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Teachers as Guardians of “Good Work”

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Abstract

How students experience and prepare for a world of unrelenting technological advances and deep social change is something that educators can influence profoundly. Research suggests that there is an expansive constellation of instructional processes and practices that support and enable good work in academic environments. Good work evokes a sense in learners that they are self-educating to where their passions and interests lie. To sustain good work in instructional settings, learners require more autonomy over tasks (what they do), time (when they do it), technique (how they do it), and team (whom they do it with).

Introduction

How students experience and prepare for a world of unrelenting technological advances and deep social change is something that educators can influence profoundly. In an age of artificial intelligence, robots, drones, and self-driving cars, there is a resonant need to re-examine the nature of “good work” in instructional settings. Learners want to do good work in two ways: “They want intrinsically rewarding experiences, and they also want to make a contribution to society that fits their values” (Sethi and Stubbings 2019, 41). Relatedly, learners seek values-inspired instructional practices to *prepare* to achieve long, prosperous, and secure lives.

Good work encompasses the nature of the organization. Educational institutions operate as complex systems comprised of state standards, formal vision and mission statements, written policies and rules, and informal practices and behaviors. At a foundational level, students seek answers to a series of questions related to their well-being: Do learners’ values align with those of the school district? Do students embrace the instructional goals of the school district and understand how their individual and collective efforts contribute to the attainment of those goals? In the context and content of school events, is there an element of meaningful social purpose in daily instructional activities? Is the commitment to treat others as one wishes to be treated the primary ethical value in instructional settings? Does the working environment of

the classroom reflect the natural rhythm of collaboration based on mutual respect? Is there a free play of imagination, creativity, and autonomy embedded in instructional activities? Are educators prepared and committed to serving as guardians of “good work” in core-curricular courses?

The Purposes of this Paper

The purposes of this paper are threefold: To delineate a set of instructional processes and practices that create and enable “good work” in diverse academic settings. To demonstrate that creating a culture of good work in a contemporary classroom begins with the individual student and then proceeds to the class as a whole. To illustrate that values-based experiential learning draws upon the ability to engage the Self in the service of others: one’s integrity, ethical principles, character, knowledge, wisdom, temperament, words, and actions.

What is Good Work?

Research suggests that there is an expansive constellation of instructional practices that support and enable good work in academic environments, including:

- Intrinsically-rewarding learning experiences that mirror learners’ values and passions.
- A meaningful purpose in instructional activities in pursuit of something greater than oneself.
- Personalization of learning to inspire and enable adaptability.
- Lessons that nurture social resilience by recontextualizing failure.
- Instructional exercises that create respectful, productive connections with peers.
- The freedom to decide the pace at which and order in which learners complete their work.
- A climate of psychological safety that deepens learning and lessens academic stress and anxiety.
- Activities that promote sustainable engagement through dispositional expressions of GRIT---the engine of human accomplishment.
- Projects that make a contribution to society and create social impact.
- Collaborative roles in how work gets accomplished through goal-directed adaptive behavior---the core of intelligence.

Discussion

Learner engagement is synonymous with good work. Deep engagement involves students in their own learning through a alchemy of curiosity, meaningful challenges, working memory, and passion. Emotion scientists and pedagogical experts contend that engagement is a vital force in stimulating and sustaining student learning (Immordino-Yang 2016). Drawing on four decades of scientific research on human motivation, Pink (2009) argues that exceptional

educators provide students with a contextual sense of their intrinsic worth by creating instructional environments that engage three overarching human needs: *autonomy*, the freedom to make choices and shape one's future; *mastery*, the ability to learn and develop expertise; and *purpose*, the quest for meaning in one's life. While classroom choices may appear seemingly insignificant to educators, it is the perception of *autonomy* that ultimately matters to learners (Bowman 2011). Behavioral scientists contend that learners' default setting is to be autonomous and self-directed. In the classroom and the workplace, the first and foremost source of self-efficacy is through having a direct experience of *mastery* of a task or controlling an environment (Bandura 1997). In confronting the question, "Does my life have meaning?" one of the Western world's most influential theologians and philosophers, Thomas Aquinas, spoke these words three months before he died in 1274: "All that I have written seems like straw to me." Historically, the question of *meaning* and meaningful contributions has been embedded in *good work* in spiritual, academic and workplace settings, from pupils to plumbers to professors (Palmer 2018).

