The COVID-19 Trilogy: What I Have Learned

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Abstract: COVID-19 has caused crises, need for change and total disruption. Yet, ironically, it has allowed time for reflection and learning. As this case study of leadership, ideology and teaching danced around us, there was much to see, feel, and reflect upon. This reflection focuses on new learnings amidst the chaos and boredom of the past year.

Keywords: leadership, ideology, teaching, COVID-19, pandemic

I sit in my home office surrounded by objects that are historically here to comfort more than challenge me. Pictures of youth, dead relatives, dogs, and a trophy or two. Both anxious and bored, I keep the room's window in my peripheral vision. I spy neighbors strolling six feet apart, their pets sniffing along in the comfort of oblivion. The characters recycle every few hours. My candle burns. I have time to see, smell, and think. What am I learning?

Leadership and Science

First, I have confirmed that leadership and the research process are important. Obviously, this is not earth-shattering, but to see a case study dance before one's own eyes is somewhat stunning. One of the first tasks of leadership is to define reality (Depree, 1989). Not *your* reality, but one rooted in expertise and science.

I have enjoyed teaching both the science and art of leadership. It is a competency that is learned; one that is more nurture than nature. Politics aside, it is interesting to watch the nation's president (as of 2020) in action and then superimpose his behaviors upon any given model of leadership competencies: unity, transparency, accountability, emotional intelligence, etc. I find myself concluding that he must have read many an excellent leadership book—in fact, devoured them, and then decided to do just the opposite. An oppositional child!

Leadership is not a value-added piece; it's pretty much most of the pie. Poor leadership is not a neutral variable. It is dangerous and toxic. Poor leadership flows downward. Good employees and stakeholders depart, compounding the problem. Organizational culture devolves inside a toxic petri dish of fear and dysfunction.

More than just teaching leadership, I have found teaching undergraduate research courses fulfilling. Students come in with a low-value expectation, often with their survival mode most prominent. I try to convince all that an understanding of the scientific methods can be strategic, whether it be with a client or program evaluation. An understanding of the research process can even help with advocacy: for self, client, and profession.

For example, many years ago I was attending a nurse-driven grand rounds, a type of observation learning common in medical fields. A group of nurses did a study on the length of patient stay and discovered that it tripled when social workers were late (beyond three days of admission) in

opening their cases on their patients. Trying not to be defensive, I asked if the study controlled for patient acuity. Unsurprisingly, it had not. What the nurses captured, in live practice, were the social workers doing an effective and efficient job in triaging their large caseloads, anticipating, and aligning their efforts with each patient's medical diagnosis, prognosis, and projected discharge timeline.

Leadership driven by valid and reliable data is a powerful tool. It becomes essential—especially, say, during a pandemic. This current crisis will pass, and life will return to normal. Still, I fear that without science and leadership, a future rogue tidal wave will appear on the horizon, approaching New York City and heading straight for the Statue of Liberty and Lower Manhattan. Scary and sad, but who could have predicted this "climate change" thing was coming?

Fluid, Personal Ideology

Secondly, I learned that there is something innately bipartisan—hypocrisy. My dad and three teacher friends (at least they were friends when the endeavor started) owned and operated a summer camp when I was a kid. The Vietnam War was raging, and folk music of the "protest" variety was all the rage. One of my counselors' favorite "folkies" was Phil Ochs, and his songs eventually looped around and within my ten-year-old brain. Yet, until my mother explained later that fall, I did not realize that Ochs' song about "liberals" was one of chiding. Introducing the song, Ochs lamented that liberals were "ten degrees to the left of center in good times; ten degrees to the right of center if something affects them personally" (Ochs, 1965).

Now, many decades later, I have learned that free market capitalists and conservative Republicans are, too, not so securely anchored in their ideology when medical testing, masks, ventilators, and customers are scarce. They appear willing to nibble at socialist-flavored nuggets if taxpayer funds can bail out their self-interests.

Supply and demand does not work nor apply in safety net, crisis situations. In the "business" of healthcare, it is inefficient to stockpile beyond traditional demand. It is also "good business" to discharge frail patients during a snowstorm rather than accumulate a non-acute day or two. This practice is not the hospitals' total fault, though; they often have to operate in an irrational system, and on the slimmest of margins.

