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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The authentic classroom

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Abstract

A panel of eight leadership scholars was convened to participate in a panel at the 20th International Leadership Association Conference to discuss the benefits and the pitfalls of applying authentic leadership theory to the classroom setting. Inspired by Ken Parry's masterful teaching and the authenticity that he displayed in the classroom, this paper provides an overview of the panel's discussion as they grappled with the attractions, the challenges and the risks that are posed to both teacher-scholars and student-scholars in bringing their full selves into the classroom.

Key words: authentic leadership; leadership education; emotional labour and gender

Introduction

Ken Parry was a masterful teacher. Simultaneously revered, feared, loved and cheered, he had a quick wit, a scary smart intellect and a bright smile. That smile would often begin as a wry smile. Ken was extremely talented at putting an idea out there, an idea that might be brilliant or was as likely to be brilliantly false. He would then wait, and watch the students, as they worked out the veracity or implausibility of the idea.

In doing so, he had the ability to embed learning through a tension of the mind, the sort of tension described by Conger (1991) in his work on effective communication. Conger describes the deep learning process when tension (puzzlement – recoil) is followed by tension release (insight and resolution) when the tension is resolved. Ken watched his students closely during this process of tension recoil and release, the wry smile slowly growing on his face because he wanted to see the student reach a resolution on their own. But he also watched his student closely because he was ready to step in at just the right moment, before the tension turned to frustration and disillusionment, to ensure that the teachable moment would not pass. Through whichever means resolution was reached (which sometimes felt more like salvation), the wry smile would turn into a bright smile and the warm feeling of having shared something special together would spread palpably across the room.

In interacting with his colleagues, Ken was, in my experience, precisely the same person he was in the classroom setting described above. A true scholar, living the life of the mind; he was as quick to test his colleagues with a brilliant, or brilliantly tautological argument, as he was his students. It was this authenticity of who he was as a person, delighting in challenging others as much as he delighted in being challenged, that became his hallmark way of engaging classrooms. His genuine love for intellectual sparring, and appreciation for the insights that are obtained by engaging with the tensions were a key component of Ken being a highly successful teacher at the highest levels of the University and Executive Education programs.

Following on from Ken's example of authentic teaching, and commensurate with the 2018 International Leadership Association (ILA) global conference theme of Authentic Leadership,

a panel proposal was prepared for submission entitled 'The Authentic Classroom'. The proposal was accepted, and the panel participants were Kevin Lowe (Organizer), Brad Jackson (Chair), Claudia Cogliser, Bill Gardner, Eric Guthey, Steve Kempster, Robyn Remke and Mary Uhl-Bien. The purpose of the session, broadly speaking, was to explore 'How might we understand the authentic classroom, and the need for the authentic classroom'? Our goal was to broach several of the questions that appear at the end of the next paragraph while taking a deeper dive into those questions for which the panellists and the audience exhibited clearly palpable enthusiasm. The panel was not concerned with debating the pros and cons of authentic leadership in theory and in practice as that is already well-rehearsed in the literature (e.g., Alvesson and Einola, 2019).

In doing this the panellists sought to be authentic, to trust themselves and the process to determine the best outcomes, rather than entering with a pre-determined notion of what the outcomes should be. The panellists were open to uncover and discover what the outcomes would be. We wanted to understand how the demands of contemporary institutional and societal pressures challenge the authenticity of lecturers and students. Within the broad panel theme questions were suggested to frame the initial conversation including, but not limited to:

> *What is the connection between being a scholar and being authentic in the classroom?*
> *What level of disclosure about one's values, opinions, experiences, etc. is appropriate in the classroom?*
> *To what extent should scholars engage in surface or deep acting? Are the pressures to do so increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant? What are the drivers of these changes?*
> *How do impression management cues and pressures impact student authenticity in the classroom? Do ingratiators and self-promoters get ahead, particularly in classes that incorporate a heavy participation component as part of students' grades? If so, are these incentives counter to promoting authenticity in the classroom?*
> *What do we expect from our students in terms of authenticity, if anything? How do gender and power dynamics impact these expectations?*
> *What would be the archetype for an authentic student? If we had a classroom of that archetype, the authentic student, how might that alter classroom dynamics?*
> *What would the authentic classroom experience be like if both components, the archetypal authentic student and archetypal authentic teacher/scholar, were present?*

