at risk. Perhaps the implementation of an ontological model in the classroom can be one key contribution to the development of students and educators and the reformation of American education. When educators and students are invited to examine who we are being as leaders in the classroom and the world, we are then better equipped to engage as citizens and agents of change. Collectively, we can renovate education and empower individuals from all walks of life who may then inform and create the future of American education and society.

Educators might then give consideration to ontological inquiry and how it might inform the work we do in the classroom. Ontology puts learners in touch with their being and its relationship to self and the world. Once this relationship and the associated dynamics are accessed, they can be critically examined and re-contextualized. Applied specifically to pedagogy, ontology can make available to the educator and learner who they see themselves to be, how they show up in the world and how the world shows up for them. Perceptions and the perceived can then be critically examined, challenged, and ultimately given a new context that would allow for more effective personal and social agency.

PREPARING FOR MY JOURNEY IN ONTOLOGICAL INQUIRY

It is the summer of 2013. I prepare to fly to Canada to take a leadership course that my dissertation advisor recommends. “Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological/Phenomenological Model”. Before taking the course, I had no idea what to expect. What I discovered in the process of taking the course is that one’s “being” is not regarded as immutable when ontologically examined.

C. Lowery et al. (Eds.), Un-Democratic Acts, 95–106.

That is, one's being is dealt with as changeable and unfixed. Approaching "being" from this perspective allows me to experience myself in ways that are not limited. Applied specifically to pedagogy, ontology can make available to the learner who they see themselves to be, how they show up in the world and how the world shows up for them. Once established, meaning can be made as to how perceptions and the perceived intersect. As a participant in the course, my perceptions and the perceived are critically examined, challenged, and ultimately given a new context that would allow for more effective personal and social agency.

It is not to say that after taking the course, I reached a high degree of mastery in my exercise of ontological inquiry. I still find myself grappling with some of the same issues I had before taking the course. However, in taking the course, it is made clear that transformation is not a one-time occurrence. Rather, as a life-long learner I will continue to experience breakdowns, to critically reflect, and to discover. However, what ontological inquiry offers is the revealing of those breakdowns and on-going opportunities to examine who I am being in those moments. In discovering, examining, and loosening the constraints that limit me as a leader, I am able to experience myself more powerfully in the world. I am also able to continually make myself available to life's possibilities and create futures bigger than myself. Such possibilities include a created future where my contribution to higher education is one where I generate opportunities for educators and students to experience themselves as active participants and contributors to learning and the creation of created futures that others can come to live into.

It's not to suggest that ontological inquiry is the only answer to educational reform or that it results in immediate transformation. The very essence of transformation is that it is a process and often not instantaneous. As we explore the nature and function of human behavior, it is inevitable that our relationship to ourselves, others, and the world will continue to shift. What ontological inquiry calls for is the on-going commitment to the discovery of who we are being. It calls for us to consider a paradigm where we do not have all the answers but rather we are constantly engaging with the questions in order to remain present with how we are showing up in the world, how the world occurs for us, and ultimately discovering what our contribution to the world will be.

AT THE AIRPORT

I am sitting in this small airport waiting to board my flight. I am all in my head and I cannot hear or see anything around me. It's all a blur. I am a bundle of nerves right now. I have a million questions running through my head. What will Vancouver look and feel like? How will I convert my money to Canadian dollars? I am feeling sad and alone. I miss my family already. Am I doing the right thing? Will this be worth it? What it will be like? My advisor told me to dump everything out before I board the plane. I need to be an empty vessel. I am writing this all down. I am empting my soul onto this journal. I am not quite empty yet. I am still swimming in what's left of my

thoughts. I ask myself: "before I board this plane, what do I want to leave behind?" My answers: (1) Fear. Fear of my power. Fear of the unknown. (2) The high level of pressure I put on myself. (3) My diminishing of my authority and validity as an African-American woman because I assume others are as well. I feel a bit more open now. I just dumped years of "stuff" on this sheet of paper. I am boarding the plane. I hope to leave as a scared little girl and return as a fearless woman.

