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Students as Leaders and Learners: Toward Self-Authorship and Social Change on a College Campus

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Abstract

In this article we present a case study of undergraduate students' experiences in several leadership programs at Bryn Mawr College. Through a collaborative action research study, we identified three interrelated sets of practices in which student participants engage: discerning differences and bringing those differences into dialogue; revising their sense of themselves and becoming more serious students; and revising leadership relationships and creating community. We offer this study as an illustration of and commentary on Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship and students' development as leaders for social change — an illustration that highlights the close connection between self-development and leadership development.

Students as Leaders and Learners:

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Survival in the 21st century requires flexibility, adaptability, the capacity to negotiate between one's own and others' needs, and the ability to cope with rapid change, ambiguity, diversity and complexity. If we expect our graduates to be leaders — in their work, personal lives, and communities — they need to achieve self-authorship. (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xxii)

The link between self-authorship and leadership that Baxter Magolda highlights in the statement above suggests a dynamic interplay between self-development and engagement with relationships and communities. This interplay is evident in the findings from a collaborative action research project we conducted with a team of undergraduate students on three leadership programs on Bryn Mawr College's campus. Drawing on students' reflections on and analyses of their experiences in these programs, we present a case study that illustrates and seeks to extend Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship as it relates to undergraduate students' development as leaders for social change.

We frame this study with a brief review of literature on self-authorship and student leadership. We then present an overview of the context of our study, a description of the programs, and a discussion of our methods. Our discussion focuses on how students develop as individual (although not autonomous) agents in relation to how they develop as leaders in efforts to help the institution and community to "function more effectively and humanely" (HERI, 1996, p. 19) through engaging in three interrelated sets of practices: discerning differences and

bringing those differences into dialogue; revising their sense of themselves and becoming more serious students; and revising relationships and creating community.

Self-Authorship and Student Leadership: Situating This Study in the Literature

The interplay between self-authorship and leadership is constituted in part by a capacity for responsiveness —based on attention both to one's own internal compass and to other people and contexts.

Self-authorship is the process of internally coordinating one's beliefs, values, and interpersonal loyalties rather than depending on external values, beliefs, and loyalties (Kegan, 1994). Through this process, young adults develop their internal voices to meet challenges (Baxter Magolda, 2009). "Self-authoring one's life is an ongoing process" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 55), and "learning how to listen to 'our own insides' and how to consciously and responsibly make meaningful sense of self and world is a kind of journey" (Parks, 2009, p. xvi). In Baxter Magolda's framework, there are three phases on the journey: (1) following external formulas; (2) the cross-roads, at which one realizes her dissatisfaction with being defined by others and recognizes the need to look within for self-definition; and (3) becoming the author of one's own life. These phases reveal how three dimensions of development — (1) how we know or decide what to believe (the epistemological dimension), (2) how we view ourselves (the intrapersonal dimension), and (3) how we construct relationships with others (the interpersonal dimension) — intertwine to contribute to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2004, 2001).

The "complex integration of connection and autonomy" (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. xx) that defines self-authorship is amplified when students develop a sense of responsibility based on their clarified sense of themselves and their realization of connections to others. The latter can

lead to what Komives et al. (2006) describe as "coming to an awareness" that one "can make a difference and can work effectively with others to accomplish change" (p. 3). Researchers have found that students can successfully take on a range of leadership roles in campus climate change initiatives (Helferti & Clarke, 2009), and can "change the institutional culture" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 27). Efforts to prepare students to become leaders take many forms (see Outcalt et al., 2001, for examples). Key to the success of student leaders is their development of self-awareness (Astin, 1996) through engagement in reflection and interaction, particularly through constructive dialogue (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Processes that teach students how to talk about, think about, and create community emphasize students developing conceptual frameworks, language, and interpersonal capacity (Varlott, 2008). The democratic forms of leadership that programs like those mentioned above aim to develop diverge from traditional top-down models of leadership (Alvarado, 1997; Coyle, 1997; Harris & Lambert, 2003) and support the development of contemporary leadership qualities acknowledged by theorists as essential: collaboration and participation, motivation, and interpersonal communication (Bush & Bell, 2002).