Harvard University professor Amy Edmondson (2018) coined the term psychological safety. Her research findings suggest that successful teams tend to have a higher sense of psychological safety. In a world that is no longer predictable and linear, a climate of psychological safety is an absolutely essential element in doing good work in academic environments. In a culture of psychological safety, teachers as guardians of good work make it safe for students to speak freely, to experience learning mistakes, and to recontextualize failure. In doing good work, missteps function as an opportunity to recontextualize failure (Edmondson). **Good work in academic settings involves setting challenges beyond students' current capabilities that encourage risk without unduly punishing failure, so that students experience the reassurance of resiliency.** This is precisely what scientists at 3M did with the Post-It Note: glue that initially failed to adhere became one of its greatest corporate successes. Mitigating fear in educational settings begins with modeling for students the importance of being open-minded, non-defensive, and intellectually curious in discussing potentially sensitive topics, including climate change, illegal immigration, and community-police relationships. In a culture of psychological safety, teachers as guardians of good work reassuringly invite challenges to their own views and beliefs and acknowledge and affirm constructive feedback. Teachers as guardians of good work create an aura of psychological safety through modeling the essential skill of inquiry: "What leads you to think so?" "Can you give me an example?" "What might we be missing?" "Who has a different perspective?" (Edmondson) Such questions signal to students that their voice is desired and that it is psychologically safe to offer a thoughtful response.

One of the most important responsibilities of teachers as guardians of good work is creating a work environment that engages learners by recognizing the benefits of diversity (Vickberg and Christfort 2019). Accommodating different learning styles in getting required work completed results in less stress and greater learner satisfaction. President Kennedy was a prime example

of one who learned and performed best through *reading*. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, nearly destroyed his presidency “by not knowing that he was a *listener*” (Drucker 2005). Though he did poorly in school, Winston Churchill sensed, early on, his impact as a first-class *writer*. Not surprisingly, many of the nation’s most prominent attorneys learn and perform best by *speaking*. Contemporary learning theory supports the belief that many individuals learn best by *doing*, while others learn best by *watching* (Myers and Vander Arc 2019). Still others perform optimally by creating knowledge and results *relationally*. Instructively, Drucker (2005, 104) cautions, “Do not try to change yourself; you are unlikely to succeed. But, work hard to improve the way that you perform.”

Whether in the classroom or the workplace, the need to be heard and respected is universal. Good work requires the ability to engage the Self in the service of others: one’s integrity, ethical principles, character, knowledge, wisdom, temperament, words, and actions (Hock 2000). Good work brings those values to life in instructional behaviors that create social impact. Good work enshrines the belief that the very purpose of education is social---the development of the community. When students work collaboratively on meaningful, challenging activities, knowledge creation functions as a social activity. In daily practice, good work mirrors the ideals, values, principles, and dispositions which address the needs of society.

Good Work: Engaging the Self in the Service of Others

Imagine a middle-school teacher beginning a social studies class with Andy Grammar’s (2016) new music video “A Call to Act against Homelessness.” Against the backdrop of his latest single, “Fresh Eyes,” the pop singer provided haircuts, clean clothes, meals, and kindness to intermittently homeless individuals seeking shelter on skid row at the Union Rescue Mission in Los Angeles (Bowman 2018). As guardians of good work, educators think and communicate in the language of those ideals which matter to human beings: Justice, truth, honesty, integrity, fairness, humility, community, respect, and service to others (Seidman 2007).

Residents who only moments earlier were viewed as vulnerable, marginalized, and invisible were suddenly seen with “Fresh Eyes.” For students viewing the moving video in a middle-school classroom, while immersed in the cascading lyrics in “Fresh Eyes,” the faces of those in the shelter compel a series of evocative questions: “Why are you looking at me differently?” “Why am I seeing you differently?” “Is it possible for me to see past the homelessness in my midst?” “Can I get to truly know someone beyond their simply being labeled as homeless?” “Did the make-up, clean clothes, haircut, and meals, together with assuming an authentic role in the music video, create a sense of purpose, meaning, and importance for the those living at the shelter?” (Bowman 2018)

The philosopher Martin Buber (1958) contends that in the ultimate sense it is relationship that educates. In academic environments, good work arises from relationships. In creating the

University of Minnesota's General College, MacLean (1962) framed the relational challenge historically: "We assumed that we could not really know what, how, or when to teach until we knew both whom we were teaching and the emerging world in which they were being taught" (7). To prepare students to connect and collaborate in an internetworked world, good work draws upon an alchemy of *sustainable* skills coupled with a renewed consciousness for relating to others (Bowman 2015). Specifically, learning "why the world wags and what wags it" is achieved through a robust set of complementary capabilities: connecting, speaking, listening, leading, and writing (White 1958, 186). In a volatile-uncertain-complex-ambiguous world, learning is no longer a solo act. When extraordinarily talented undergraduates arrive at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, they "rapidly discover that it is impossible to succeed solo" (Ancona and Gregersen 2018, 34). Success requires relating to individuals of relatively equal status and diverse backgrounds in an increasingly interconnected world (Seidman 2007).

