Why is the concept of agency so important in Leadership for Learning?

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of human agency and its crucial relevance to the 'leadership for learning' practice. It arises from the Leadership for Learning (Carpe Vitam) project.[1] Sources from both sociology and psychology are drawn upon to explain and discuss agency and its relevance to leadership and learning.

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Over the last three and half years a group of researchers and school practitioners have engaged in a large scale action research project focussing on the development of 'leadership for learning' practice (MacBeath *et al*., 2006). At our final international conference in October 2005, the Cambridge team put forward a conceptual framework in which the concept of 'agency' formed the bridge between leadership and learning. While most of the concepts and principles we presented were intelligible and resonated well with the lived experience of conference participants, the concept of 'agency' stood out as problematic. In discussions and in the written feedback at the end of the conference a number of practitioners said that the word is 'unhelpful' and that its meaning is 'unclear'. It was even suggested that it is not a relevant concept. This paper is therefore an attempt to explore and clarify the concept of 'agency' and to explain why it is of central relevance to the pursuit of leadership for learning.

Agency as 'making a difference'

To begin with, the term 'agency' when used in the school improvement literature is often taken to mean simply – the capacity to make a difference (Durrant and Holden, 2006). Here the assumption is that making a difference can extend far beyond the practice of teaching. Of course it is true to say that teachers and other practitioners in schools make a difference by enabling children to learn and develop, but the question is about the extent to which practitioners can make a difference more widely. Can they make a difference to the way that the school operates as a whole? Can they make a difference to the practice of their colleagues? Can they make a difference to the part that parents play in their children's learning? Can they make a difference to policy? These questions are at the heart of how we conceive of teacher professionalism. In the 1970s Eric Hoyle compared the idea of the restricted professional with that of the extended professional (Hoyle, 1972). The focus of the restricted professional was on the classroom whereas the extended professional took a wider view of schooling and curriculum having a theoretical perspective and being active beyond the school. Hoyle talked of extended professionals as teachers who were potential 'champions' of innovations – a term recycled more recently by David Hargreaves in his Demos pamphlet about innovation (Hargreaves, 2003). Lawrence Stenhouse's (1975) critique of Hoyle's notion centred on the idea of the 'teacher as researcher'; he argued that professionalism involved inquiry integrated with teaching. However, neither Hoyle or Stenhouse recognised the importance of the concept of leadership.

If agency is about 'making a difference', it will strike many as being obviously relevant to the practice of leadership particularly if it is assumed that leadership is what school school principals and headteachers. However, our 'leadership for learning' framework demands not only a different way of thinking about leadership, but also an integration of this concept with that of 'learning'. Some writers on learning have focused on the role of human agency because it is a powerful factor in shaping motivation. Chris Watkins for example explains what he takes agency to mean.

> The exercise of human agency is about intentional action, exercising choice, making a difference and monitoring effects.

> (Watkin, 2005:47, after Dietz and Burns, 1992)

So, it may be that the concept of agency is relevant both to the concept of leadership and to the concept of learning but this does not necessarily explain why it is so relevant to the perspective that we refer to as 'leadership for learning'. In any case a problem arises because we inhabit a climate where the agency of both teachers and pupils has been seriously compromised by the imposition of targets externally set; we are in danger of such ideological saturation that we need to work hard to understand the importance of agency and then to consider how we can take steps to ensure that it can be taken into account in our practice as educators. In order to clarify the concept I draw on sources from social theory, sociology, social cognitive theory and constructivist psychology.

Agency and free will

Those who watched the recently released Scorcese documentary about Bob Dylan may recall that, when asked, about the meaning of his songs and what he was trying to protest about in his early career, Dylan claimed that he was merely a channel or a conduit; that ideas came through him rather than from him. Van Morrison has made similar claims, much to the irritation of music journalists. This explanation seems to echo pre-enlightenment religious beliefs in which human beings have mere instrumental agency rather than being the authors of their own actions.

In the 17th century the philosopher Descartes argued that 'reason is the noblest thing we have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects' (Descartes, 1970: 228 in Malik, 2002). This statement can be seen as representing a significant plank of Enlightenment thinking which allowed a degree of emancipation from the god-given and forces of nature. This liberation brings with it a range of problems of course. If we have free will, we have to make our own moral choices and, as our technological mastery develops, we are liable to disagree over the choices we make in relation to our use of the natural world. Should a poor farmer in Afghanistan be able to exercise free will in planting poppies for example? Should an

enterprising peasant in the Amazon basin be free to enter the logging business? Agency then involves the exercise of will but also moral choice.

Major thinkers of the 19th century provided us with at least two alternative ways of thinking about this. Marxism de-emphasised the individual and provided a foundation for a more deterministic perspective. In the 1970s, the more optimistic amongst us had to contend with the argument that the pursuit of equality in educational provision was merely performing the function of legitimisation which enabled the process of the reproduction of a stratified society to carry on unhindered (see Bowles and Gintis, 1976 for example). What is the point – so the argument went - of tinkering around trying to ameliorate the negative effects of family background if schooling itself is simply there to provide factory fodder on the one hand and an officer class on the other. While Marxists waited for the revolution to bring about change others relied on a more comfortable view of change – evolution. Evolutionism helped to shape deterministic thinking but in a more gentle way. Nevertheless Darwin's biological breakthroughs suggested the idea of change as a process of unfolding. (There are interesting ironic possibilities in the etymology of the word evolution which according to Giddens (1984) is derived from the Latin for 'rolling out' – originally as in rolling out of a parchment - which resonates rather uncomfortably with the contemporary habit of announcing the 'rolling out' of national policy initiatives even before the pilot stage has been evaluated.)

