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COVID-19: An Illuminating Instructional Lens

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Abstract

Every crisis evolves over an arc of time, through stages of “what was,” “what is,” and “what will be.” The COVID-19 pandemic provides an illuminating instructional lens for educators and students to view, examine, and understand the dimensions and function of culture, governance, and leadership in enhancing learners’ capacity to self-govern during a crisis around common values: Truth, transparency, trust, fairness, humility, and service to others. In crises, culture answers three pivotal questions: How does information flow? How are decisions made? How is power wielded?

The Purposes of This Paper

The purposes of this paper are twofold:

- To view, examine, and understand the dimensions and *function* of culture, governance, and leadership in enhancing learners’ capacity for collective action in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To provide illustrative instructional activities to contextualize learners’ understanding of COVID-19’s impact on culture, governance, and leadership in sustaining social coherence.

Introduction

Epistemologist Gregory Bateson (1979) argues that a difference is a difference that makes a difference. There is a significant difference, for example, between studying what a cell is, and studying how a cell functions. Studying what a cell is involves memorizing facts about membranes, nuclei, ectoplasm, and endoplasm. Understanding how a cell functions involves *intellectual curiosity* in discovering the mysterious dance of protein formation, how the cell maintains the integrity of its cell wall, and how the cell rebuilds itself in continually interacting with its environment (Senge 1999; Hennessy 2018). In a social studies class, studying the concepts of culture, governance, and leadership frequently involves memorizing definitions, indentifying the distinguishing characteristics of each concept, and reviewing relevant historical documents. Understanding how culture, governance, and leadership *function* in the midst of a pandemic is a difference that could truly “make a difference” in whether or not students participate in rebuilding a national and global community wounded by a highly transmissible pathogen. The school is society’s agent for preparing students to participate in and benefit fully in a democratic way of life. In teaching and learning, knowledge is not simply the accumulation of information. Knowledge is the capacity for effective action. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an illuminating instructional lens for educators and students to view, examine, and understand the dimensions and *function* of culture,

governance, and leadership in enhancing learners' capacity for collective action in the depths of an infectious humanitarian crisis.

Culture, Governance, and Leadership

Culture resides at the synapses where people interact. It reflects the values, principles, habits, mind-sets, history, lore, and legends that influence how individuals behave (Bowman 2014). While one cannot see it, touch it, or measure it, culture is what gets colleagues and students either excited or apprehensive about coming to campus every day. The underlying theme of an academic culture is captured in the playfully dismissive expression: "That's the way we do things around here." In a prolonged infectious crisis, culture and character are unmasked contextually in coping with evolving ambiguities, uncertainties, and anxieties.

The verb "govern" derives from the Greek *kubernan* "to steer a ship." Political leaders cannot "steer a ship" in a crisis without an implicit or explicit sense of purpose and direction, such as adopting mitigation strategies during a pandemic. In its Latin form, *gubernare*, "govern" means to guide or rule. A system of *governance* is essentially a code of conduct designed to anticipate, prescribe, and proscribe certain behaviors, often through a set of rules such as a state's guidelines on social distancing (Seidman 2007). The enduring COVID-19 crisis has revealed contrasting operational definitions of governance at the state level: "The imposition of one group's will on another" versus "the process of continually orienting and adjusting" to evolving scientific data (Senge 1999, 366).

Leadership is a *process* in enabling and sustaining significant change. In crises, leadership is personal. It cannot be confined (Goffee and Jones 2006). Crises require leaders to demonstrate confidence when they feel most vulnerable and maintain vision for others when their line of sight is obscured (Anderson 2018). Taking risks in the midst of crises in pursuit of a transcendent purpose is the price and prize of leadership. Vision, mission, and collaborative relationships reside at the very heart of a deep exploration of what is possible in life. Shortly after the first powered flight by the Wright brothers on December 17, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, "Orville Wright told the curious public that man would *never* be able to build an airplane that would be capable of carrying more than two people" (Sheridan 2019, 50). The essence of leadership in a crisis is to see what is possible and to inspire people to attain it together (Hunt 1999). In *Living, Learning, and Leading*, Gardner (2003) frames the role of intellectual curiosity and leadership in diminishing the shadow of COVID-19. Pointedly, he argues that collectively citizens are faced with a series of great opportunities---brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems.