While we realized that this set of framing questions was overly ambitious for a 90-minute session, what did occur was that we discussed, debated and waxed philosophic about what the term 'authentic classroom' means and what experiencing an authentic classroom could be like. Drawing from the principles of authentic leadership (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis & Dickens, 2011) our conversation centred on how the classroom experience would be different, for students and for lecturers, if everyone brought their full selves, their fully engaged selves to the classroom. Importantly, we sought to fully engage the audience on their perspectives on what the term authentic classroom might mean and, in so doing, created an environment of rich dialogue and appreciative inquiry. The resulting conversation was highly generative. Panellists and audience alike were evidently engaged by, and at the same time struggling with the tensions that arise when simultaneously considering the motives, issues, and risks in pursuing the promise of the authentic classrooms. In short, it was precisely the sort of conversation that Ken would have revelled in. A potentially perilous but ultimately upward intellectual spiral with a focus on positivity rather than digging oneself into the mire of negativity. A dialogue where the 'outcome' was a higher level of thinking that could achieve a real breakthrough rather a linear solution that merely satisfices. While representing the depth and the breadth of the conversation is well beyond the space allotted here, we highlight below a few of the many themes that emerged from the session.

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The Leadership Teacher is Supposed to be (or should be) The Most Authentic Teacher

Most scholarly descriptions of the authentic leadership construct will, as a typical point of commonality, list and describe at least four dimensions of authentic leadership (Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016). These dimensions include: self- awareness (know thyself), internalized moral perspective (be genuine), balanced processing (be fair-minded) and relational transparency (be open). Brad Jackson pointed out that when teaching leadership, we should not be too surprised to discover that our own leadership becomes a focal point of interest to students. Invariably students place us under the most critical of leadership microscopes. Are we just another case of a lecturer who cannot do (in this case lead) and so have we been merely relegated to the role of teaching? Or is there something genuinely different about the way we teach and organize our classroom that models effective (authentic) leadership? It never fails to amuse us that our colleagues who teach Accountancy, Finance, Operations, Strategy or even Marketing tend not to be subject to the same levels of scrutiny with their respective specializations. While students likely wonder if their finance professor is good with money, or whether their consumer behaviour teacher is able to avoid the traps set by clever marketers, or whether their accounting professor saves the most on their taxes, seldom is the lecturer's expertise so easy to judge *in situ* as in a leadership course. We are, of course, consoled by the fact that we are kept 'honest' by these expectations. But to what extent are we kept to the standard of being 'authentic' by our students?

Brad noted that, of all the leadership theories and concepts that he examines in his classes, but especially in the MBA, Authentic Leadership is the theory that perennially generates the most enthusiasm and debate. A close second is Followership. Authentic Leadership has the distinction of being the leadership concept that our students most readily identify with, most strongly advocate for, and most ferociously lament when it is missing. Indeed, one of our panellists, a highly published and influential leadership scholar remarked that Authentic Leadership was by far their most popular contribution with Executive Education audiences who were eager to attend and be anointed an authentic leader at the end of the program. Yet Authentic Leadership was also the concept that, with the appropriate encouragement, the students could most quickly mount a powerful collective critique of the theory's foundational principal. In that regard, Authentic Leadership is best exemplified as a 'seesaw' leadership concept, both hero and villain on the leadership stage.

In guiding their critiques, students invariably turn to their workplaces as the basis for building their critique of Authentic Leadership where it 'might be alright in theory, but in practice…'. Looking back, we could be using the contemporary university classroom – real, virtual or blended – as an even more compelling context upon which to base their critique. However, given that Authentic Leadership (as well as other more contemporary theories such as shared, distributed and responsible leadership) are often taught towards the end of a class or program, having installed the more basic, less emotive, and leader-centric trait, behavioural and contingency theories first, we often think it politic not to subject their MBA experience to even greater critical scrutiny that has already been proffered. Upon reflection, we regret not taking the higher road and resolve to endeavour to do so in future classes.