ENGAGING IN THE COURSE

I walk into the course room. I am the only African-American woman in the room. I already feel like I don't belong. We jump right into the material. Moments later we are in a group activity. I am the only one with a Student Affairs background. Everyone is from the business world. They don't understand me. I retreat. It doesn't matter because no one will notice anyway. I am glad to be finished with the group activity but these feelings of isolation are lingering. In fact, these feelings are relentlessly piercing through me and won't leave me alone long enough for me to focus on the instructors. What is the matter with me? Why do I feel like I don't belong? Why do I always do this to myself? I tune back into the course just in time to hear the instructors talk about the difference between "conditions" and "contexts". Conditions are the facts with which one is confronted. Contexts allow one to see the possibilities in those conditions. I am thinking to myself, "So you mean my conditions won't change but I can change the context that I bring to it?" There is this idea of choice and freedom. The group exercise was a condition; the contexts I brought to that situation shaped the way that condition showed up for me. Could I have chosen another context?

It suddenly hits me; my contexts were showing up for me while I was in the group. Actually, my contexts have been showing up undetected in just about every "condition" in my life. Suddenly, I want to be on the court. I came here to be transformed right? I cannot continue to allow these contexts to run my life. My mind is made up; the only way to loosen the power that these contexts have on me is to share it openly and authentically in front of the entire class. I raise my hand. There is no turning back now.

The moderator is approaching me with the microphone. My heart is racing. I feel the eyes of everyone in the classroom burning through me. The silence in the room is deafening. I am fighting back tears. My voice is shaking. Here goes. "I have discovered that my contexts are victim, not good enough, not smart enough, and as an African-American woman no one cares about what I have to say". I am speaking from the depths of my heart and soul. A hidden, unexamined reality shows up. A burden that I silently carried for most of my life just purged itself right out of my mouth. I feel liberated yet deeply sad about what I just said.

Nozick (1989) writes: "When we guide our lives by our own pondered thoughts, it then is our life that we are living, not someone else's. In this sense, the unexamined life is not lived fully" (p. 15). Erhard et al. (2012) write:

> The good news is that most of what limits and shapes our perceptions – that is, our network of unexamined ideas, beliefs, social and cultural embedded-ness, and taken-for-granted assumptions – is in fact accessible through language. Since language is a faculty over which we can exercise real choice and through which we can employ our emotional and rational intelligence, an effective use of language provides access to a high degree of mastery in the exercise of leadership. (p. 41)

Bay (2011) notes:

> Critical reflection provides one way of stepping back from practice. By locating ourselves directly within the incident or event, we subject our practice to a critical gaze, unraveling the meanings and discourses embedded in our sense-making and narratives, scrutinizing knowledge claims—our own and others. (p. 748)

To further hone in on the limits we place on ourselves, the course leaders engage us in an exercise where we discover the difference between "I am" and "the way I wound up being". During this exercise, I write sentences that begin with "I am" then rewrite those sentences by beginning them with "the way I wound up being." When writing sentences that begin with "I am," I experience myself as limited and with without options for other possible ways of being. However, when writing those same sentences and beginning them with "the way I wound up being", I experience myself as having options and choices that do not confine me to limited traits or characteristics. Having discovered the power of living life without boundaries and limits, the course then invites me to discover a commitment to creating futures that I never would imagine. By considering myself beyond the "way I would up being", it occurs to me that the way I occur for myself does not have to be fixed and *unmalleable*. This discovery creates access for me to consider the possibilities I have for creating futures that are not connected to a fixed way of being. Rather, I can create futures from a space of freedom and possibility.

I discover the areas in my life where I have not made myself available to greater possibilities. I am able to discover how experiencing myself as "I am guarded" as a result of losing my mother keeps me from experiencing the fullness of meaningful relationships and close friendships. I also discover how experiencing myself as an African-American woman whose perspectives are not understood or valued keeps me from fully expressing myself in a professional setting. In those moments, I find myself holding back from sharing my thoughts and opinions. As a result, I experience myself as confined and inauthentic. The ontological model used in this course invites me to create a future where I am fully self-expressed and actively engaging with life. The ontological model provides me with access to how powerful contexts are and opportunities for other possible ways of being.