These ways of thinking share in common a lack of conviction about the power of individuals to bring about change. We might as well say to the Chinese pro-democracy demonstrators of 1989 that there is no point in staging a protest because, as the economy expands, social institutions will inevitably change to serve the economic needs of society. Why throw yourself under a tank in Tiananmen Square? Better to eat more hamburgers and buy more iPods to hurry the unstoppable process on its way.

Contemporary sociological perspectives

Around the time that Margaret Thatcher declared that there was no such thing as society, the prolific sociologist Anthony Giddens offered a more optimistic take on the question of the scope that individuals have to make a difference. His structuration theory does not deny the importance of social structures in shaping human action, but instead he sees them as being less deterministic (Giddens, 1984). He argues that functionalists have naively seen structures as 'patterning' social relations in the way that girders do for a building or a skeleton does for a body. He talks of the duality of structure in which social structures are not fixed sets of rules and resources but are features of social systems that have to be recreated in the specific moment of action. Such recreation can only take place when human agents act in this way or that and a powerful influence at that point is the reflexivity and knowledgeability peculiar to the human species.

> Human actors are not only able to monitor their activities and those of others in the regularity of day-to-day conduct; they are also able to 'monitor that monitoring' in discursive consciousness.
>
> (Giddens, 1984: 29)

To put this another way, we might say that we humans do not simply act according to some predetermined pattern but rather each action is influenced by a range of norms, traditions, overt formalised rules and so on. There are other contingencies such as emotional states, beliefs and behavioural habits that may play their part. We make choices which have moral dimensions. The key point however, is that we are accountable for our actions and are called upon to explain our actions to each other. One important implication of Giddens' theory of action, is that social (or organisational) structures can be modified by the agency of individuals.

This is not to say that agency always involves intentional acts. Giddens sees agency as a capacity to act and reflect on the consequences of that action. For example, I may eat eggs for breakfast because I have been brought up to believe that they are wholesome and good for me. My intentions are largely focussed on my own nutrition and enjoyment. Subsequently I may learn that hens are being kept in cruel conditions, and my buying these eggs makes it possible for this farming practice to occur. I had not intended my action to have this effect but it is arguably a consequence nevertheless. This new information about farming approaches presents me with a dilemma. I have choices. I can ignore the news about hens' conditions; I can switch to free range eggs; I can join an association dedicated to changing the laws governing agriculture and so on. I also have a choice about whether to learn more about the subject. Of course, the supermarket chain may seek to influence my choices by telling me that the eggs are good for me and the hens are happy in their little cages. They may try to influence me in ways that are less direct by artificially lowering the price of the eggs. However, as we know, even Tescos have to respond to the desire of their customers for ethical eggs and now it is common place to find free range eggs at reasonable prices. So, in Giddens' terms I am an agent, witting or not, but I have the capacity for knowledgeability; I can monitor my own behaviour in the future and decide not only how to act, but also what attitude to strike about the moral claims of free range enthusiasts.

Psychological perspectives

The psychological tradition is perhaps more naturally oriented towards the individual, what drives them, how they fulfil their needs and achieve their goals, so a concern with the concept of agency is to be expected. However, for the purposes of illuminating leadership for learning some psychological perspectives are unhelpful. For example, an approach based on assumptions about mechanistic responses to the environment can be seen to be inadequate.

The notion that humans are entirely autonomous beings is not seriously argued by anyone. Bandura also rejects the idea that they act mechanically in response to their environment (Bandura, 1989); he argues instead for the idea of 'emergent interactive agency' which resonates well with Gidden's sociological account and, in addition, provides some detail about how the process of self-regulation actually works. Speaking from the perspective of social cognitive theory, Bandura claims that human agency and determinism are in fact quite compatible (1986). He explains this in outline thus:

> the exercise of personal agency is achieved through reflective and regulative thought, the skills at one's command, and other tools of self-influence that affect choice and support selected courses of action. Self-generated influences operate deterministically on behavior (in) the same way as external sources of influence do..… It is because self-influence operates deterministically on action that some measure of self-directedness and freedom is possible.
>
> (Bandura, 1989: 1182)

This seems to echo Giddens' sociological account.

Bandura's analysis sheds a great deal of light on a range of issues pertinent to the study of learning; these include the importance of the idea of 'self-belief of efficacy', the role of feedback and the power of 'forethought'.

Self-belief of efficacy

Efficacy means having an effect, and our capacity to have an effect is shaped by the extent to which we believe we can. This simple point will be easily recognisable to anyone involved in the enterprise of learning but Bandura draws on empirical research to support this (1989). The experimental research he cites focused on memory performance and found that people with stronger beliefs in their own memory capacity devoted more effort and time to 'cognitive processing of memory tasks' which had the effect of enhancing their ability to memorise (Berry, 1987).

