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PROVOCATIONS
AND
PROVOCATEURS

Editor's Introduction

DENIS GIOIA

As Arthur Bedeian so succinctly points out in the opening of his following essay, you do not need to be a rantier to be a provocateur. Sometimes provocateurs gently sneak up on you. I have known Art a long time, and perhaps my most enduring characterization of him is that he is, above all, a gentleman. Gentlemen can be provocative, of course, but their provocations tend to be couched in the most gentle of language and example. That's the case here. Art takes us to a place where many of us have lived for many years, often without knowing it—in the memories of our students. It's a place we hope we inhabit well, but most of us are prone to wondering about whether our teachings, our preachings, and/or our practices make any real difference. He makes the case well that we often do, using himself as his own best example. His message is a good one on which to reflect: Your greatest contribution as a scholar is likely to be in the sometimes subtle effect you have on your students' lives as a teacher, and yet you might be blithely unaware of the influence you wield in this role. In the venerable mode of storytelling by a careful observer with a long memory of rich experience, our teacher teaches us about teaching.

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Critical Moments in Learning A Teacher's Ultimate Reward and Glory

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This essays builds on the notion of "critical moments in learning" to suggest that teachers often teach without knowing it and that regardless of how much they publish, their greatest contribution is more likely to be in the lasting impact they have on their students' lives. In doing so, the author reflects on critical learning moments in his own education and, in turn, ponders how actions he had taken in and out of the classroom may have unwittingly influenced the thoughts, feelings, and, sometimes, even lives of the many students who had enrolled in his courses.

Keywords: *critical learning moments; teaching; memories*

"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

—Henry B. Adams (1918, p. 300)

When I first considered preparing an essay for the Provocations and Provocateurs section, I considered either addressing one of several academic issues that have been gnawing at me for some time or commenting on some absurdity that I had observed within our discipline. Starting with my Academy of Management Presidential Address (1989), however, I have done my share (some would doubtless say I have done more than my share) of

"stirring up the field," or what others might less charitably call "ranting and raving," which is the more usual purpose of a section titled "Provocations and Provocateurs." Thus, as enticing as the opportunity may be to comment once again on various peculiarities that plague our common academic enterprise, I have chosen to use this occasion to share a series of thoughts (some yet inchoate) on a topic that is close to my heart—my experiences as both a student and a teacher.

The origins of these thoughts go back to an incident that has been stuck in my mind for almost three decades. Over these many years, this one incident has prompted me to interpret and reinterpret my influence

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The helpful comments of Courtland M. Chaney, Hubert S. Feild, Peter J. Giordano, Hettie A. Richardson, and Shannon G. Taylor on a draft manuscript are gratefully acknowledged. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Arthur G. Bedeian, Department of Management, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-6312; e-mail: abede@lsu.edu.

JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT INQUIRY, Vol. 16 No. 4, December 2007 408-411

DOI: 10.1177/1056492607307595

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as a teacher, as well as to wonder whether the teachers who have affected my life have had any way of knowing about their part in determining where I am today. My purpose in reflecting on these experiences is not to engage in a display of public catharsis or self-flattery. Rather, my intent is to comment on what I have since come to appreciate as "critical moments in learning." In doing so, I hope to possibly validate the private thoughts of others regarding their experiences as a teacher and, perhaps, even provide a moment of reflection and revelation for those who have not realized the critical learning moments they have experienced and perhaps caused.

CRITICAL MOMENTS

Whereas the incident that prompted my thinking happened long ago, it was not until 3 years ago, when I stumbled across a 2004 Web-posting titled "Teaching and Learning When We Least Expect It: The Role of Critical Moments in Student Development" by Peter J. Giordano that I first realized my thoughts on learning and education had been articulated by someone else. As described by Pete, "critical moments in learning" (his term) are specific and identifiable moments that are transformative in the impact that they have on the education of students. He notes, however, that these moments are generally rare, typically related to personal issues, often possess an emotional component, require time before a student recognizes their significance, and are hard to predict. Furthermore, as teachers, we probably do not even know they have occurred. It is this last characteristic that Pete and I both find humbling, perhaps even troubling, and, above all, intriguing.

