Humility in the classroom: On questioning the *Sage on the Stage* Approach

Abstract: Humility manifests in a recognition of self-limits. While scholars have demonstrated the importance of humility for servant leadership and employee empowerment, and have linked humility to job performance in care-oriented roles, little work has explored the role of humility in the classroom to encourage student learning. While the traditional "sage on the stage" approach may discourage humility in the classroom by pinning student learning on the expertise of the lecturer, experiential approaches may require a humble facilitator as these approaches place the student's experience at the center of learning. In this roundtable discussion, participants will explore the benefits and limitations of humility in the classroom and will share their experiences with overcoming barriers to displaying humility.

Introduction

> *"We are whiplashed between an arrogant overestimation of ourselves and a servile underestimation of ourselves, but the outcome is always the same – a distortion of the humble, yet exalted reality of the human self, a paradoxical pearl of great price. I once heard this Hasidic take "we need a coat with two pockets. In one pocket there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us who we are." Knowing, teaching, and learning under the grace of great things will come from teachers who own such a coat and who wear it to class every day" (Palmer, 2017, p. 110).*

The coat that Palmer espouses we, as educators, wear assumes that we acknowledge the importance of demonstrating humility. Contrasting the image of a *Sage of the Stage* whereby a faculty member is captured by the arrogance of knowledge, reputation, and the reward and coercive power afforded them by their position, a humble faculty member recognizes their limitations and aspires to listen and learn from students. This in turn empowers those students to participate in a collaborative learning process (Harlos, 2000). As Chang and Diddams (2009) suggest, humility is an aspirational, learned process whereby we seek to practice inclusivity and an openness to acknowledge mistakes that are in the spirit of Quaker teachings. "When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to sense where they come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people's opinions may contain for you" (Quaker Faith & Practice).

As we have experienced in the classroom, our acts of humility have given students voice in their learning and helped us better understand when and how our lesson plans, assignments, and interpersonal communications have been effective or ineffective. Our students, through intentional listening sessions and course debriefs, empowering assignments, and sharing of our non-knowingness, have learned to question authority, participate in critical evaluation, and wrestle with the simultaneous intrigue and discomfort of experiencing a more active role in their learning. The vulnerability associated with planting a seed of doubt in the minds of your students (i.e., that they should question ideas and approaches) opens the door to new ideas, pedagogical adaptions, and positive relationship development between student and professor.

The purpose of our roundtable discussion will be to engage participants in an exploration of what it means to be humble as an educator, the barriers that may dissuade or discourage acts of humility, and the potential outcomes of demonstrating humility for student learning and faculty development. Therefore, new and seasoned faculty, along with chairs and supervisors, may find this roundtable discussion a helpful way to frame ways to improve their teaching and relate better to their students. Our session will feature targeted discussion and participant storytelling that may lead to further collaborations on the topic of faculty humility in the classroom. We hope that this discussion will help participants reflect on how and why demonstrating humility may bring a renewed sense of enthusiasm in their teaching and how it may improve the student learning experience.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The humility construct has been examined in servant leadership (Van Dierendonk, 2011; Owens and Heckman, 2016), employee empowerment (Lin, Chen, Herman, Wei, and Ma, 2017), and in the doctor-patient relationship literatures (Clabby, 2017). With the exception of Harlos's (2000) influential examination of humility in spiritual pedagogy and a brief essay by Tomkovick (2004) in which he espouses effective strategies for teaching marketing, one being the demonstration of humility, little work has explored the role of humility in effective management education, thus presenting an opportunity for further research. A humble leader "highlights the strengths of others, models teachability, and acknowledges one's personal limitations" (Daniels and Greguras, 2014, p. 1223). Such leaders are more likely to believe in follower capabilities, involve followers in decision-making processes, seek out feedback, and work to develop more trusting relations with employees and peers (Van Dierendonk, 2011; Owens and Heckman, 2016). Similarly, if we consider the faculty and student dynamic, Paulo Freire, the late educator and philosopher known for his foundational work in critical pedagogy, argues that faculty humility can both empower students to challenge assumptions and encourage a more intimate, caring relationship whereby the faculty authentically ask for student feedback about their learning experiences (Roberts, 2017).

Faculty humility may manifest in different behaviors. Tomkovick (2004) suggests it begins with laughing at yourself when you "mess up" in the classroom, admitting your own shortcomings to students, including your own mistakes as a practitioner or educator, and acknowledging when you do not know the answer to question. We believe faculty humility may be further demonstrated by focused, intentional discussions and assignments that engage students in shared learning.

We have utilized various approaches to facilitate student engagement that require faculty humility and power sharing in the classroom. For example, we have conducted mid- and final semester listening sessions that prompt students to discuss in small groups their thoughts on the semester and share with faculty who facilitates a review of the feedback. Students have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about their experience. While we have learned much about assignments, communication practices, and pedagogy, the most interesting and beneficial aspect of these listening sessions has been the deeper understanding about the student experience. This provides a space for students to offer thoughtful, critical feedback about assignments or affirmation about a project that helped them learn the material and thus these sessions haves been highly rewarding and meaningful to our development as teachers. Demonstrating vulnerability by welcoming input was critical to further developing a trusting relationship with our students so that they would continue to seek out support or offer suggestions when questions or issues arose about assignments or course material.