Context: Bryn Mawr College and Three Leadership Programs

The institutional context in which this study is situated is a small, selective liberal arts college in the northeastern United States. The student leadership programs include a nationally based leadership program (Posse), a student-driven social justice project (SJPP), and a home-grown, cross-constituency teaching and learning initiative (TLI).

As their website explains, the Posse Foundation "identifies public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes." Posse's partner colleges and universities award Posse Scholars

four-year, full-tuition leadership scholarships. Posse students arrive as a group on Bryn Mawr

College's campus, having been selected through a highly competitive process and prepared to

serve as leaders. Since 2000, a total of 90 students have attended Bryn Mawr College in nine

Posses. Jody Cohen has served as a Posse mentor since the program's second year on campus.

The Social Justice Partnership Program (SJPP) emerged in response to a racially charged

incident on campus in Spring 2007. A group of students took leadership and, with the

collaboration of faculty and staff, created a program to support community members in

developing the capacity to talk across differences in cohorts of students, faculty, and staff that

meet every other week and discuss issues of diversity. To date, approximately 300 students have

participated in SJPP, thirty in formal leadership roles, the rest as cohort members (see Cook-

Sather, Cohen, & Alter, 2010, for a discussion of this program). Alison Cook-Sather and Jody

Cohen have been members of the SJPP steering committee since its inception, and Alice Lesnick

has served as a cohort co-facilitator.

The Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI) was created in 2006 when administrators,

members of the Board of Trustees, and a small group of faculty took stock of the teaching and

learning opportunities afforded faculty and staff on campus and created a community-building

initiative through which students choose to work with faculty, staff members, and one another as

educational partners (http://www.brynmawr.edu/tli). The faculty development work is supported

by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the staff education work is supported by the Offices

of the Chief Administrative Officer and the Chief Information Officer at [College] (see Cook-

Sather, 2010a, 2010b, 2009, 2008, Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010, and Lesnick, 2010, for

discussions of this work). Fifty-three students have participated as pedagogical consultants to

faculty members, and 95 as mentors to and partners with staff. Cook-Sather oversees the TLI,

Lesnick launched the staff education program, and Lesnick and Cohen have participated in faculty/student partnerships.

All three programs encourage students to lead cross-cultural communication with the goals of greater understanding, respect, and empowerment; support students as they assume ownership of the academic and social missions of the College; and challenge students to work productively within *and* to change existing structures and practices in the academy and the world. Our focus overlaps with and complicates Baxter Magolda's as reflected by our differing research methods and conceptions of how individual growth and social change may be related. Baxter Magolda's interview method reinforces her focus on individual development. While her participants certainly refer to social contexts, her focus remains individualistic and does not address participants in the context of their communities. In contrast, our study is situated within an institution and around identified, targeted challenges on campus and in the world that students are engaged with groups in addressing. Our use of focus groups and collaborative, participatory reflection with students reflects this more group- and context-saturated perspective. Thus, we argue that self-development can entail not only recognizing one's power to change one's own perceptions and reactions but also deliberately questioning and seeking to change aspects of the world.

Methods

With the support of the Provost's and Admissions Offices and approval from Bryn Mawr College's Institutional Review Board, we conducted a collaborative action research study to investigate students' experiences in the programs. Both our methodology and the modes in which students engage through the leadership programs reflect what Belenkey et al. (1986) and Clinchy

(1996) call connected knowing. The emphasis is not on "propositions and validity of inferences but on experiences or ways of seeing" (Elbow, 1986, p. 261); the concern is not with the "soundness of the position but with the meaning to the knower" (Clinchy, 1996); and the purpose is to understand the meaning perspectives of participants (Erickson, 1986). Connected knowing is a rigorous, deliberate procedure (Belenky et al. 1986) that intersected for us with action research's commitment to erode "the boundaries between action and knowledge-generation" (Somekh & Zeichner 2009, p. 6) and its potential to result "not only in collective vision but also a sense of community" (Stringer, 2007, p. 11).