The incident that has remained lodged in my mind all these years incorporates each of the preceding core characteristics. At the time the incident occurred, I had been teaching for perhaps 12 years. In the principles of management course that I was regularly assigned, I had up to 400 students in a single section, so I was unaccustomed to thinking in terms of significantly influencing students on an individual level. One day, however, as I was into Draughton Library on the Auburn University main campus, I was approached by a staff librarian who began to tell me about how her niece's interest in school and, indeed, her entire life had been altered following a one-on-one conversation

in my office. Evidently, sometime in the past, her niece had come to my office in response to having done poorly on one of my mass exams, and the concern I had expressed in her schoolwork and future had so inspired her that she turned a corner and, to her parents' relief (amazement?), had gone on to successfully graduate. As the aunt spoke, however, it quickly became painfully obvious that I had no memory of her niece or whatever I had said. The aunt was visibly crestfallen and I, of course, was more than a bit embarrassed not to have recalled such a momentous personal event. To this day, I still have no idea of the niece's identity or what magic words I had managed to utter. The niece was likely one of any number of students who had done poorly on an exam and to whom I had read the "riot act" to good effect.

MOMENTOUS EVENTS AND VIVID MEMORIES

In writing about "Momentous events and vivid memories," David Pillemer (1998) analyzes a somewhat similar incident. He notes that whereas speakers may be unaware that a "message" has been delivered, their words may nevertheless have "symbolic meaning." Such meaning is "created through an active, constructive process on the part of the recipient" (p. 68). This is seemingly what took place in my conversation with the librarian's niece.

Pete's work (and my memories) prompted me to look back over my own "critical moments in learning" and ponder the "symbolic meaning" that they had conveyed in my own life's course. In doing so, I have not only reflected on how various events in my own life have affected me but also how actions I have taken in and out of the classroom might have, in Henry Adams's indelible words, "influenced eternity" for more than 10,000 students who have endured my courses over the past 38 years. Several moments of critical learning, all precursors to my career as an academic, readily come to mind. Descriptions of three such instances follow. In each case, I am confident that the people involved had no inkling whatsoever that our interaction would have an enduring influence on my life. Pillemer (1998) refers to such interactions as "turning points," wherein a specific episode alters or redirects the "ongoing flow of the life course" (p. 76).

TURNING POINTS

I entered the University of Iowa as a 17-year-old freshman. Being from Memphis, I was a long way from home and did not know a soul on campus. As neither of my parents had been able to attend college, I was quite naïve about college life and more than a bit uncertain as to whether I was in over my head. Looking back, I suspect my image of attending college was most influenced by what I had seen in movies made before I was born. This said, I am unsure exactly when I first thought about going on to graduate school, but do know that, as I look back, two positive critical moments served as turning points in my life course.

The first incident took place in Irving Kovarsky's labor legislation class in the fall of my senior year. The class was a split-level course that included both undergraduate and graduate students. I did not know enough at the time to tell if the graduate students were master's level or PhDs. I remember sitting in class on the day that our midterm exams were handed back and Professor Kovarsky expressing disappointment at the number of low grades. As he reproached the class, I began to feel more and more uneasy, thinking that his comments no doubt included me. Suddenly, he walked over to my desk—I must have had a look of terror on my face—and announced that I had received the highest grade in the class and, indeed, written a perfect exam. Not only was I astonished but I suspect everyone else in the class must have been, as well. I can still picture the classroom where this took place and the pride that I felt at that moment. In a very meaningful way, my entire self-image had changed. As Professor Kovarsky went on to berate the graduate students in the class for being outperformed by an undergraduate (perhaps providing them with their own critical learning moment!), it first dawned on me that I could compete at a graduate level. After all these years, this one experience still comes to mind each time I return exams to my students. The lesson here is that positive feedback is always appreciated, especially when it comes from an esteemed source.