We also regularly afford students the opportunity to query the professor early on the semester to foster a classroom norm that empowers students to challenge the professor. Many of these questions allow the instructor to comment on his/her teaching philosophy and professional experience as well as pet-peeves that help establish classroom norms. The questions also allow the students to see the instructor not only in that role, but as an individual with likes/dislikes, personal interests, and activities. This exercise has helped us build a rapport with the students, helped create a learning climate consistent with our teaching philosophy of active engagement and critical thinking, and demonstrated our own vulnerability and openness to experience.

As a final example, we have used discussion leader assignments to further empower students as owners of their learning, which acknowledges the limitations to the instructor's role in student learning. While more likely to be used in seminar or advanced courses, this assignment has been effective in introductory courses to encourage students to help their peers understand and apply content. Students are responsible for leading discussion on a particular reading assignment for a portion of the class meeting. They are empowered to develop an exercise to apply the readings, lead students through a video case analysis that demonstrates knowledge and application of the theory or concept, or simply prompt students to analyze and discuss the readings. In contrast to a lecture, the discussion leaders are tasked facilitating in a community whereby they, their peers, and the faculty are learning together. As Roberts (2017) suggests, this Freirean approach means that the faculty member "sacrifices the possibility of exercising some forms of power (e.g. the power to dominate, or to manipulate, or to control)" (p. 843) and thereby invites students to take partial control of their learning experience. The approach-inhibition theory of power (Anderson and Berdahl, 2002) suggests that our students would be more motivated to perform because of their personal sense of power that has been afforded by the assignment.

We have found, anecdotally at least, that our students value these opportunities to interact with and challenge their faculty. While we suggest empirical investigation to examine these potential outcomes, our experience suggests that students feel more trusting of their faculty and have improved commitment to learning course material. Research on leader humility suggest that followers tend to feel respected (Van Dierendonck, 2011), engage in team-self monitoring (Owens and Heckman, 2016), and experience higher levels of job performance (Ou, Tsui, Kinicki, Waldman, Zio, and Song, 2014). Owens and Hekman (2016) found that there may be a contagion effect whereby followers engage in collective humble behaviors. In the context of the faculty-student relationship, might we see students who also engage in humble acts? One of the important outcomes of humility is the acknowledgement of doubt (Roberts, 2017). If faculty recognize their limitations and encourage students to question assertions, statements, and pedagogies, might students also demonstrate humility in their own interactions and learning? "Humility is important in avoiding the blindness that can accompany excessive certainty about the correctness of one's own position" (Roberts, 2017, p. 842). Additionally, students who learn the value of humility may be more likely to critically think whereby they challenge assumptions, question the limitations of their own viewpoints, and seek to learn from others (Paul and Elder, 2008).

The word "humility" is derived from the Latin word "humilis" meaning "on the ground" (Lin, et al., 2017). Moving from the metaphorical stage to the classroom "audience" may also challenge us to navigate resistance to acts of humility. Faculty seeking to empower students, shorten the power distance with their students, and demonstrate vulnerability may be met with unforeseen normative barriers. This roundtable will explore some potential barriers and brainstorm ways to overcome such barriers. For instance, might colleagues believe such humble acts are signs of weakness or somehow calls into question our expertise (Harlos, 2000; Palmer 1998)? Might students who originate from high power distance cultures be more likely to experience discomfort or distrust for a faculty member who engages in humble acts? While students with a lower power distance value, like employees interacting with a humble leader, may welcome faculty acts of humility, this may not be universally welcome by our students. How do we aspire to be humble when it may be culturally unacceptable? How may we exhibit humility when our inclination is oftentimes to embrace the *Sage on the Stage* persona?

Furthermore, is humility always the most effective attitude to display in the classroom? While we recognize the potential barrier of power distance, it should be noted that we have used the five-question icebreaker activity previously discussed in this proposal with groups of students from both high and low power distance countries (e.g. China and Canada, respectively). We found that this activity worked equally well with students from countries across the power distance continuum.

Session Description

This session is designed as a roundtable discussion. We will invite participants to explore the topic of faculty humility. Facilitators will guide initial discussion using targeted prompts (detailed below) and invite participants to share stories, experiences, and knowledge of the literature.

1. **Opening (5 minutes):** the session leaders will introduce the session and its purpose
2. **Discussion Questions and Dialogue (30 minutes):**

   - How have you shown humility in your teaching?
   - What would be a barrier to you incorporating more humility in your teaching?
   - Would your colleagues, faculty and institution be supportive of humility in the classroom? Why or why not?
   - How much humility in the classroom is too much (i.e., is there a diminishing return effect)?

3. **Intellectual Humility Questionnaire and Discussion (20 minutes):** the humility instrument developed Krumrei-Mancuso and Rouse (2016) will help participants better understand their own humility and consider the context of their students and institution.
4. **Conclusion (5 minutes):** session leaders will summarize the main points and welcome participants to share additional insights into how and why faculty humility might be further studied.

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