Four Basic Types of Group Culture

Seidman (2007) posits that there are four basic types of group culture: anarchy and lawlessness, blind obedience, informed acquiescence, and values-based self-governance. Briefly, the dimensions of each of the four basic types of group culture were distinctly observable across the nation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the city, state, and national level. Ironically, a number of the four basic types of group culture were acting separately and simultaneously within a single governmental entity throughout the crisis.

In the early stages of the coronavirus, for example, college spring breakers on the beaches in Florida seemingly indulged *anarchic* impulses implying that "social distancing rules do not apply to me." Moreover, at a lake in Texas, a law enforcement officer who was engaged in social distancing enforcement was pushed into a lake by young adult swimmers. In a state of lawlessness, everyone acts in their own self-interest with little regard for the group dynamic. In later stages of the infectious virus, the Mayor of New York city coerced residents to comply through *blind obedience* to the city's social distancing guidelines by demanding that residents "snitch" on their neighbors who violated social distancing orders. To achieve their individual goals during a crisis, people often do basically what they are told to do in cities like New York or face harsh consequences, including being arrested and fined. In

Minnesota, the governor embraced a policy of *informed acquiescence* in urging residents of North Dakota not to travel to their summer cabins in the land of 10,000 lakes to protect the health and safety of all citizens. Informed acquiescence cultures are rules-based, treating people as rational agents. Individuals wishing to participate in the culture and natural wonder of a neighboring state, for example, learn the rules and abide by them to produce desired results.

At the federal level, the Coronavirus Task Force chaired by Vice-President Pence communicated a series of guidelines anchored in both scientific data and core values: safety, personal responsibility, transparency, fairness, trust, and self-policing. The Task Force's guidelines reflected the belief that in a *self-governing culture* the role of everyone is to lead and be a leader to ensure the well-being of others. In a *self-governing culture*, values speak to one's higher self. Thus, to betray the core values of safety and personal responsibility embedded in the Task Force's Guidelines is to ultimately betray the self.

Culture, Governance, and Leadership: Three Pivotal Questions

In organizational life, culture answers three pivotal questions: How does information flow? How are decisions made? How is power wielded? (Seidman 2007)

How does information flow? Every crisis evolves over an arc of time, through stages of “what was,” “what is,” and “what will be” (McNulty 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved, it served as an abrupt reminder that “early in a crisis, leaders must understand that the information available to them may not be entirely accurate or complete---and they must make decisions with potentially profound consequences anyway” (Anderson 2018, 52). Just as art is remarkable precisely because it doesn't force people to derive a particular meaning, evocative questions leave learners free to learn for themselves in an environment that is intensely contextual. In a class discussion related to the flow of information during a pandemic, for example, educators might pose a series of probing questions including: Is there evidence that the World Health Organization initially withheld or suppressed information regarding the pandemic threat posed by the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China? Did a series of hypothesized global and national models predicting extremely high levels of disease and death from the coronavirus provide credible information and trustworthy guidance for citizens and policy leaders? Did the daily White House National Task Force press briefings provide information that was germane, transparent, and trustworthy? Did the information provided in regular press briefings by the nation's governors inspire higher conduct while simultaneously discouraging unwanted behavior, such as people participating in large social gatherings?

How are decisions made? The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the enduring tension involving the decision-rights inherent in a federal system of government. The Tenth Amendment essentially says that any power that is not given to the federal government is given to the people or the states. With respect to the production of urgently-needed ventilators for states like New York, for example, the federal government invoked the Defense Production Act to ensure that every state received their critically-needed ventilators. Initially, the President asserted, however, that it was each state's responsibility to obtain items such as personal protection gear and diagnostic testing supplies. While the White House Coronavirus Task Force issued mitigation guidelines for the whole nation, the states exercised the power, for example, to close schools and non-essential businesses. In opposition to Phase One of the National Task Force guidelines, the Governor of Georgia, for example, opted to open his state for business, including tattoo parlors and barber shops. Playfully, one political leader exclaimed, “If you are not confused, you don't know what is going on.”