I am aware of when I retreat and diminish my power as an African-American woman for fear of how I will be perceived or as a result of how I perceive the world

around me. For example, I can recognize this constraint when I am in a meeting with other directors in my department. I occur for myself as one of two women and the only African American among a group of seven directors. When the meaning I place on this experience is grounded in "no one cares what I have to say", I find myself holding back. In these instances, I am aware of how my actions become correlated with the way the situation is occurring for me. It is the ontological model and a phenomenological method used in the course that provide me with access to ontological constraints that are limiting me.

This course, unlike other courses I have taken, engages me in a way where I am an active participant in my learning. On a number of occasions, I am challenged to critically reflect on the assumptions I make about myself, others and the world. Additionally, unlike other courses, this course is designed in such a way that I am actively engaging in the material, participating in dialogue with the instructors, and learning from the sharing and discovery of others as they also grapple with the material. I discover how easy yet challenging it was to shift my contexts after becoming present to the constraints that limit me. I find myself teetering back and forth between freedom and fear; this is also a reminder that ontological learning is an on-going process of breakdowns and discoveries. In one moment I am embracing the freedom of having limitless possibilities ahead of me. In another moment, I am frozen in fear of the idea of facing a world of unpredictability; one where there are no boundaries or limits; one where I have the power and authority to fully define; one where I would have to leave my comfort zone and let go of my need for structure; one where I can unapologetically take risks. However, I also recognize that this is what ontological inquiry is calling me to do; to make myself available for all of life's possibilities, dance with the unknown, and engage in life-long discovery and learning.

Through ontological inquiry, I discover what is possible when I learn how to engage the world around me and make a commitment to being a contribution to the world. Through critically reflecting on what my life, career, and education is really about, I am able to discover what is possible as a higher education professional. I create a future where my contribution to higher education is one where I generate opportunities for educators and students to experience themselves as active participants and contributors to learning and the creation of created futures that others can come to live into. I think about my role as an educator and the opportunity I now have to empower others. As Osteen and Coburn (2012) note, the "growth of our students' leadership capacity is in direct relation to our leadership capacity as educators" (p. 13). I leave the course with a renewed commitment to higher education. I become reacquainted with the power of discovery and self-agency that education can provide. I leave with a new commitment to inviting my staff and students to experience themselves and the world differently. Being committed to empowering others and inviting them to create futures bigger than themselves would not have been possible if I did not first learn how to lead myself.

As an educator, I am left wondering how ontological inquiry can inform the work that I and other educators do in the classroom. How can we invite our students to limit the barriers they and society have placed on them? More importantly, how can we as educators create the type of spaces that allow for such possibilities? How do we create democratic spaces where pervasive paradigms of power and privilege are challenged? How do we ensure that every students' narrative can be valued and seen as a critical contribution to everyone's learning?

One possibility might be the incorporation of ontological inquiry into liberal arts education. Certainly liberal arts education has much to contribute to the development to graduates who can experience themselves as creators of a future for society. Thus, an integrative approach to ontological inquiry and liberal arts might enhance the learning that occurs in the classroom. As McGowan (2014) notes:

> Not unlike the journey of life itself, the liberal arts journey is indirect, textured, often difficult, but ultimately rewarding. This is because liberal education is about discovering your passion and developing your capacity to pursue and realize a life that is successful and meaningful. Liberal arts students learn more than intellectual content; they learn how to learn as a way of being in the world. (para. 2–4)

As such, ontological inquiry might support liberal arts education in realizing its goals of providing "students with knowledge, values and skills that will prepare them for active and effective participation in society" (Barker, 2000, para. 6). Ontological inquiry, much like liberal arts education aims to develop one's capacity for critical inquiry and understanding. Therefore, ontological inquiry can provide students with actionable access to who they are being as they engage in learning that invites them to negotiate their relationship to the larger world.

