

Collective Leadership: Practice, Theory, and Praxis

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My role as a faculty member has given me an entry into the community area as a public educator. I come from a working-class community and am unequivocally committed to understanding the issues that have an impact on people, families, institutions, and communities. I have worked to stay grounded within this philosophy as I conduct research, as I teach, and as I serve the university and community that nourish me. Though this informs my identity, my values and practices are guided by the need to cross boundaries—generations, racial groups, and geographic places. Crossing boundaries as a mode of work affords the opportunity to experience new knowledge, explore innovative responses to old issues, and invite people who have lived on the margins of academia and education to engage in the process of their own development. This value and practice increases the energy in the classroom, the innovation in research, and the transformation in service. From a pragmatic perspective, it allows for integration of theory and practice. Ontologically, this is congruent with my way of knowing.

I'd like to share an example that demonstrates how I work to integrate research and service into the classroom. During my four years at Texas State University- San Marcos, there have been multiple examples that my students and I can highlight, but one event that best captures the integration and leadership in teaching, research, and service occurred on the evening of January 28, 2006.

I received a call that evening from Chris, a community member whose father my students and I had recently engaged in conducting a life history.

The caller said, “Dr. Guajardo, sorry for not getting back to you earlier. We have been busy with family business, but I did want to call and let you know that my father died today.”

“Chris, I am very sorry to hear this,” I said. “Please give my condolences to your mother and family. If there is anything I can do to help you and your family through this very difficult time, let me know.”

“Well, Dr. Guajardo,” he said, “We have been talking with our mother, and we do have a favor to ask.”

“Whatever you need, Chris,” I replied.

Chris said, “Dr. Guajardo, my mother, my family, and I would like to ask if you would consider delivering the eulogy at my father’s funeral?”

I took a long breath, thought deeply about what Chris was asking, and as soon as I gained my composure, responded: “It would be an honor to serve your family and father in this capacity. When can I visit with your family? I’ll need to do some research in preparation for the funeral.”

I met Chris Ramirez, Sr. and his family during the fall of 2005, when my students conducted an oral history with him for my Understanding Environments class. At the time, I was not aware that the senior Ramirez was ill. I knew he had taught at Southwest Texas State (Texas State’s former name) for 30 years and I was eager to learn from him. I offered my students guidance for a class project structured on the concept of conducting research in the local community and consulting class readings to make sense of the data collected. The students would then produce a digital story that would be shown in a public viewing. At semester’s end,

we invited all our community partners to share in a celebration of the students' work and our community partners' lives.

The delivery of the eulogy was a special event; seeing the glow and pride on the faces of the Ramirez widow, children, grandchildren, friends, and community gave me a satisfaction that few other academic experiences will ever produce. Indeed, this was as much a humanitarian act as anything. It is my opinion that this is what our craft should be responding to: humanitarian acts that will improve the human condition.

This story captures the essence of my work as an academic, teacher, and community builder. At the core of crossing boundaries is integration of the three core mandates that are put forth by the academy: teaching, research, and service. This integration can be effective and meaningful if it is done in an organic and well-organized manner. I have learned that integration of the three components helps students grow intellectually, emotionally, and as public people.

As a teacher, this approach forces me to be aware of the literature in multiple fields as well as current and local events. As a researcher, these types of experiences help me train students' skills in real-life settings. Knowing the craft of research is critical to students' leadership development, and seeing it come to life gives them an appreciation for the research process. This process also challenged my skills as a researcher. Having to research 72 years of a man's life, including 30 years of academic work, in 48 hours will test any researcher's skill set, but to then present it back to the people who knew him best at his funeral really raised the bar.

This experience also highlights my commitment to service, which is informed by research and is grounded in pedagogy connected to community building, change, and hope. In Ramirez's story, the family wished to honor their father, husband, and leader, and so they came

to a group of people, my students and me, who had asked him to share his story. This speaks to the power of story as research. Simultaneously, a counterstory is also cultivated and nurtured. Counterstory pushes me to decenter my reality and cross boundaries in my research, teaching, and service (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a, 2002b; Yosso, 2006). This concept creates a natural tension within me and in the classroom, tension that originates from having to contemplate the unknown. It gives me energy, but I understand that it creates anxiety in many of my students and community partners. This is something I must always be aware of, and I am consistently trying to mitigate the stress it engenders. Working to create a safe space in the classroom is important because the spaces and boundaries we cross are geographic, as we traverse into neighborhoods many have never visited, explore literature that many have not read, and feel emotions many have not experienced. In short, the act of crossing boundaries is a physical, intellectual, emotional, and relational process.

