The Scholar-Practitioner Concept and Its Implications for Self-Renewal
A Doctoral Student's Perspective

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Abstract

There are basically two types of educators in the educational community: those that have become embittered and unable to remain effective, and those that continue to remain passionate learners. The scholar-practitioner model offers an opportunity for self-renewal, as experienced by one doctoral student finding herself at a point where she had to decide which type she would identify with. The zeal of scholarly work, when placed within the confines of practice, will sustain the flames of learning, even as one moves through change.

Introduction

In the educational community, there are basically two types of educators: those that have or will become embittered, hardened, and unable to remain effective, and those that protect their hearts by remaining passionate learners (Palmer, 1998). It doesn't take long to determine an individual's classification. Just listen to the voices heard wherever faculty might gather to converse, as either positive or negative comments that focus on students, teachers, and administrators as policies ripple through the air.

Fortunately, each individual has a choice as to the type of educator he or she will become. Daily choices spiral one upon the other, and over a long period of time help to shape attitudes and beliefs. For those that align themselves with the second category, the excitement and fun found in learning naturally spills

over to others as people are drawn into meaningful dialogue. This enthusiastic, unquenchable zeal does not necessarily stem from outside pressure to raise test scores or to acquire advanced degrees, but emanates from within as a "desire to understand, to preserve, or change the world" (Heinrich, 2001, p. 89). DuBois (1983) believed that this internal desire was driven by "a passion for substance to answer questions central to the discipline and to social and humanitarian goals of society" (p. 46).

A key concern for today's educational family revolves around the ability to self-renew, as teachers and administrators are faced with the challenge of making necessary changes and implementing fast-paced, innovative programs, while parents, community members, and businesses await results to quantify any signs of growth. Feelings of exhaustion attack and weaken our immunities against negativism, inadvertently impacting a leader's ability to perform. Does embracing the characteristics of a scholar-practitioner also help to protect one against burnout and create the capacity to self-renew? How has the scholar-practitioner conceptual model assisted in the self-renewal of one doctoral student? Can the same method be successful in safeguarding others?

What is a Scholar-Practitioner?

Defining the term scholar-practitioner is not necessarily a simple task, for the intellectual work cannot occur apart from the development of one's identity within and across cultures, as we grasp this "dynamic connectedness" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 25). Jenlink (2003) stated that the scholar-practitioner draws "from diverse conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, and methodological tools to create a bricolage of scholarly practice, shaping one's identity and at the same time working to enable 'Others' to develop identities" (pp. 5–6). We dwell in a world that co-evolves as we intermingle with it. There is constant motion within the system as it continues to evolve, requiring the scholar-practitioner to change as he or she researches, analyzes, teaches, learns, and grows.

Horn (2002) grounded the conceptual model of a scholar-practitioner by delineating the "interplay between theory and practice, which enables them to recognize the ubiquity of their interaction with others" (p. 83). Mullen (2003) envisioned a change agent who deals with the enormous pressures facing all educators today, by confronting these struggles instead of merely absorbing or ignoring them. In order to successfully emerge from these demands, a scholar-practitioner must be a craftsman of his or her trade, wisely selecting appropriate tools that will serve to accomplish the specific task.

Scholar-practitioners desire to gain an intimate awareness of their practice, with the objective being to better navigate the course that lies ahead. This individual is known as "the interpreter, creator, user, evaluator, and re-creator of theory" (Bloomer & James, 2003, p. 249); systematically, through processes that tend to be interpretive and reflective in nature, practices are "achieved,

perpetuated, or transformed" (p. 249). The scholar-practitioner will find that having "a perpetual curiosity, a focused commitment, and a willingness to risk challenges" (Heinrich, 2001, p. 99) increases the desire to acquire new information about one's practice and engagement.

Pracademicians, a term coined by Salipante and Aram (2003), mirror scholar-practitioners in that they span the boundaries between the world of academia and the world of practice resulting in a more authentic outcome. Additional blurring often occurs between artificial boundaries (i.e., research paradigms, theory and practice, scholars and practitioners, professional and personal, rationality and emotion), or binaries. "These binaries are collapsed as the scholar-practitioner-as-bricoleur utilizes an eclectic mix of inquiry methods and methodologies to better understand the deep and hidden meanings of a phenomenon" (Mullen, 2003, p. 24).

Connecting the Scholar-Practitioner Model
to Self-Renewal

All leaders within the school environment at some point in their career find perspectives and beliefs as well as strategies and implementation techniques challenged as newer methods are introduced either through professional development opportunities or read about in books and journals. The essence of change often evokes feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, stress, loss, anxiety, conflict, and strain (Oplatka, 2003). It is during these low periods that an individual may experience burnout.

Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) characterized burnout as a "prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment" (pp. 397, 399). Farber (1991) concluded that between 5% and 20% of all American educators are burned out, due to the escalating workload and the intense scrutiny that has been placed upon schools to increase their performance level. Taris, van Horn, Schaufeli, and Schreurs (2004) found that people must maintain a balance between the professional and the personal self. If the balance becomes and remains off-centered for a sustained period of time, the risk of developing burnout significantly increases. Gardner (1981) determined that motivation and tough-minded optimism is a necessity in life, as well as energy and stamina, self-development, self-knowledge, courage, and love. These characteristics tend to help ground individuals and protect them from the possibility of burnout. The scholar-practitioner embraces this optimistic approach to life, as opportunities are seen as a means for growth, and multifaceted learning experiences await the individual at every turn.

One such approach to professional development, as well as furthering the development of self, has been found in the pursuit of doctoral studies. Educators,

upon graduating from a university with a bachelor's degree, often find the lure of advanced placement or higher salaries too much of a temptation. Soon after graduation, many of these individuals find themselves enrolled in a master's level program, and they quickly find the assignments to be relevant to their job, as well as mentally stimulating. The scholar-practitioner way of thinking, similar to a sleeping giant, awakens inside the individual, causing vital connections to be made from the class work to the professional work. As a smaller, more intensely committed group of individuals continues to move higher up the educational ladder, the desire to have "a greater focus of education as a field of inquiry, higher personal and professional standards, professional breadth and depth, and the opportunity to integrate the body of knowledge" (Jablonski, 2001, p. 220) also increases. Value is observed by participating in a doctoral program as a means of lifelong learning, as well as the opportunity to integrate theory and practice, in other words, to reach maximum potential as a fully developed scholar-practitioner.

Doctoral programs encourage its members to develop in "passionate scholarship" (Heinrich, 2001, p. 89) often times by fostering a community of scholar-practitioners immersed in a caring culture. The work that is conducted is "exciting and risky, personally meaningful and socially relevant" (Heinrich, 2001, p. 92) to professional work found in the education field. Opportunities to participate in passionate work provide significance in personal and professional growth; rewards stem from the process as well as the outcome. Doctoral students, once fully committed to the process, find the journey to be filled with potential dangers. However, the struggle of determining whether or not the costs and the benefits are actually worth the commitment ceases as each individual finds the process to be well worth the battle. Throughout this cyclical progression, a strong sense of self emerges converting the doctoral student into a transformational leader, one that has discovered there is great fun in passionate scholarship and practice.

A Personal Reflection:
Through the Eyes of One Doctoral Student

In the spring of 2003, I received notification of being accepted into an educational leadership doctoral program. It was at the same time, coincidentally, that my job as science coordinator, along with 18 other administrative jobs, was being cut. This was a period full of anxiety and stress, as I began to search for another job. I realized that the opportunity to participate as a doctoral student would serve as a stabilizing factor, mentally and emotionally, as well as challenge me in all aspects of my life. Needless to say, I was excited about the experience that awaited me.

After the first class meeting, I found myself among a cohort of 16, representing the state as well as the educational field, including teachers, administrators,

and higher education people with varying years of experience. Assignments were given, and after a very long day, I drove home to contemplate my decision. That night, sleep did not come easily. I remember dreaming that someone had placed a hat upon my head; however, after a few moments, an ever-increasing suction began forming around the brim. The force became so tight that it was virtually impossible to remove the hat. My head hurt and my brains felt as if they were going to be stretched beyond all normal boundaries. As night gave way to morning, I realized that this dream might be prophetic, unveiling a momentary glimpse of what was to come.

During that first year, each member of the cohort traveled to a place hidden to outsiders. I ventured into my inner depths with fearful trepidation, as foundational beliefs were scrutinized. Wheatley (1999) wrote, "Belief is the place from which true change originates" (p. 3). I was sensing a change occurring within me, as ideas and thoughts were deconstructed and reconstructed, only to be deconstructed once more. I began to take what was read and discussed in our classes back to my job site, directly connecting the scholarship aspect of a doctoral program with the practical side of my profession.

Since beginning in the summer of 2003, I have learned much about the scholar-practitioner conceptual model and have applied what has been learned directly to my teaching profession. As a teacher-in-residence at a local university, it is my responsibility to work with area science and math teachers, as well as their school districts, as they hone their skills and find ways to integrate and advance science and math content across grade levels. As I supervise teachers and provide feedback, I also understand from the scholar-practitioner's standpoint that "it is not sufficient for us to just do, as models of the doing, but rather we must reflect on our own process of doing in a manner that makes it accessible to others" (Holloway, 1994, p. 7). Holloway continued, "The goal of supervision is to connect science and practice . . . to make and live out the connections between the science knowledge and practice knowledge" (p. 7). It is in both the articulation and the understanding of our practice as educators that we are capable of uncovering the relationship between the scholarly work and the practical aspect of teaching.