Ontological inquiry can also support educators in realizing their capacity for critical inquiry and understanding. That is, if we are to invite our students to develop their capacity for inquiry, we ought to engage in critical inquiry as well. As educators, if we are seeking to foster the sort of learning that liberal arts education calls for, we ought to engage in practices that model on-going inquiry and discovery for our students. That is, we ought to find comfort in not being the expert in the classroom. We ought to be able to stand in the inquiry with our students rather than resorting to the "banking model" that Paulo Freire (1972) argues against. That is, as educators it is critical that we not view our students as empty vessels into which we are to deposit knowledge and information. Palmer (2010) writes:

> When we honor the hidden aquifer that feeds human knowing, we are more likely to develop a capacity for awe, wonder, and humility that deepens rather than diminishes our knowledge. And we are less likely to develop the kind of hubris about our knowledge that haunts the world today. So much of the violence our culture practices at home and exports abroad is rooted in an arrogance that says, "We know best, and we are ready to enforce what we know politically,

> culturally, economically, militarily." In contrast a mode of knowing steeped in awe, wonder, and humility is a mode of knowing that can serve the human cause, which is the whole point of integrative education. (p. 22)

It is imperative that we consider the power dynamics that we create in the classroom by examining who we are being as educators, who we are assuming our students to be, and how learning in the classroom occurs for us. If we are seeking to realize the goals of liberal arts education yet learning occurs for us as only the teacher can be the knower, then we may fail to develop our students as global citizens with the capacity to pursue lifelong learning and become valuable members of their communities (Haidar, 2014).

EDUCATORS DOING THE WORK

After taking the course, I had the privilege of interviewing national and international educators who are engaging their students in ontological inquiry. These educators are part of a group called LECOLE (Learning Community for Ontological/ Phenomenological Leadership). They are an extraordinary learning community of individuals who are committed to creating futures for higher education and students. While they do not directly quote scholars like Paulo Freire or Henry Giroux, nor do they specifically talk about evidence of critical pedagogy, it is clear that they recognize the value of ontological inquiry in the classroom. With ontological inquiry, there is always something new for them and their students to discover about themselves. However, with on-going discovery comes some challenges. As one educator states:

> The primary frustration is the willingness to be in the gap, in the breakdown, and reconcile the cognitive dissonance. In an ontological inquiry the question is where is the gap going to show up, and am I willing to be in that gap to deal with it? I am still discovering that each gap invites a new discovery, and new discoveries lead to new breakdowns. The challenge is in becoming comfortable with questioning the premise of something. We have to be willing to inquire into the premise of our beliefs to reveal our faulty assumptions; otherwise we put them in action and they become the truth. The truth becomes something to protect and we hold on. To engage in ontological learning, we have to have a beginner's mind.

While the ontological model creates opportunities for on-going discovery, it also invites participants to confront their beliefs, grapple with breakdowns, and embrace a learning that requires continuously seeing the world new. Another educator states:

> We are always disclosing. Whatever we engage in is disclosing who we are. The self and the students are the material, the students are the material and the interaction generates new material-if we are willing to see it. We need to bring all of that in the classroom. I am committed to developing leaders but also

> the 'being of being in a human way.' I believe that peace will never occur in the world until people feel fully heard and feel like contributors. Much of the peace that the world does not have is rooted in the insecurities that people have because they are not heard or valued. That aspect of humanity is not always addressed. Education should be a natural place where this happens.

Through ontological inquiry, these educators are able to recognize themselves and their students as active participants in their learning and experts in their discoveries. This sort of learning experience mirrors the type of pedagogical approach that Giroux (cited in Polychroniou, 2007) advocates:

> … [one where educators provide] the conditions for students to engage in unlimited questioning and sustained dialogue so that teachers and students can experience themselves as critical agents and learn how to oppose dogmatic forms of education which not only limit critical thinking, but also close down the capacity for self-determination, agency, self-representation, and effective democracy. (para. 1)

In the most fundamental way, we ought to give some reconsideration to the way we teach and learn. How might we invite educators to consider possibilities for creating the sort of learning experiences that cultivate leaders who know themselves as engaged contributors to society. As Giroux (2013) notes:

> There is a need to invent modes of communication that connect learning to social change and foster modes of critical agency through which people assume responsibility for each other. This is not merely about skill sharing or democratizing education and politics; it is about generating a new vision of democracy and a radical project in which people can recognize themselves, a vision that connects with and speaks to the American public's desires, dreams, and hopes. (p. 19)

American higher education not only has a responsibility to leave learners transformed but also with the tools needed to create futures that might not happen without their leadership. That is, educators and students must move beyond social barriers and towards a social movement that embodies democracy, agency, and contribution from all walks of life. This can only be realized when educators and learners experience themselves differently, more powerfully. As educators we might consider challenging our taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, others, and the world. How might we reconsider the limits and barriers we place on ourselves and our students? How might we disrupt the social paradigms that assume racial, gender, and economic hierarchies? As Jenlink and Jenlink (2012) write:

> A fundamental concern for social justice and democracy is at the heart of educational leaders' work in schools today…Importantly, a stance for social justice recognizes that passive leadership practices lead to the reproduction of the existing society with its inequities; historical and structural inequities

> in society, and through its educational systems, that disadvantage many while benefiting a few. Equally important, a social justice stance warrants the need for a critical, active role that challenges dominant social orders, and the need for a public pedagogy that works to effect the transformation and the realization of a just, democratic society. (p. 2)

Perhaps we might reconsider the sort of learning experiences we are creating that reproduce such dynamics in the classroom. Part of achieving this is fostering learning experiences that empower students to discover things for themselves. We might then find value in the unique and individual experiences of our students and validate those experiences as valuable contributions to the world. In doing so, we empower our students to consider themselves beyond the "way they wound up" and experience themselves as contributors to the creation of futures for society. As noted by Tomas and Levine (2011):

> Every citizen has a voice in the management of the community. The progress, and even the safety, of a democratic community depend in part upon the intelligence of the citizens, and by thus we cannot mean the intelligence of some citizen, but the combined intelligence of all. (p. 154)

What is critical here is that "every citizen" has a voice in the development of a democratic society, especially those who have been traditionally underrepresented. All students, including women, people of color, the underprivileged, and the underrepresented, warrant opportunities to see themselves beyond the way they have been defined by society and self. This requires the creation of new and empowering contexts that offer possibilities for other ways of being in the world.

As educators, how can we empower our students to transform and expand their opportunity for other possible ways of being and action? It is important that we invite our students to be active participants in learning and social change while celebrating their unique contributions to the world despite whatever conditions they are encountering. As educators, we must also rethink the power structures created in the classrooms. As educators, are we willing to allow ourselves to be the student and the student to become the educator at any point in the classroom? Doing so creates a spirit of investment and collaboration that calls for everyone to be accountable for the learning and success of each other. Certainly this requires vulnerability and openness on the part of both educator and student. Sharing experiences creates a space of humanity and connectivity. We are then able to see ourselves and our students as a part of the greater fabric of life. We become accountable for each other and work together for the greater good. As such, one also cannot underestimate the value of authentic listening in the classroom.

It is also important that we consider the listening we have for our students. That is, it is essential that we create a space where their aspirations are heard and celebrated. In doing so, we also invite them to be a listener for themselves in the way they language their beliefs about themselves and the world. As Souba (2011) notes:

> This idea that reality is constituted in language is core to an ontological approach to leadership. Language reframes our observing, sense-making, and feelings so we can be a different kind of leader. When we change our thinking and speaking, a different reality becomes available to us. Shifts in our mental maps generate new possibilities for desires, actions and outcomes not previously accessible. The distinctions that we share with one another, with the intent of achieving mutual understanding, are those that occur in language. This…is the foundation for connectivity, collaboration, and alignment. (p. 8)

There is an internal dialogue and external language that proves essential if individuals are to experience themselves differently. Critical reflection is essential to this internal dialogue. Additionally, this dialogue is best navigated through the sharing of such with others who can challenge, support, and inspire us to be our best selves. As educators, it is important that we take the time to authentically listen to the concerns of our students and thus challenge them to self-reflect and consider their internal dialogue. Imagine creating a space where students can share the challenges, struggles, and successes through their self-reflection with others who are a supportive listener for them. And as they become more aware of their humanity, it is essential that we invite them to celebrate it as a contribution to the world.