The second positive critical learning moment that served as a turning point in my life's course also occurred while I was an undergraduate and in the same semester that I was enrolled in Professor Kovarsky's course. At 8:00 a.m., each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I sat in Max Wortman's personnel management class. I was to learn years later

that Max had just been promoted to associate professor. He was, simply put, an animated ball of fire. Near the end of the semester, bolstered by my success in Professor Kovarsky's course, as well as my other classes, I began to seriously think about attending graduate school. As I was doing reasonably well in Max's course, I approached him one day following class to request a letter of recommendation required as part of a graduate-school application. I fully expected he'd say "Yes" and I would hand him the form on which the letter was to be submitted. To my utter surprise, rather than simply say okay, he indicated that I was to come to his office at 7:00 a.m. the next morning. I had never been to any of my professors' offices and did not even know where they were located. Phillips Hall, home to the business college, had just been dedicated and all faculty offices were on the restricted top floor, accessible by an elevator that was otherwise off-limits to students. If I had known that Max was going to request that I come to his office, I probably would have never asked for his assistance—I was that petrified. When I got to Max's office, I was relieved that he remembered who I was, as I had never opened my mouth in his class. He asked about my plans and I explained that I wanted to return home to Memphis for an MBA. At that point, he whirled around in his chair and, before I knew it, was on the phone with Don Sheriff in the college's Bureau of Labor and Management. After a few words on the phone, he turned back to me and announced that he was offering me a graduate assistantship for the next fall. Beyond being in awe of Max's decisiveness, I left his office with a newfound confidence. The fact that a professor who I admired had actually thought enough of my ability to support my graduate study seemed incredible. Once again, the symbolic meaning conveyed in a seemingly innocuous action by someone I held in high regard has had a lasting impact on shaping how I have interacted with my own students.

At this juncture, I should probably acknowledge that not all turning points associated with critical learning moments are prompted by positive feedback. Negative critical learning moments, however, can serve as motivators. During my graduate studies at Mississippi State, I took a microeconomics class from Yoon-Bock (Robert) Awh, a mathematical economist. I was definitely out of my league, having to learn calculus while at the same time trying to keep up with Professor Awh's lectures. To this day, I remember being called into Professor Awh's office to

receive my final course grade. As I reluctantly walked into his office, he looked up and shook his head saying (with a distinct Korean accent), "Art, I'm very, very disappointed." My consciousness has been seared all the many years since, but at the same time I have been inspired by the fact that Professor Awh took an interest in my performance and it mattered to him that I succeed.

GREAT TEACHERS

Over the intervening years, I have authored several books and a long list of articles. One lesson that I learned, and that I try to pass on to my graduate students, is that, regardless of how much teachers publish, their greatest contribution is more likely to be in the lasting impact that they have on their students' lives. Moreover, they will seldom have any idea when this influence is occurring. Simply stated, as teachers we often teach without knowing it. I also caution them that comments that might seem innocent or harmless to us can take on special meaning and have a lasting impact on our students. We can only hope that this impact is positive, as a 5-second aside could change a life (Giordano, 2007). It is possible that some students may impute wisdom, expertise, and even genius to us—although we are not often inclined to think of ourselves in such terms. When we respond to a question, there is always the chance that students will accept what we say as "the truth." As a result, we have an extraordinary responsibility as teachers to be aware of the lasting power of our statements.

Although I do not want to overplay the influence we have as teachers, neither should we fail to realize the impact of our praise and our negative remarks as potential critical learning moments in the lives of our students. At the same time, I hasten to add a corollary observation from an experienced colleague: Students can provide critical learning moments for teachers, as well—and, as is generally true with teachers, the students are unlikely to realize that they have done so (Courtland M. Chaney, personal communication, April 14, 2007). Moreover, as with our students, we may not realize the significance of such moments until much later, and then, only after reflection and introspection.

In closing, I would like to relate a story of which I am particularly fond (Bedeian, 1998). The story appeared in a column by Sydney Harris (1982) and deals with an obituary for a University of Chicago professor. The obituary concluded with the bleak declaration: "He left no survivors." As Harris observed, however, such a statement is ridiculous. Great teachers, even if they do not write a word, can be "survived" for generations, even centuries. Their survivors are those students whose thoughts, feelings, and, sometimes, even lives they have helped shape (for better or worse) in critical learning moments. This is a teacher's ultimate reward and glory.

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