In his 1963 *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King (1963) pinpointed the essential first step in crisis decision-making as one of “dramatizing the present situation” so that people could see the current reality. The crucible of COVID-19 dramatically revealed the social, moral, economic, and legal

complexities of life in the shadows of death. What became piercingly clear in several states, for example, is that “rules change behavior” and that “power over rules is real power” (Meadows 1997, 78). To understand the deepest malfunctions in systems of governance, “pay attention to the rules and to who has power over them” (Meadows, 78). The Governor of California dramatized his power over rules with a novelistic flair by posting a list of approved outdoor activities, including badminton, BMX, car-washing, tree climbing, gardening, and *watching the sunrises and sunsets*.

How is power wielded?

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the governors of several states wielded their formal authority to shut down schools, close public parks and beaches, order the closure of non-essential businesses, and declare a state of emergency. In Elizabeth, New Jersey, drones were used to patrol neighborhoods to enforce the governor’s social distancing policies. When asked in a live television interview if his policies impinged upon the Bill of Rights, one governor remarked: “That is above my pay grade.” In New Mexico, the governor invoked the state’s Riot Control Act to seal off roads in an out of the city of Gallup to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. In Michigan the governor prohibited citizens from traveling to their personal cabins in the north and from purchasing grass seed while in a store buying other essentials. Contemporaneous news accounts also reported that both silent and public defiance increased during the duration of multiple states’ mitigation efforts. Several thousand cars, for example, circled the state capitol in Michigan to protest the governor’s actions while dozens of other individuals entered the state capitol building while legally carrying guns. Moreover, faith leaders in Minnesota sued the state alleging that the governor’s executive orders abridged citizens’ rights under the U. S. Constitution.

Whether or not citizens’ concerns and actions were defensible or indefensible, *positional* authority characteristically lacks the ability to inspire or enlist people in a common cause. When well-intentioned political leaders demand acquiescence based on an expressed concern for “public safety,” for example, there tends to be a grudging willingness to go along with that order, because fear is a real contagion during an infectious virus outbreak. Eventually, as evidenced in the numerous state protests, willing acquiescence turned into grudging acquiescence, followed by subtle undermining, and eventually open defiance, including the young mother in Dallas, Texas, who refused to apologize to the court for opening her beauty salon in opposition to city guidelines to “earn money to feed her kids.” The judge sentenced her to seven days in jail, without bail, only to have the sentence vacated by the Texas Supreme Court. The ruling by Texas’ highest judicial body underscores the belief that empathetic leaders are expected to manifest genuine concern for those affected by a crisis and to take steps to alleviate suffering (McNulty 2020).

COVID-19: Instructional Implications

In remote teaching and learning settings, culture answers the same three foundational questions: How does information flow? How are decisions made? How is power wielded?

How does information flow? When learners encounter a datum from any source, they instantaneously interpret it as either “noise” to be ignored and discarded or as information relevant to the future they are trying to create. Remote teaching and learning during the pandemic have redefined “noise” for both students and educators alike. An exasperated secondary school educator framed the issue: “What I’m learning from students is that their whole families are sometimes coming to class with them, and that is a challenge when they have two or three younger siblings in the house. You no longer have a secluded space to teach or learn.”