We began, in early Fall 2008, by holding focus groups (Morgan 1996) that positioned students as informants on their experiences (Cook-Sather, 2007; Fine et al., 2007; Thiessen, 1997). We invited all 138 students who had participated in leadership roles in these programs and for whom we could obtain email addresses to participate. A total of 45 students (four graduates and 41 current students) attended one of four focus groups. We used a single question — "What have you gotten out of your participation in these projects (SJPP, Posse, TLI)?" — to prompt open discussion, through which students surfaced themes that would inform the survey (deVaus, 2002) we developed subsequently. All focus group discussions were transcribed and initial themes identified.

After these meetings, we formed a research team of the three of us faculty and seven students, selected to represent participation across the programs and dimensions of diversity in the student body. Each member read the focus group transcripts and identified themes, and the research team drafted and revised the survey until it captured the questions we wanted to explore. In early Spring 2009 we sent the survey to the 138 participants and received 71 responses (roughly a 50% response rate); of these, 49 completed all fields. Based on responses, the research

team generated follow-up questions and invited the same students to again participate in focus groups. Twenty-one participated in this second round, each focus group facilitated by two members of the research team.

Working with the data generated through both sets of focus groups and the survey, the entire research team conducted analysis sessions. In Summer 2009, the faculty members of the team used constant comparison/grounded theory (Creswell, 2006; Strauss, 1987) to analyze the data and, keeping in mind the themes student researchers had emphasized, identified the three sets of interrelated practices we present here: discerning differences and bringing those differences into dialogue; revising their sense of themselves and becoming more serious students; and revising relationships and creating community. We shared these categories with the student members, who refined them and selected additional illustrative examples from the data. In the following discussion, each example represents the experience and perspective of at least three students.

Three Interrelated Sets of Practices that Contribute to Self-Authorship and Leadership for Social Change

The three sets of interrelated practices that emerged from our data offer glimpses into the journey toward self-authorship and the process of developing capacity as leaders for social change. Across these sets of practices we see a movement from discernment to revision to recreation.

The first set highlights insights that illuminate students' own experiences and values and inspire them to engage with others' experiences and values. This set of practices aligns with the first and second of Baxter Magolda's (2008) three-phase journey toward self-authorship —

following external formulas and the cross-roads — and is foundational for assuming leadership roles that require both self-awareness and capacity to engage with others.

The second set of practices constitutes a more active process of revision, which can be seen as spanning the second and the third phases of Baxter Magolda's (2008) sequence — the cross-roads and becoming the author of one's own life — and the parallel increase in agency through becoming a leader.

Through the third set, students begin to forge relationships based on their personal values and commitments, and to make change with and for others in the community.

Discerning Differences and Bringing Differences in Dialogue

This first pair of practices refers to the sudden insights students experience through the three programs — realizations about themselves and others — and their subsequent efforts to enter into dialogue rather than retreat and experience differences as impediments.

Discerning Differences

In this phase, students talk about "becoming aware" of others and of differences between themselves and others. This may entail a sharp perception of others as distinct from oneself, (as if) for the first time: "You might be with a friend, but all of a sudden you are seeing them in a different role" (Focus Group, 3.30.09). Baxter Magolda (2009) has argued that, "As we travel along our developmental journey, we interpret things we see along the way through the perspectives we have acquired—rules of how we have come to think about the world and ourselves. Generally speaking, we do not consciously think about these rules unless something unexpected happens that surprises us" (p. 3). Encounters with different perspectives is that

unexpected happening.

Students in these programs discern differences in a fresh way. As one Posse student put it: "Despite students' similar backgrounds we can look at our lives from completely different perspectives — this has given me lots of light bulb moments — 'oh, you think of it that way?!'" (Focus Group, 4.6.09). This is an example of what Parks (2000) describes as "becoming critically aware of one's own compositing of reality" (p. 6) —prompted by realizing that someone else's reality is composed differently.

Rather than trying to reconcile diverse perspectives, students talk about developing "the whole idea of having multiple perspectives" (Focus Group, 12.10.08) and pose questions such as "How many different ways are there to express something, like the many different meanings of student silence?" (Survey).

Bringing Difference into Dialogue

Within program structures that support dialogue across difference, students work through discomfort and across conflicting ideas. One student explained how her experience in SJPP "has really provided me a space to articulate what's going on in my head and a space where other individuals can bring in what they are thinking about" (Focus Group, 12.15.08). In these spaces, people who might not otherwise know each other or be status equals come together to talk about intense, personal, and political issues.