Another important variable is the extent to which humans can exercise control over their own responses to difficulties. Of course we cannot avoid difficulties such as failure, criticism or inequity; nor can we dispense with the usual responses which might include anxiety, fear and disappointment, but we can regulate these emotions. Our ability to do this might depend on the extent of our emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996), or perhaps more usefully, our emotional literacy (Weare, 2004), but perhaps the most powerful influence here may be our previous experience of dealing with these emotions. Those who have been able to rise above setbacks in the past will be able to imagine doing so again. A lack of belief in the ability to recover from a feeling of failure or disappointment can lead to depression and ill health.

> There is a growing body of evidence that human attainments and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1986). ...Self-doubts can set in quickly after some failures or reverses. The important matter is not that difficulties arouse self-doubt, which is a natural immediate reaction, but the speed of recovery of perceived self-efficacy from difficulties.
>
> (Bandura, 1989: 1176)

However, the importance of the self-belief as described by Bandura is not just a matter of well-being. For schools, the most important question is how this bears on the question of learning and there are major implications for the business of learning here. One is concerned with the way teachers provide students with feedback. The development of assessment for learning techniques (Assessment Reform Group, 2002) has included a focus on feedback and the extent to which this enables students to reflect realistically and productively on their progress. One of the key aims here is to enable students to attribute any shortfall in their achievement to something that they can do something about – an unhelpful learning strategy for example – rather than an underlying lack of capacity to learn. The whole point is to put the learner in the driving seat. This is a part of the wider business of scaffolding meta-cognition whereby students develop the tools to think about how they learn.

Learners' beliefs about their efficacy will be shaped by their experience in classrooms. When they are continuously confronted with learning tasks that match the learning preferences of a minority of students, they experience failure. This is why many schools in the Carpe Vitam project and elsewhere experiment with processes to identify different learning preferences and to draw students into dialogue about how they prefer to learn. We find that, when students experience learning tasks that are well matched to their preferences, they experience success and consequently develop a stronger belief in their capacity to learn (Frost and Roberts, 2004).

> People's self-efficacy beliefs determine their level of motivation, as reflected in how much effort they will exert in an endeavor and how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles. The stronger the belief in their capabilities, the greater and more persistent are their efforts (Bandura, 1988).

What is key here is the opportunity for the learner to exercise some measure of control over the learning process by being able to express a view about it. Also crucial is the possibility that students might take up the challenge of learning voluntarily if they expect to experience the thrill of success.

Agency and the curriculum

A common assumption is that this encouragement to take responsibility for the learning process is really to address the question of motivation. The assumption being that

learners will be more positively disposed towards leaning because they will not be demoralized by the challenge, will have better self-awareness of themselves as learners and will have command over a wider repertoire of learning strategies. They will have been successfully incorporated into the enterprise of learning. However, the question of what they learn remains none of their business. At our conference in Athens, the project's critical friend David Perkins reflected back to us the view that the question of what is learnt in our schools has been neglected in our project. This issue is echoed by Michael Apple in his address to ICSEI 2006 when he drew attention to the imperialistic nature of the curriculum that denies the identity of different ethnic groups within our schools.

The practice of 'students as researchers' goes someway to address this issue in that it can involve students in setting their own agendas and pursuing questions determined by themselves (Sutherland, 2006). Here we can see more clearly the links between leadership and learning and how the concept of agency links them. A challenge for those of us interested in talking the pupil participation agenda forward is whether we can enable students to engage with the what as well as the how of learning.

Agency and shared leadership

The question of student's involvement in choices about both the what and how of learning points to the whole business of shared leadership which is a concern at the very heart of the Carpe Vitam project. Jerome Bruner's account of agency and learning helps to make a bridge between learning and shared leadership. He describes the situation where a child is beginning school: the school is the first major institutional experience which provides a context and criteria for evaluation of his or her actions (Bruner, 1996). As we make our way in the social and institutional world we develop 'skill and know-how' but we also continuously evaluate ourselves. Each new day at school presents the child with opportunities for enhancing their agency or diminishing it. Bruner's analysis is applicable to the more general matter of shared leadership in that it poses a question about the extent to which schools provide opportunities for agency to be enhanced for all members of the school community including the teachers. We have to ask whether teachers' agency is enhanced – enabling them to learn and develop as a teacher - or whether their agency is frustrated by the climate of performativity we currently inhabit. In the Carpe Vitam project we have explored the possibilities for both students and teachers to make a difference through learning, to learning and as learning.

Conclusion

Arguably our identities are forged through the interpersonal connections that constitute the communities we inhabit (Nixon *et al.,* 1997). We are all engaged in an ongoing process of recreating ourselves and becoming human. In Gadamer's terms, this is about

achieving 'bildung' in which we learn to inhabit an ever widening community through the power of dialogue. Schools lay the foundations for this in the sense that they can be learning communities in which all members (students, teachers, support staff, parents etc) are able to have influence over themselves and others. The key to this lies with our understanding of the concept of agency

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