How are decisions made? Across the educational landscape, the coronavirus pandemic challenges the adaptation capacity of teachers and students as the structures that have traditionally kept students focused tend to fade away. As many schools and universities shut down in-person instruction and transitioned to teaching remotely, there was an emergent realization that some assignments were no longer possible, that

some expectations were no longer reasonable, and that some instructional objectives were no longer attainable. Instructional decision-making in the COVID-19 era is contextual. The skill set for both educators and students is captured resonantly in President Theodore Roosevelt's enjoiner: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

How is power wielded? In the COVID-19 era of remote teaching and learning, power is occasionally revealed in the magisterial voice of a disembodied attendance officer: "This is South High School calling. Your student is required to check in remotely with her instructor at least three times a week for each of her classes. Our records indicate that your student failed to check in twice in the past week in two of her classes." For many students and parents, the deeply supportive role of educators has been replaced with uncertainty at best and existential dread at worst.

COVID-19: Illustrative Instructional Activities

The illustrative instructional activities below are intended to contextualize learners' understanding of COVID-19's impact on culture, governance, and leadership. Deeper learning occurs over time and in real life contexts (Mehta and Fine 2019). The first rule of deeper learning is that learners learn best what they want to learn. That is, the teacher appears when the student is ready. Relatedly, learning that endures reflects an enhanced capacity for effective action in settings that matter to the learner (Senge 1999). In confronting a global pandemic, learning is doing; doing is learning.

- Assign a research paper addressing one or more of the existential themes in Albert Camus' *The Plague*: What truly matters in life in the shadow of death cast by a pandemic? What do we owe one another? How durable are our values? What is decency? What is heroism?
- Throughout the pandemic, medical centers across the nation displayed signs that read, "Heroes Work Here." Media reports featured medical practitioners wearing scrubs, gloves, and goggles in hospital emergency rooms, facing a virus without a cure and risking their own lives by simply walking into work. In a remote interview with one or more of these front-line workers, ask: "What was the powerful motivating force that explains why you chose to do what you did?" Was it an intrinsic feeling of pride in making a critical contribution to your community? Was it pride in the reputation and legacy of your institution in serving others in need? Was it perhaps the money that you needed to feed your family? (Katzenbach 2003)
- In *Tyranny of Metrics*, historian Jerry Muller (2018) argues that our obsession with metrics in the midst of crises threatens the quality of our daily lives and the performance of our institutions, including schools, hospitals, governments, and the military. The author argues that crises such as COVID-19 require the ability to expose oneself to the scientific facts without being suffocated by them. During a crisis, does authentic leadership demand a creative talent? Is leadership a creative function that requires a continuing act of imagination that saves both lives and livelihoods? Is the intuitive role of a political leader one of imagining other people's lives and other versions of reality and how both the metrics and other versions of reality might fit together?
- In his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi (1993) observed that experimentation is how we learn and that a lot of experiments fail. COVID-19 has reminded us that if we live our lives experimenting, our failures will often be personal and tragic. Yet scientists tell us that we often learn more from experiments that fail than from those that succeed. What were some of the well-intentioned policies and practices adopted by political leaders, such as those involving long-term care facilities, that demonstrably failed? As a society, what did we learn from those failures?
- Remotely, create a school-wide town-hall meeting involving political leaders and governmental officials addressing three key issues: (1) Who has the power to decide what are essential and non-essential activities in closing down businesses and civic events? (2) In developing a state or city's re-opening policies, what risks are *reasonable* in balancing concerns about citizens' lives and their livelihood? (3) Do governmental surveillance programs, such as using drones or cell phone

apps to track citizens' movements, violate the expectations of privacy embedded in the U. S. Constitution?