Because these programs occur consistently and over time, students practice what they learn: "I hear where people are coming from, then think about that before making assumptions" (Focus Group, 3.27.09). They invent language to express new insights, as one TLI student explains: "Education is emotional — I learned to leave the space to create language for talking

about this kind of thing with my [TLI] professor" (Focus Group, 4.6.09). Truly "*hear(ing)* where people are coming from" and "creat(ing) language" for conversations across difference require that participants take risks and sit with uncertainty, as they engage cognitive and emotional dissonance.

In bringing differences into dialogue students manifest "connected knowing" (Belenkey et al., 1986) — they want to learn from multiple "ways of seeing" (Elbow, 1986, p. 261), and are concerned with "the meaning to the knower" (Clinchy, 1996). Through these practices of discernment, students develop "the capacity to actively listen to multiple perspectives" and "openness to new possibilities and diverse others" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xxii); they strive to create spaces for growth — an aspect of leadership.

Revising Sense of Self and Becoming a More Serious Student

Spanning the second and third phases of Baxter Magolda's (2008) journey, students move from discernment to revision, clarifying a sense of themselves *as individuals* and specifically *as students*. Students question and re-imagine themselves, reconsidering their responsibilities to themselves and others. In one student's words: "Before Posse, my attitude was more, 'I have this to teach someone and work to change them,' but now I'm open to changing myself as part of it" (Focus Group 4.06.09). Becoming more serious students means not only developing greater capacity as individuals but also taking more responsibility for others' education — a form of leadership.

Revising Sense of Self

Students' self-revision builds directly on their developing capacity to listen. As one Posse

student claimed, "Once you start listening to people's biases and recognizing your own, that's not something you can then stop" (Focus Group, 12.19.09). In the context of developing self-authorship, such listening does not reflect the need for others' approval (Baxter Magolda, 2008) but rather creates possibilities for authentic relationship. In one student's words, "I am a student within a community — community member. I have realized that there's a bigger picture, and it isn't all about me" (Focus Group, 3.27.09). Rather than express fear or discouragement when faced with this "bigger picture," students describe feeling empowered; through self-development, they can contribute to others' development:

> I have experienced working with older family members in my household who have some of the same life experiences and difficulties as the staff who work at [Bryn Mawr College]. Having participated in this program has helped me develop into a patient, confident individual who believes that I can really make a difference in many people's lives. (Survey, TLI)

Students' self-revisions emerge from and catalyze their interactions with others. They talk about "being open, not being judgmental" (Focus Group, 3.30.09), and "work(ing) with others (to) create unity" (Survey, Posse). Students report gaining a sense of being valuable to the community, even as they examine and change their values. Thus, self-development and leadership development are fundamentally linked.

Becoming a Stronger, More Serious Student

As students progress toward self-authorship and leadership for social change, they become stronger students and take more responsibility for co-constructing their learning environments. Through the co-curricular experiences of diversity leadership, students experience

increased academic engagement, responsibility, and agency. A Posse student describes how she develops a "power voice"; another student explains: "I am a more thoughtful person and serious student because of [SJPP and TLI]" (Survey).

Participation in the TLI affords students the opportunity to develop responsibility and agency in new roles. One student explained: "When a class isn't working for me, instead of just resigning [myself] to the idea that it's a bad class, I work to understand why I am having a negative experience and what would need to happen to make it a positive one" (Survey). This student recognizes the need to "take responsibility for crafting [her] own identity" as a student (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 49).

A sense of connection and belonging to the College community strengthens these students in their role as students. A Posse student explains:

A sense of belonging to the community has definitely helped me transition . . .
Once I was able to recognize that I too am a student of [College] with an
academic stake, I felt more comfortable about approaching professors with papers
and joining organizations, therefore boosting my overall confidence on campus.
(Survey)
Seeing themselves as substantive contributors to programs of value to the College enhances students' confidence and sense of purpose:

As a student of color …[being] part of these programs allowed me to feel
embedded within the community, although at times I still feel as if I am not as
embedded as most other white individuals on campus. As a freshman, I even
questioned my place on this campus. However, my Posse motivated me to stay
and knowing that other programs like TLI and SJPP need people like ME forced

me to stay. (Survey)

Highlighted in these shifts, students expose, and move beyond, the limitations of the competitive, achievement-driven educational context, resituating academic life in a broader field not confined to a concern with individual advancement. Through these programs, students are developing their values, their sense of identity, and their evolving capacity to construct independent relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2008) in an institutional setting in which they engage more deeply and creatively.