In doing good work, learners seek a meaningful purpose in instructional activities. A social studies class, for example, might reflect upon President Kennedy's speech to a special joint session of Congress on May 25, 1961. In "Kennedy's Moon Vision," listeners across the nation came together speaking the same language, having a common consciousness, and pursuing a mission greater than any individual. Like Martin Luther King's iconic "I have a dream speech" on August 28, 1963, President Kennedy's address to Congress conveyed and symbolized a sense of meaning, purpose, and common identity to the nation (McChrystal, Eggers, and Mangone 2018). Inspiration elicits belief in the pursuit of goals greater than oneself. In practice, good work inspires and connects learners in rallying around an idea and promoting sustainable engagement through dispositional expressions of grit. Research suggests that grit is the engine of human accomplishment (Bowman 2017; Stoltz 2015).

One of the most inspirational gifts that teachers as guardians of good work can share with their students is the very heart of grit: Retain faith that you can prevail in the end, while still exercising the discipline required to confront the brutal facts in your environment. The eyes of the world were recently focused on the Tham Luang cave system in Thailand, near the border with Myanmar. The Wild Boars soccer team comprised of 12 boys and their coach, who had ventured into the caves about two weeks earlier, were trapped on a rock ledge deep inside. It was the monsoon season. Water was rising and oxygen levels were falling. Not all of the boys could swim. With time running out, "the most audacious, moving, complex, and successful rescue operations in history relied not on a single technology or hero but on the collaboration of many people, working together in a spontaneous network" (Hobsbawm 2018). In 10 days, the network that helped rescue the boys had swelled to 10,000 people from more than 20 nations. Networks that come together like this and use technology, communications, and collaboration in a timely manner rely on collective self-management and functioning

community. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) argue that because the instinct of community is everywhere in life, “only in relationship can individuals be fully themselves” (11). In academic environments, good work is a complex mosaic of relationships (Schein and Schein 2018).

Values-Driven Experiential Learning

Good work does not occur in a vacuum. Deepa Krishnan (2019), an entrepreneur, social worker, and educator in Mumbai, India, highlights the vital link between instructional activities that promote good work and course content. In her experiential learning courses, her students mentor schoolchildren in India’s slums in “yearlong journeys of discomfort and discovery” (2). The values-driven experiential learning classes provide students with the ability to go beyond a theoretical analysis of poverty to an immersion in the cauldron of everyday life in the slums. Going from being outsiders to insiders fosters learners’ empathetic understanding of the *other*. Krishnan argues that while empathy is innate among humans, it takes “an immersive real-life experience to bring it to the surface.”

Krishnan’s in-class group discussions begin by asking students to answer an evocative question: “Why is your mentee’s family poor?” Students are subsequently confronted with a series of popular misconceptions: Are the poor lazier than, say, those in your own family or community? Are your mentees less capable? Are there cultural or religious reasons why they are poor? Is being poor attributable to a lack of gender parity? Is being poor due to lack of ambition? Is it explained by a lack of interest in education? As students begin to draw and refine their conclusions, they dig deeper into the structural issues at play in poverty, including barriers to education, lack of private assets, and class and group discrimination. Krishnan (2019) contends that experiential learning is one of the most promising tools that educators can use, for example, in addressing poverty as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon “because the direct experience of adversity is powerfully transformative” (7).

Academic Culture: The Heartbeat of the Classroom

Are there cultural barriers that inhibit students’ ability to do good work in instructional settings? Are their ways that students think, feel, behave, and relate to each other in academic environments that undercut good work? While one cannot see it, touch it, or measure it, culture is what gets educators and students either excited or apprehensive about coming to school every day. In a word, an academic culture is “the nothing that is everything” (O’Toole 2014, 78).

The underlying theme of an academic culture is captured in the playfully dismissive expression: “That’s the way we do things around here.” An academic culture expresses the shared sensibility of one’s colleagues and students. It reflects the values, principles, habits, mind-sets, history, lore, and legends that influence how individuals behave organizationally. An academic culture is not an irrational set of beliefs but rather “is the embodiment of past beliefs and practices that have become institutionalized as a result of past success” (Shaw and Ronald

2012, 51). Individuals within an academic culture “share a tacit understanding of the way the world works, their place in it, the informal and formal dimensions of their workplace, and the value of their actions” (Katzenbach and Harshak 2011, 35). A school or academic department’s culture circumscribes deeply-embedded beliefs, attitudes, self-reinforcing behaviors, and mind-sets regarding how to relate to one’s colleagues and students, coupled with ingrained perceptions regarding the nature of professional success and preferred methods of getting work accomplished. Importantly, academic cultures are in a constant state of *becoming* as educators and students adapt to emergent challenges and opportunities while pursuing stronger interpersonal connections. Ultimately, an academic culture is “powerful because we all take our cues from people around us” (Kleiner 2011, 1).