Three guiding questions, arising from lessons learned through the scholar-practitioner model, have caused me to stop and reflect upon my actions and words in my daily practice: What am I doing; why am I doing it; and why does it matter? The scholarly grounding permits me to delve into the research and explore methods and theories that help explain my actions. The reflective and reflexive piece allows time to contemplate my teaching, as well as my foundational beliefs and attitudes. The evaluative piece permits a time of gathering data in an effort to mark any growth, as it directly relates to my actions, whether it is done quantitatively or qualitatively.

Palmer (1990) discussed a moment in his life where he was participating in an Outward Bound program, hoping to learn about the wilderness but as a result, learning much more about himself. During an afternoon's activity, he was asked

to walk down the face of a cliff. Unable to see the course that was before him, and completely entrusting his life to the harness system and the instructors, he attached himself to the gossamer strand and flung his feet away from the ground and into the unknown. As he progressed downward, he found himself entering a very large hole in the rock. Fear overtook him and he froze; he was unable to move to the right or left. As he hung there in an almost lifeless state, the instructor called out to him, "If you can't get out of it, get into it" (p. 33).

I have often times found myself hanging lifelessly from the rock's ledge; but with the coaxing of my instructors and cohort members, I continue to find the strength and courage necessary to move on. The self-renewal process that I have witnessed in myself has been phenomenal. Even as I continue to experience days of doubt and frustration, I am finding that this season has been one of growth and fulfillment. I momentarily reflect back on the hat dream, and realize that the suction represented a time of knowledge expansion unlike anything known to me before.

As witnessed in my students, once something is mastered, it is put behind them and the passionate dedication to learning is soon forgotten. What was learned in our undergraduate studies is often misplaced in the day-to-day inner workings; the lessons from graduate level programs will be sifted, and the pertinent lessons will remain with us to be used as necessary. But the lessons that are gained through the interconnectedness of a doctoral program, especially one that embraces the characteristics of a scholar-practitioner, will forever remain as a sweet taste in a student's mouth. It is within those characteristics that we find passionate, dynamic relationships emerge as scholar-practitioners intermingle with other scholar-practitioners. "Be confident that life is good and trustworthy. The great failure is not that of leading a full and vital active life, with all the mistakes and suffering such a life will bring (along with its joys); the failure is to withdraw fearfully from the place to which one is called, to squander the most precious of all our birthrights—the experience of aliveness itself" (Palmer, 1990, p. 8).

Conclusion

Educational leaders must have the opportunities to experience and understand pertinent theories, therefore transferring that knowledge into daily practice. Sergiovanni (1991) believed that theory in practice must seek to establish augmented professional intelligence, thereby serving to inform, not replace, the intuitions of administrators as they practice. Jenlink (2001) reiterated Dewey's notion of scholar-practitioner by stating that this individual "reflects characteristics of a practitioner who is a scholar as well as a practitioner, and understands the intellectual, moral, and social responsibility of education in relation to a transforming society" (p. 6).

By using inquiry and the other characteristics of scholar-practitioner, a building administrator redefines the relationship to knowledge and transfers that

knowledge to staff members, colleagues, and students causing a reconstructing or renewal of practice. Instead of being crippled through the frustration associated with change on a building or a classroom level, the scholar-practitioner applies a variety of lenses to interrogate and explore the situation, further advancing the value and practice of serving in the educational community. Giroux (1994) believed that the construction of a scholar-practitioner would help to create schools that provide a sense of hope and social responsibility. In essence, the scholar-practitioner is called forth to mediate professional practice, formal knowledge, and theory in a disciplined and scholarly fashion, remaining practical as each decision is guided into becoming and as necessitated on all levels of the educational continuum.

With the advent of educational accountability and the increasing job-related stress, school districts scramble to attract and maintain highly qualified faculty and staff. Yet, in spite of the demands, there remains the growing need for visionary instructional leaders to step up to the task, and meet the challenges head on in a wise and compassionate manner. The ability to self-renew will guarantee the sustainability of valued members of the educational family.

Oplatka (2001) found that the concept of self-renewal maintains four different points of view: the first is involved with a personal relationship encouraging an updating of beliefs, theories, ideas, and actions; the second centers around a means of revitalizing attitudes and faith, where individuals replenish internal energy and rebuild their self-concept; the third seeks intellectual stimulation; and the fourth values a time of reflection, re-evaluation, and re-creation of the self. Each of these key points directly relates to the notion of scholar-practitioner, and if this method of learning and practice is encouraged throughout our schools, the chances of burnout and decline experienced in teachers and administrators might lessen or even possible diminish altogether. Leaders that choose the scholar-practitioner way of life will tend to remain effective and motivated for many years to come, as the impact of the lives of such change agents continue to impact our students long after they have left the building.

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