- Invite students to create contrasting video presentations of simulated daily TV newscasts featuring COVID-19 information and events from alternately unbiased and biased points of view, with a follow-up critique from class members. During an emergency, is it absolutely essential that media information be authoritative, transparent, and trustworthy?
- Introduce the discipline of the four-sentence rule to highlight the need for students to need to know when to speak, when to be silent, and when to listen in a *dialogic setting* (Kohlrieser 2006). In a psychologically safe environment, each student in a class discussion is invited to speak in four sentences or fewer on culturally sensitive topics such as the controversial role of the police in enforcing social distancing and/or arresting citizens for not wearing a face covering (Edmondson 2018).
- During the COVID-19 crisis, the overarching themes involved the issues of authority and justice. In Illinois, the governor's lock-down rules stated that while boats can be used for recreational purposes, only two people can be in a boat at the same time, but not three persons. In a class discussion, pose these questions: Are restrictions such as only two persons in a boat at the same time based on science? In declaring lock-down policies, is a governor's authority absolute? During a pandemic, is any leader's authority absolute? Relatedly, does America still have a Constitution in the midst of a pandemic?
- In public comments regarding coronavirus restrictions in his state, the Governor of Texas argued that no one should forfeit their liberty and be sent to jail for not wearing a mask. Should the application of leadership tactics during a pandemic be "intensely contextual and always dependent upon particular circumstances that change from moment to moment and from place to place" versus a checklist with universal applicability across a state or nation? (McChrystal, Eggers, and Mangone 2019, 23)
- In peer groups, invite students to generate compelling examples of parents and educators helping students to process the emotional aspects of the coronavirus crisis including the attending social isolation that students were living through. Specifically, how important is socialization in the daily lives of students in academic environments?

Discussion

The illustrative COVID-19 instructional activities above mirror a mosaic of deeper-learning principles and practices involving analytical, critical, and creative thinking. In the everydayness of instructional events, deeper learning:

- Connects students' learning to who they are and to who they seek to become (Handy 2019).
- Creates an enhanced capacity for effective action in settings that matter to learners (Senge 1999).
- Highlights a fundamentally emotional process, essentially because learners think deeply about things that they *care* about (Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2016; Fabritius and Hagemann 2017).
- Involves real-world activities that have a distinctive social purpose and allow learners to collaborate in teams and groups to achieve a shared goal (Mehta and Fine 2019).
- Supports students in thinking and acting in new ways in confronting complex, conflictive issues without creating defensiveness (Senge 1999; Edmondson 2018).
- Inspires students to develop a spirit of intellectual curiosity (Hennessy 2018).
- Connects students by a common sense of mindfulness, purpose, and core values in pursuit of a clear view of reality (McChrystal, Eggers, and Mangone 2019; Wheatley 2013).

- Involves intrinsically rewarding experiences that allow learners to make a contribution to society that fits their values (Schoenberger 2019; Sethi and Stubbings 2019).
- Underscores the fact that deeper learning is not a solo act for either students or educators but rather a portfolio of ever-deepening relationships to build shared understanding and to coordinate effective action (Wheatley 2017).
- Occurs when students embrace challenges by trying to produce something consequential, when they see purpose in what they are doing, when they have a choice involving what they are doing, when they have constructive feedback on their work, and when they are part of a community that not only supports them but also holds them to high standards (Pink 2009; Mehta and Fine 2019)

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a disquieting impact on the nation’s physical, emotional, economic, and educational well-being. For decades, the traditional school day has been a metronome in the rhythm of learners’ lives. In an era of remote teaching and learning, however, the COVID-19 pandemic invites a reexamination of both institutional and instructional *purpose*. At the institutional level, the primary purpose of education is the development of society (Gopalakrishnan 2019). Historically, the school has been society’s agent for preparing students to participate in and benefit fully in a democratic way of life. At the instructional level, Dewey (1916) argues that the “aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education and the object and reward of learning is the continued capacity for growth” (117). Levine (1978) expands Dewey’s statement of the aim of education: “To set free and to develop the capabilities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class, or economic status” (257). Perceptively, Mason (1975) argues that the learner’s emotional and behavioral changes and development must take place and be practiced in the *context* of the individual’s surroundings and social environment.

Today, the COVID-19 crisis has generated a highly social context involving a constant reorganizing and reconstructing of learners’ experiences grounded in the belief that common values such as transparency, truth, fairness, justice, integrity, and empathy are integral threads in the fabric of culture, governance, and leadership. Probing and analyzing the interplay of culture, governance, and leadership amid a crisis nurtures the inquiry, reflection, and understanding essential to preparing students to participate in reweaving the fabric of a damaged human community (Palmer 2018). Poetically, the world unravels always, and it must be rewoven again and again to preserve the fabric of social coherence.

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