Theory

This story does not need an analysis, but I will frame it with a theory of change model that places these values, the work, and the action within the framework of the change process. The process of human development, creating the conditions for optimal learning, and building community can transpire anywhere people come together. I have worked to create these conditions in schools, community organizations, institutions of higher education, and between groups that have been stressed by competing tensions. These exchanges are where the leadership question emerges, and the questions are at the core of the change process. In my work as a researcher, teacher, community builder, and leader, I find it is more important to have the right questions than the right answers. This is when learning is at its best. But learning does not happen in a vacuum; it is a social process. In my mind, effective leaders foster pedagogical conditions that

create change. The change process is a necessary outcome in this transaction. This change is guided by actors who are committed to the common good and are working to improve the human condition.

Actors with the specific skills, dispositions, and beliefs that nurture change guide the story. Integration of these skills with the spaces and conditions for change intersect at the space Freire (1970) called praxis. Praxis is the dynamic space where ideas, practice, theories, and people intersect. This is the area navigated by leadership. The role of teacher/facilitator or leader is to help all participants and the institution find a rhythm in which all participants can maximize the opportunity for participation and engagement. For these conditions to transpire, the facilitator must understand himself or herself and model a process for redistributing or negotiating the traditional power dynamics. This action is facilitated when the facilitator is transparent and understands his or her story. Understanding one's story is to begin to understand one's ontology.

In this specific situation, the story became a strategy for engagement and data collection and a tool for helping the facilitator and students ground ontological reality as private and public people. Knowing our story begins to create the space for theorizing the self, community, and research partners. Void of this knowledge, the experience becomes an intellectual venture and eludes the spirit of community building and change. This does not imply that one's ontology is stagnant; on the contrary, the ability to self-reflect facilitates dynamic self-analysis. This skill assists continuous development of individuals and teams as we co-construct the nature of our reality and interdependence. This interdependence then nurtures a spirit of collaboration, crossing boundaries, and public service to the university and community. I pride myself on being a steward and a good citizen for both my academic and community of practice. The story given

here begins to articulate a collective leadership process at a micro or local level, but I also work at connecting my micro and macro worlds.

During the last six years, a group of community advocates, researchers, and philanthropists have worked on constructing a theory of change model that is built on collective leadership (www.iel.org/pubs/klccframework.pdf). This theory of change model is not linear or prescriptive; it proposes a landscape to leadership and change process for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. The theory frames collective leadership as relational, fluid, and transformational. The framework is grounded in four stages: building trust, co-constructing purpose and a strategic plan, acting together, and deepening, sustaining, and making the work a way of life. On a grid, the stages are represented horizontally across the top and on a vertical axis are four elements: know your community, build a strong team, develop the individual and group, and make the change or action. This matrix captures a schema for individual work at the micro/personal and community levels for individual and teams. This theory of change model has proven effective in nurturing the change process in 12 communities across the country, and the work is growing.

Reflection

Integration of theory and practice is a necessary process for building strong leadership, vibrant ideas, and sustainable institutions. But to me, the most important element of this work takes place when the spirit of love and authentic care for people and communities is placed at the forefront of any agenda. My goal as an education and community leader has been to improve the human condition and maximize the opportunity for participation of citizens from the margins. The search for justice in this work is compromised if my actions violate the dignity of others, and this tension is many times difficult to balance when negotiating scarce resources or traditional

power situations. I do not claim that this goal is always accomplished, but it is a goal that has guided my leadership journey. This leadership journey is much more powerful and meaningful when traveled with others. The collective leadership model helps level and re- distribute power, because power is best when it is given away and shared. The collective leadership model creates the space for constant and continuous mentorship. Working for the common good and improving the human condition is a leadership act we cannot afford to neglect. Leadership is also an act we cannot perform alone. So let's invite a friend; our partners are waiting for us.

References

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