Imagine a system of education that invites educators and students to be contributors that engage in democratic practices within and beyond the classroom despite whatever conditions they are facing. That is, despite social conditions and the personal narratives we assign to ourselves as a result, we still powerfully engage with the world. Souba (2011) writes: "While we cannot do much about what we know, we can alter the way we know it. We have the freedom to alter the way we distinguish the situations that occur in our lives; we can shift the context" (p. 8).

Essentially, when people have a commitment bigger than themselves, they become connected to people in a different way. When individuals continuously make themselves available to the possibilities of creating futures that require their leadership, they become keenly aware of the world around them and can choose a life of freedom without limits. Individuals might then see themselves as part of the world around them rather than a person who happens to simply exist in the world. The result is a web of connectivity that invites all voices to the table in the creation of futures for society. Imagine if education occurred to us as communities of learning, discovery, sharing and action. This is what an ontological and phenomenological approach to learning can create and how such an approach can reform American education.

Having established the need to rethink the way we approach education we might now consider how to prepare people for the kind of learning that ontological inquiry requires. Those who are engaged in ontological work are cognizant that we have a commitment larger than what the current educational structure provides. We are grappling with how to engage our colleagues in this work although many are still operating from a different paradigm. Certainly, the reformation of American higher

education will not happen overnight. Much like the process of transformation, it will require on-going critical reflection, discovery, and action from all those involved. As educators we are called to consider new pedagogical practices that invite our students to experience themselves as part of the future they want to create. This will require from both educators and students a commitment to a better future for themselves, others, and society. It will collectively require educators and students to critically think about who we are being in the world and what our contribution to it will be. It will require us as educators and students to align our present actions with what is required to create a future founded in democracy, inclusivity, access, agency, and the elimination of social inequalities.

We ought to invite our students, regardless of race, gender, SES, or ability, to create a future bigger than themselves; one where their being and action in the present is consistent with the future they want to create. As educators, we are also invited to engage in life-long discovery, on-going inquiry, and to dance with the challenges and successes that come with on-going critical reflection and discourse. As educators, we must think critically about the ways we are informing educational practices that foster the development of future leaders who can democratize education in the classroom and thus help to inform the creation of a better future for our society.

QUESTIONS

- As an educational practitioner, who am I assuming my/our students to be? And, how does my practice of teaching and leadership cultivate and/or stifle learning that links identity development, critical thinking, and social justice?
- What is my identity as an educational practitioner? How did this identity form? Have the ways in which I have "defined" my identity limited me as an educator?
- What social paradigms (both consciously and subconsciously) influence my identity of self and students?
- How do I use my practice to deconstruct paradigms of thought to promote equity in teaching and learning?
- How does or can this ontological stance influence axiological and epistemological stances for educational practitioners in the classroom?

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Uchenna Baker
Elon University

REFLECTION

Hello Uchenna,

There is indeed a great need to empower students to become more critical in their thinking, more aware of their ever changing identity, and how they can become more engaged in a world crying for the eradication of discriminatory acts. The ontological model as presented holds great promise as a pedagogical tool, especially for educators.

Incorporating deeper notions of cause and effect into this process, from social, political, economic, and educational perspectives, can help turn our world inside-out. You tell the reader, "Essentially, when people have a commitment bigger than themselves, they become connected to people in a different way." I believe this to be a very powerful statement of fact. This kind of commitment reminds me of dialogue from one of the Star Trek movies that basically told us the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, and the one. This statement also supports Carl Glickman's focus on developing a "cause beyond self" within the culture of an organization.

I believe that we must continue to find ways for our future generations to save this world by taking their blinders off and broadening the lens from which they see the world, their place within it, and their commitment to it. It is indeed my hope that our readers will embrace this ontological model, as they read each of the following essays, and find ways to utilize this process as they reflect and prepare to act as we work to eradicate discriminatory acts across this world.

– CT