Certainly, we now find ourselves in a rather rare predicament. But our current situational crisis is not true for all. For those historically affected by health care disparities, this is their typical: continual access challenges, fear, mistrust, and—at best—a fragmented clinical treatment experience. Ironically, one that is less efficient, costlier, and paid for by you, the taxpayer and the privately insured. As I write this, data is emerging showing virus outcome disparities along racial and social-economic lines. In fact, Nova (2020) reports that in addition to the 28 million pre-COVID uninsured adults, another 5.4 million have recently joined their ranks. Mostly as the result of job loss. This cannot be surprising, but, perhaps, now harder to "turn a cheek" to. Curiously, America seems to struggle with the notion that health care could work more effectively and efficiently as a universal entitlement and should not be jerry-rigged into a capitalist, free-market business model. Especially when that system does not work for most

providers and consumers. The virus will make this clear. Health care is, in practice, already a governmental care-taking responsibility and moral imperative. Go to any emergency room and you will get health care. But an emergency room is not the place for primary or preventative care.

Finally, people seem to have this primitive, tribal need to pick our political teams and defend them at all costs (Klein, 2020). These seemingly hardwired, ideological chasms close quickly when one is face-up on a gurney—or in the queue waiting for one.

Managing and Teaching Humans from Home

The third learning leg of my COVID-19 education shifts to the possibility that technology can be your friend, especially if you do not get too clingy and become overly dependent on it. At the beginning of my college's online transition, my sister sent me a picture of a border collie sitting in front of a computer screen. On the screen, in rows of three, were fifteen neatly herded sheep. I laughed, until I quickly realized it was going to be much harder corralling a group of first-generation freshmen once they left the college-controlled pasture. And, clearly, I was not feeling the virtual-leadership confidence the border collie projected.

Thinking back to my own college days, I remembered singer/songwriter John Prine, who had recently died from virus-related complications. His lyrical stories and ironic melodies were first among the many things I'd come to appreciate during my college years. The political science student down the hall heard my Phil Ochs record and thought I'd appreciate Mr. Prine. Being campus-based was everything to me; I considered then how this change would affect students, and the disconnect now is visible.

On the "shepherd" side, at least, our current-day faculty have done a miraculous mid-semester pivot. During our virtual weekly division check-in meetings, we actually see, attune, and certainly talk with each other more so than during a typical week. Last week's Zoom faculty meeting had greater attendance and discussion than any one in recent memory. Still, I think about our freshmen (as well as the student body in general). They struggled this initial year to retain and remain at school: They fought homesickness, intellectual self-esteem, and that psychological undertow that pulls them back to what feels safe and familiar. For months, students and I worked together—at least one of us understanding the stakes were life-altering—only for me to suddenly watch them pack and leave prematurely. And as students attend lectures from the safety of their (often non-private) bedrooms, we now try to re-engage.

Like many small, private colleges, our success is interdependent with that of the student's. Budget success is tuition driven and relies heavily on retention. I feel confident that we can and will deliver the curricula to each student. However, keeping them engaged and feeling supported presents a more daunting prospect. A developmental process has been interrupted and, environmentally, students have returned to the safety and chaos of their family life. No less, at a time of extreme stress and anxiety. Can an email carry the same influence as a smile or supportively stern office meeting? Can they afford to stay involved? Will they return in the fall? Will they be allowed to? Will there even be a campus to return to?

Conclusion

In conclusion, if a crisis provides the opportunity for growth, then perhaps these days may prove purposeful and fortuitous. Slowing down does allow for observation, reflection, and learning—in technology, science, leadership, and "person-in-environment" behavior.

As such, from within the slowness of the pandemic some shortfalls are easier to spot. Higher education leadership, for example, faces its share of painful sustainability dilemmas, especially as online learning cuts costs. Deming (2020) writes that colleges may now come to view online learning as a money-saving, "non-rival" good, meaning an online lecture's lifespan is not shortened with each use or viewing. He worries more about students, though, than teaching, and fears that on-campus learning, with all its relationship building and co-curricular enhancement, will further become a luxury of the rich—thus creating more future disparities.

The one presidential message in 2020 that did resonate with me was to not make the cure worse than the disease. Some of us may be forced to do just that. Lack of leadership, environmental influences, pre-existing disparities, and the unintended assault on higher education access and retention threaten our students' ability (and ours) to level the playing field. Both the science and art of leadership will be critical as we move forward, not only in Washington DC, but across college campuses. Can our leaders ever become more egalitarian and manage their jobs toward a greater good? Or, at least, just do their jobs and govern? Can our shepherds guide our sheep with virtual crooks? In my worries I am focused not so much on the virus itself, but on our reaction and what might be our collective takeaways and continuous learning.

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