The most striking learning for many of us from the ILA session on the Authentic Classroom symposium was just how precarious and conflicted the university classroom has become. Mary Uhl-Bien and Claudia Cogliser noted that this conflict can be especially marked in the USA where deep divides in political perspectives can challenge our e ability to maintain civil discourse in the classroom. While the discussion began as planned with a consideration of the emotional labour that needs to be drawn upon by both faculty and students (those of who choose to engage, of course) to create not so much an authentic but a meaningful learning experience, it rapidly escalated to encompass the ethical, legal, political and even security risks associated with teaching in the contemporary university. These concerns were echoed by several members of the audience and a variety of coping mechanisms were shared; most memorably to issue an invitation to the

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chancellor of the university to speak at the first class to remind the faculty and students of their obligations to the university charter and to each other.

Brad Jackson identified that this failure to grasp the bigger and increasingly uglier societal picture graphically demonstrated one of the fundamental weaknesses of the contemporary field of leadership studies. A pre-occupation with generating micro-level context-free theory while failing to take notice of far-reaching societal, political and environmental seismic shifts. As Tourish memorably observes, leadership researchers 'seem content to ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the palpably absurd' (Tourish, 2015: 137). While this critique could be laid at the feet of many streams of research conducted in business schools, it strikes us that we have an important opportunity as leadership scholars to 'Take the Lead' not by endeavouring to create 'Authentic Classrooms' alone but to generate 'Responsible Leadership' (sustainable decisions that consider all stakeholders) through our teaching and our research (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). We believe that this is something that Ken Parry would have strongly approved of and would agree with our view that authenticity is a crucial component of being an effective responsible leader.

On this topic of being a responsible leader, Bill Gardner shared the journey he went on to discover his purpose. His journey, enabled through the facilitation of a coach, morphed from a drab description of his purpose as 'teaching, research, and service' to the more engaging and personally meaningful phrase 'to make leadership theory real'. This short but carefully constructed purpose has, in turn, become a mantra of sorts for giving voice to his values. To make is to create; leadership theory is what is made, but the simple manufacturing of leadership theories is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. It is in making the theories real, in pursuing with students the profound difference that theory-informed practice can achieve, that gives this responsible leader (Professor) the moral license to more fully bring themselves to the classroom. While the need for the performative (i.e., dramatic) element remains (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013), to capture student imagination, this strong sense of purpose brings an authenticity to the performative aspects of the classroom that might otherwise be missing (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Having suggested that the leadership teacher is supposed to be an authentic teacher, and indeed likely should be, the conversation turned to impediments to the authentic classroom. These impediments arise, as barriers often do, from the relatively benign and noble aims that when pursued separately, rather than holistically, serve to challenge the underpinnings of the principles on which they were designed. We now look to trends and institutional pressures that present challenges to the authentic classroom.

Challenges to the Authentic Classroom: Dealing with Emotional Labour in Higher Education

Steve Kempster recalls that in a recent conversation at a conference with a colleague, Eugene, they spoke about the significant changes in higher education in the UK. The neo-liberal agenda that has gripped the world of commerce, government, public sector and even health is equally prevalent in how universities are being run. The shift to the consumerization of higher education, the increasing prominence of the university rankings industry, and the rise of social media, where 'performance gratification' is nearly instant, have had palpable effects on student outputs and expectations. Steve recalled that Ken Parry commented, in a conference keynote at Lancaster in 2014 that: 'I started in the manufacturing industry, moved into the knowledge industry and now find myself back in manufacturing – churning out endless papers for the treadmill of ranking points'! Ken went on to speak of the shift in the role of the academic, the role of the researcher and the role of the teacher, and the increasing separation of the two roles to achieve more 'efficiency' through specialization of labour. It is to this trend in the shifting role of the teacher that is addressed next.

