Chapter 4

Smart People Learning:
Self-Knowledge that Disrupts Practice in Meaningful Ways

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights instructional practices informed by an Interactive Learning Model (Johnston & Dainton, 1996) that fosters retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and heightens reflective practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Schon, 1987). This disruptive pedagogy reveals the symbiotic nature of theory and practice and teaches aspiring and practicing leaders that effective leadership is all about learning.

INTRODUCTION

Today, learning has a central role in conversations and research about quality leadership of organizations (Collinson & Cook, 2007; Crispeels, 2004; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). In fact, Silverburg and Kottkamp (2006), in the premier issue of the Journal of Research on Leadership Education, argued that an essential skill for today’s leaders was “behaving as learners”. This view has also been fostered by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) under the auspices of the Collaborative Leadership Learning project. The intent of the project is to engage Collaborative Leadership Learning Groups (CLLG) in collective learning that eventually leads to discussions about the actual experience of engaging in collective learning, an example of reflection on action. According to James, Mann, & Creasy (2007), the learning “design implicitly
and explicitly parallels the elements of distributive leadership that top leaders are required to address in their own organizations” (p. 91) as they lead change efforts.

The CLLG project is one of very few examples of instructional approaches to collective leadership that engage students in sensemaking activities focused on learning. This chapter highlights pedagogical practices that are grounded in similar perspectives, practices that enlist the symbiotic nature of theory and practice to foster disruption that enhances collective learning. In this case, the instructional approaches connect to Weick’s notions of sensemaking (1995), Johnston’s Interactive Learning Model (1996), and Mezirow’s adult learning theories (2000; 2000a). Thus far, these classroom practices heighten reflective practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Schon, 1987) and foster more sophisticated sensemaking. A decade of findings from action research (Rusch & Horsford, 2008; Rusch, 2005; 2004, 2004a) indicate that a process of retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995), coupled with knowledge about individual learning processes and skills of reflective discourse, fosters qualitatively different responses and in some cases, deep and transformative insights into beliefs and actions of educators who want to be viewed as change agents.

BACKGROUND

My professional life has been devoted to learning. Early stages of my career were dedicated to helping children learn about long division, the difference between latitude and longitude, and important facts like what three U. S. rivers meet in Pittsburgh! As I pursued a Ph.D, my most thrilling discovery was that academics actually were paid to engage in learning. During both stages of my career, I truly believed a teacher’s role was to share everything I had learned and I worked hard to present all my knowledge in creative, provocative, and disruptive ways. I have fond memories of a 4th grade lesson on giving directions that led to total class disruption when I put a large glob of peanut butter on my nose because I rigidly followed student instructions for making a peanut butter sandwich! Once I became a university professor, I gained a reputation for disruptive assignments, the kind that invited student-designed approaches or sketched, rather than written products; most of my assignments lacked rigid instructions and encouraged student inventions. My all-time favorite assignment provided small groups of doctoral students with garbage bags filled with identical assortments of children’s outdoor game objects (e.g. balls, hula hoops, bats, frisbees) followed by instructions to invent a game that they could teach to the other groups the next day. The planning process, and the field event that followed, became a yearlong textbook on organizational development, team building, and group dynamics. The point of this brief recap of my teaching career is that there came a very disruptive moment when I realized, much to my dismay, that my teaching did not always lead to learning, that in fact, my creative approaches to sharing all I had learned actually inhibited learning for some of my students. In other words, my versions of disruption did not support the reflective outcomes I wanted for many of my students. The outcomes of my own reflections indicated I had to learn new approaches that fostered learning rather than just continuing to share my knowledge. My own learning, detailed in the sections that follow, was guided by an interesting symbiosis of theory and practice.

SENSEMAKING

Karl Weick (1969), in his seminal treatise on *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, highlighted the critical importance of *affect* in-group functions. In the case of problem solving or decision-making,