Cultural transformation in classroom settings involves accepting things “exactly as they are and exactly as they are not” (Logan, King, and Fischer-Wright 2008, 128). Gaining cultural insight in instructional settings starts with a dialogue regarding learners’ emotions, behaviors, and deep-seated attitudes. Dialogue allows educators to see what truly motivates their students. In *The Critical Few*, Katzenbach, Anderson, and Thomas (2019) argue that the best way to hear the heartbeat of an organization is to tap into its authentic informal leaders. As informal leaders, students’ intuition regarding “how things get done around here” makes them invaluable allies in identifying the critical few behaviors that can be translated into concrete ways of doing good work. Neuropsychologists contend that “the key to learning is that it is a fundamentally emotional process” (Fabritius and Hagemann 2017, 186.) A handful of emotionally-resonant truths about the nature of good work in academic settings can unlock its greatest potential (Katzenbach, Anderson, and Thomas 2019).

In instructional settings, the most evocative four-word question that one can ask is: “What do you think?” Students’ responses often create a litany of insights that help to reveal who learners are experientially, where learners are going instructionally, and how educators and students connect relationally (Bowman 2019). A simple question such as “What inspires you in the classroom?” allows educators as formal leaders to become comfortable with potentially disquieting truths about current instructional practices. To capture the emotional energy that propels cultural transformations, educators must learn through intensive listening to be *vulnerable* to the cultural insights of students in diagnosing and understanding the existing culture. In narrowing down actionable, targeted steps and goals in promoting good work, both formal and informal leaders need to appreciate that it is essential to work with, rather than against, the grain of how students *already* think, feel, behave, and work together. The intent is to identify cultural elements that can potentially cause friction or resistance to new ways of doing good work. Educators cannot realistically set and impose cultural values in academic settings. Cultural values are discovered contextually and organically by individual students, not imposed on a class. Creating a culture of good work in a contemporary classroom begins with

the individual student and then proceeds to the class as a whole. Students as informal leaders motivate and inspire others by what they do and how they do it (Katzenbach, Anderson, and Thomas 2019).

Educational philosopher John Dewey (1916) argues that “the object and reward of learning is the continued capacity for growth” (117). Good work in academic environments mirrors a wondrous constellation of instructional practices that have historically “enabled individuals to continue their education” (Dewey 1916, 117). Students in Dewey’s Laboratory School at the University of Chicago lived and learned in a student-centered, highly social context in which students were engaged in a “constant reorganizing and restructuring of experiences” that led to a definite goal. By developing a perceptive understanding of their students’ aspirations and values, educators can inspire and enable goal-directed adaptive behavior that is authentic and autonomous. In the everydayness of life in academic environments, adaptability is synonymous with good work.

In the *Critical Few*, Katzenbach, Anderson, and Thomas (2019) argue that the most reliable method for fostering cultural transformation in contemporary settings is to selectively identify a critical few *behaviors*, essentially because formal and informal leaders can change only three to five key instructional behaviors at a time. It is hard to overstate that point in identifying instructional processes and practices that create and enable good work in diverse academic environments.

Conclusion

Good work elicits and supports the attributes and skills that prepare and allow students to be innately human---to satisfy an innate need for creative, self-directed, satisfying work. Good work evokes a sense in learners that they are self-educating to where their interests and passions lie. In speaking to a group of school children, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos remarked: “We all have passions. You don’t get to choose them; they pick you. But you have to be alert to them” (Davenport 2018). In a holistic sense, good work invites creative collaboration, critical thinking skills, experiential learning, and the ability to fail fast and adapt through feedback (Dewey 1916; Bowman 2011; Edmondson 2018). Feedback is the means by which organisms across a variety of life-forms and time periods have adapted to survive. Feedback resides at the heart of both good work and vibrant learning organizations. It is “no coincidence that the words *organism* and *organization* share a common Latin root” (Rock, Jones, and Weller, 22). Pink (2009) frames the essence of good work succinctly: To sustain good work in instructional settings, learners require more autonomy over tasks (what they do), time (when they do it), technique (how they do it), and team (whom they do it with). Finally, teachers as guardians of good work gently remind students of *why* what they do in academic environments matters to each other and to the world (Palmer 2018). **In daily practice, the why creates the energy that catalyzes deep learning by defining a sense of meaning, purpose, and community. Sociality lies at the heart of good work. Students crave community and form learning communities naturally.**

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