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Returning to the neo-liberal agenda, Eugene and Steve shared a series of experiences and anecdotes associated with the neo-liberal classroom. Steve mentioned that teaching staff must score at least 3.5 (out of 5) from the students; otherwise, there is a mandatory performance review with the Head of Department. Eugene 'upped the ante' and (miss)citing Monty Python stated, 'you call that pressure, that's nothing, we have to score 4.1'! The relationship of such classroom performance management to the neo-liberal agenda seems most tangible. The students have become customers. They have an expectation that teaching will indeed should ensure, that they get what they have purchased, a degree and at least a 2:1 – that is the new psychological contract with the institution. The teacher's job is to perform to this contract, and anything less constitutes a customer service failure. A student in my second-year undergraduate class said, about his course work, 'what have I got to do to get a first'? It would seem most natural to simply respond with 'work hard, do a lot of reading and thinking and hopefully you have a high level of intelligence to enable this to happen'. This was not his expectation of the contract. He meant 'what are you going to do to instruct me on what to read and what to write, and undertake various reads of drafts so I am able to get a first'? The implications are most significant. Performativity has become an essential component of performance measurement and, as a by-product of authentic conversations which might create learning through discomfort, may have to be sacrificed to on the altar of student rating metrics. The teacher has become reframed as an entertainer or a shop assistant, alongside the last vestiges of being a personal tutor for classes of 200-plus students!

The context for teaching in the UK HE sector is a problematic space for the authentic classroom – especially if you are an aspiring early career academic. Notwithstanding the endless pressure to only publish in the top journals (for the institutional rankings), academics must hit the minimum teaching score evaluations and generate student assessment outcomes of at least 2:1. This dual quest of achieving rankings based on research and customer (student) service goals based on teaching has led to a number of role 'innovations' such as research-only positions and teaching-heavy positions with titles such as Clinical faculty and Professors of Practice. Such 'innovations' increasingly deprive students of exposure to faculty who have a deep understanding of the scientific method and the processes whereby knowledge is created in favour of faculty who may have higher (or more focused) performative skills.

Authenticity in teaching is thus highly susceptible to emotional labour and the requirement for 'acting' (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour as 'surface acting' reflects 'deliberate emotional displays that are intended to deceive other persons about what the actor actually feels' (Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009: 471). The pressures to modify emotional displays are demanded from the higher education institution and the students. Both bring attendant measurement processes. The increasing, and perhaps inevitable trend for 'edutainment' in the classroom – where it is expected that students require a blend of entertainment with education in varying combinations. This expectation inevitably demands leadership teaching that is highly susceptible to becoming inauthentic through favouring performance elements over intellectual elements; alongside the continual act of being liked (for the student evaluations). I recall a few years ago a student astutely observing that 'I suspect you appear to like us more than you do'! What might the implications be for such inauthenticity for the teacher?

We know that the manifestation of emotional labour is not injury free when associated with inauthenticity. Well-being is impacted through the generation of emotional dissonance – a consequence of the mismatch between displayed emotion and felt emotion, and the consequent diminished sense of self (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). It cannot be acceptable that the calls on teacher emotions (from both students and institutions) for this edutainment can be sustained day after day. We need to be able to practice as teachers as we think most appropriate to enable education to occur. For example, when teaching leadership (especially authentic leadership), the sense of incongruence and diminished self, is further exacerbated. In the ILA panel colleagues spoke of the necessity for authenticity in the student–teacher relationship to enable leadership development to occur. As teachers we all need to be able to challenge underlying assumptions,

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expose inconsistencies, address power dynamics (e.g., the institution and the increasing control of student expectations); however, disquieting the consequences may be in order to allow the students to become the people we hoped they would become.

Will the system change? Will romanticism overwhelm realism? (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). Probably not. Does it matter – hell yes! So, what is the pragmatic way through this for us? It maybe that we need to reframe our sense of what educational authenticity is in the higher education context of emotional labour.

Debates are growing in the field of authentic leadership theory as a consequence of embracing concepts of emotional labour (Iszatt-White, 2009). For example, how does a leader offer relational transparency when the followers want the reassurance of success when the leader is scared, fearful and anxious? In this respect authenticity in leadership (Kempster, Iszatt-While & Brown, 2018), here reframed to authenticity in teaching, is perhaps more about an authentic commitment and fidelity to the purposes of education and learning and the role requirements to achieve this end. As such teaching, along with leadership, necessitate the need to embody deep acting – a genuine sense of acting, or edutainment – through alignment with such a deep commitment to the purposes and role as educators (see Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch & Wax, 2012 for a more comprehensive discussion of deep acting, surface acting and congruence).