Revising Leadership Relationships and Creating Community

 In revising themselves and taking increased responsibility for their own and others' education, students develop "the capacity to engage in authentic, interdependent relationships with diverse others" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 49). In the third pair of practices, we focus on how students reposition themselves in leadership relationship to other individuals and as members of community.

Revising Leadership Relationships

In their reflections, students redefine leadership in terms of trust, collaboration, and sharing — rather than accumulating — power to forward common goals. One student explains: "I learned how to trust and be okay with being vulnerable, let others carry some of the weight, trust them, as when co-facilitating Posse meetings" (Focus Group, 4.6.09). Another reflects: "I learned not to try to do everything myself. It started out that I did everything [in SJPP over the summer]. Once people got back to school, I learned I couldn't and we are a team" (Focus Group, 12.19.09). About sharing power, a third argues: "Nothing is more powerful than seeing a

professor take your ideas seriously, to have rich discussion about them and possibly see them

implemented into a class" (Survey).

These insights align remarkably well with Astin & Astin's (2000) four principles of

leadership: empathy, self-knowledge, authenticity, and disagreement with respect (pp. 20-21).

This is leadership based on connected knowing (Belenkey et al., 1986; Clinchy 1996) and on

collaboration, motivation, and interpersonal communication (Bush and Bell, 2002).

Creating Community

Students' understanding of community is also complex and relational, including their

recognition of the role of conflict. As Parker Palmer has argued, community, and knowledge,

depend on conflict: "[the] primary virtue [in a "community of scholars"] is capacity for creative

conflict….[T]here is no knowing without conflict." Students too understand that "community is

conflict, and when there is no conflict, someone is most definitely repressed" (Research Meeting

Responses, 3.09.09, Posse student). They raise such questions as "When are you part of what

community?' and "In what situations does one community take precedence over another?"

(Research Meeting Responses, 3.09.09, TLI student).

Students come to see that conflict, engaged productively, can help their efforts to "work

effectively with others to accomplish change" (Komives et al., 2006, p. 3). Through their

experiences, students strengthen their sense of belonging to their community and talk about

developing skills (patience, persistence, listening, initiating change) that position them to

encourage others. Their recognition of the importance of including a wide range of people

prompts students to affirm a "common language and concerns":

I am sustained deeply by this work…helping to build and support relationships

between differently positioned community members, bringing teaching and

learning to the forefront of our community's common language and concerns.

Now we all can teach, we all can learn, and more and more of our community

believes that. (Survey)

This affirmation of unity represents a complex instantiation of "self-authorship" via a greater

uptake of diversity, individual capacity, belonging, and challenge to the institutional context.

Conclusion

Concluding her discussion of students' self-authorship, Baxter Magolda (2001) asserts:

Colleges must offer a new kind of partnership to prepare graduates more

effectively for the self-authorship demanded by contemporary society…These

mutual partnerships mean giving learners more control and responsibility for their

journeys and their lives. They mean reducing external control and enhancing

internal self-authorship. (p. 332).

Our research suggests that one way for educators to create these "mutual partnerships" is to co-

design liminal spaces with students, neither academic nor social per se, but suspended among the

spaces students navigate. There adults can validate learners' capacity to know, situate learning

in learners' experiences, and mutually construct meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2004).

Our study confirmed that, as adult facilitators and participants in these programs, we

must strive to be "good company," making space for participants' centrality as meaning makers

yet offering supportive partnerships (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 331). Extending Baxter

Magolda's model, we suggest that embracing students as partners or colleagues, we can create a

kind of "radical collegiality" (Fielding 1999) within which students are dialogue partners, co-

conceptualizers, and co-constructors of educational experiences and institutional revision (Cook-Sather, 2010a; Fielding, 2006; Rudduck 2007). Such opportunities support students, and their elders, in the dynamic interplay between self-authorship and development as leaders for social change.

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