Gender and the Authentic Classroom

Calls for authentic leadership often speak to the desire to be led with relational transparency. However, as Robyn Remke noted the research tells us that our leadership expectations vary based on the leader's sex, gender and race. For example, women are often expected to show empathy and compassion in their leadership practices, regardless of the authenticity of those emotions, because observers have been shown to perceive these practices as representative of women's 'natural' selves. Yet these same emotional displays are often perceived by observers as pro forma evidence that the woman is less leader like or less deserving of the leadership role (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Meister, Sinclair & Jehn, 2017).

In contrast, because men are expected to be less emotive, empathetic and relational, men are credited positively when they demonstrate these same practices and behaviours. In addition, women are routinely encouraged by professional female leaders such as Sheryl Sandberg (COO of Facebook and author of Lean In) to emulate a particular form of leadership that affirms heteronormative masculine practices such as assertiveness and proactivity to achieve workplace success.

But this masculine performance can backfire for some women because it appears to contradict what some perceive to be their authentic (feminine) self. We, therefore, situate female lecturers and especially female students in an increasingly precarious and contradictory position: they are required to perform what appears to be a scripted and inauthentic form of leadership to succeed in traditional business contexts. Further, leadership scholars and educators must navigate the tension of wanting to critique, challenge and rewrite the leadership landscape while also preparing their female students to achieve success within the constraints of patriarchal expectations. Accordingly, we know that to have a more authentic classroom, where students of both genders and gender orientations can bring their full selves, we need to unpack the challenges of teaching students how to be authentic relative to power dynamics, including gender politics that may include hidden agendas and subversive behaviours

Conclusion

So, what is the authentic classroom? As this narrative reveals we have only begun to begin to unpack what the term means let alone its implications. The session at ILA attended heavily to the faculty role, the classroom leader side of the conversation. Perhaps this is not too surprising

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given that most of the people in the room taught leadership either as lecturers or as a leadership development specialist. The emphasis on the classroom leader may also not be too surprising given that most discussions on leadership and followership often seem to drift towards the leadership side, continuing the underdevelopment of the followership muscle within academic research. But to get a more comprehensive view of what the authentic classroom would or could look like we need future research to unpack what the archetypes would be for authentic students. At a minimum, these archetypes would seem to include students who are engaged by the subject matter, who expect to have a voice in an appreciative inquiry into the subject matter, and who value introspection and curiosity in the same way that the facilitators (teachers) of their learning do.

We suspect that is the question 'What is authentic leadership in the classroom'? is one that Ken Parry would have enjoyed discussing. The roots of such a conversation might have started something like this:

Ken Parry: 'I've been thinking a lot about authentic leadership mate and what the classroom experience might be like if the teacher and the students both entered into the classroom experience authentically. I think I've about got it worked out but was wondering about your thoughts on the subject'.

Ken's Scholarly Friend: 'Well that's an interesting question Ken. I have not thought about it much (intellectual tension ensues) but the first thing that comes to mind is……..(five minutes of stumbling around concepts and hitting logical dead ends occurs raising the intrapersonal tension at not knowing the answer)……so tell me since I seem to be unable to answer it, what is the authentic classroom'?

Ken Parry: Just a hint of a wry smile begins to appear: 'C'mon mate, you've been teaching this stuff for a decade, and you've been in the classroom for longer than that. Heck you've even published articles that measure authentic leadership. Give it another go, see if you can come up with something'.

Ken's Scholarly Friend: Sheepishly compiles a couple of simplistic sets of propositions by mechanically appending the definitions of the dimensions of authentic leadership to the aspects of the classroom setting. Asks 'How's that? Anything like what you came up with'?

Ken Parry: Wry smile rapidly expands to a large grin. 'Ah mate, I was just having a bit of fun with you, I haven't really thought about it that much, was just curious what you might come up with'. Friend's tension is now released but now the friend's mind is engaged and relaxing to think about it further. 'But hey if you want to grab a beer and see if we can sort this out, I'd be happy to give it a go, I think the rugby's on too'.

Brief Statement on What Ken Meant to Me: As a scholar, Ken was an intellectual whetstone for me. My understanding of a topic was always shaped and sharpened through spirited discussions with Ken. As a friend, he schooled me on topics ranging from rugby (league vs. union) to cricket (we toured the Melbourne Cricket Grounds together) to art appreciation. Our last time together was in a museum where our conversation included how art could be used to teach leadership.

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