

Enduring Portals of Teaching in a Changing World: A Personal Reflection on My Ps and Cs¹

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In this time and age, I believe that we live and breathe change 24/7! While I am not aware or cannot imagine any era in human history that has not been punctuated or imbued by change as an essential condition of life, I believe that most of us agree that there has never been a world so replete with change as we witness today. Change in today's world is being generated by constantly and pervasively expanding globalization and a seemingly limitless increase in the speed and types of instant means of communication and with conceivably millions of people at any given moment via Internet and telecommunication technology. The notions of a flat world (Friedman, 2007) and infotopia (Sunstein, 2006) are only two of the myriad of works that provide popular and thoughtful testimony to the condition of our world today. While teachers at any level, including the college level, have been exposed to and altered by a lot of these emerging waves of change, teachers in higher education settings will be increasingly expected to adapt or organically absorb the necessities and complexities of this new world. And that is where the scholarship of teaching and learning (Grum and Macpherson, 2007) helps us by promoting a dialogue for sharing our views on this emerging and emergent reality that is only going to become more complex and demanding.

In writing this paper, I reflected upon how I have been riding the waves of change in the past two and half decades of teaching my management courses. From this reflection, I wanted to find out how over these years I have welcomed and worked with the change as I was getting older and as my students were getting younger, more diverse and non-traditional. As I delved into this reflection deeper and longer, I discovered a number of different pedagogic design elements and practices involved in my teaching that have enabled me to meet the changes in my students and conditions. My contemplation about these elements and practices resulted in naming them the enduring teaching portals of teaching. While some of these portals were present right from the beginning of my career, most of them were developed and retained over the years of my teaching experience. All of them were and continue to be refined in an evolutionary way. In retrospective reflection, these teaching portals have helped me to absorb and adapt to the changes in my students and the larger environmental conditions.

I chose the word portal as I thought its various definitions best represents the totality of what I have in my mind (see Table 1). It also includes the two main elements characterizing my enduring teaching elements and practices over the years: a) constancy and regularity of presence and appearance, b) serving as a means not as an end. Furthermore, as Table 1 shows, the word portal is a contemporary Internet

¹ Author thanks two anonymous reviewers of the journal for their constructive comments.

oriented word. Accordingly, I propose that teachers are the portals for the changing students who would experience and bring more change upon themselves and us, as they get educated through their teachers' teaching portals. Thus, these portals as constant features of my teaching over the years, have served as means - not end - for my students spending time in my course towards their life journey in search of meaning, knowledge and skills. In reflectively developing these portals, I owe a great deal to my former teachers, professors and past and present colleagues for what I have learned and continue to learn from them; I now hope that the presentation of these portals as follows provides me with more opportunities to receive their feedback and therefore further learn from some of them and the colleagues who read this paper.

Table 1.

Dictionary.com Definition of the word Portal

Adapted from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/portal>

(Visited on Wednesday, December 19)

1. a door, gate, or entrance, esp. one of imposing appearance, as to a palace.
2. an iron or steel bent for bracing a framed structure, having curved braces between the vertical members and a horizontal member at the top.
3. an entrance to a tunnel or mine.
4. *Computers.* a Web site that functions as an entry point to the Internet, as by providing useful content and linking to various sites and features on the World Wide Web.

[Origin: 1300 - 50; ME *portale* < ML, n. use of neut. of *portālis* of a gate. See [portal](#)²]

- Related forms portaled, portalled, adjective

- Synonyms 1. entranceway, doorway, entry, threshold.

In reflecting on my teaching portals - following Weick's long time wise advice (1979) - I expressed them in "ing" format as it provides a process dynamic and therefore gives a changing character to each portal as design elements. And since a good number of these portals came to my mind beginning with the letters P and C, I decided to call them the Ps and Cs. This should also help out with making them more memorable for practical purposes. A summary of these PC portals is presented in Table 2. The rest of this paper gives a brief explanation to each.

Table 2.

Enduring Ps and Cs Teaching Portals

P1: Passion Pursuing or Being Passionate about What One Teaches

P2: Planning and Preparing for the Course

P3: Practicing What One Preaches

P4: Playing Games and Experiential Exercises

P5: Prodding Participation

P6: Personalizing the Interaction and Content

P7: Promoting Peace

C1: Covering the Content

C2: Constructing Creativity

C3: Community Building

Inclusive and Conclusive Portal: Performing as the Main Teaching Act

1. Passion Pursuing or Being Passionate about What One Teaches

In my reflection, I could not see how I would have been able to endure changes in my teaching path, if I were not passionate about teaching in general and about the subject matters I teach in particular. As a teacher of organizational management, for as long as I can remember, I have been passionate about people and their behavior in organizations. Fortunately, my passion in teaching has been consistently reported by students in their evaluation of me as "being enthusiastic." I knew that if I don't show passion for the importance of understanding and influencing behavior and actions in organizations, many of my students would not be persuaded to believe in the necessity and authenticity of the subject matter. I believe displaying and pursuing my passion in the classroom for teaching in general, and my subject matters in particular, has served as a portal for students to think, work, and strive towards their own passions. Being passionate about their own work and the topic of management, would in turn provide them with the energy and zeal to delve more in depth into their respected fields and seek new knowledge and details about them. In this way, teachers are like athletes playing a sport in front of spectators. If the athletes do not show passion and enthusiasm for their game, play actions and victories, then how would and should the spectators show any enthusiasm? Without passion about a field, there is often no gateway to welcoming change and working hard at understanding and inventing new and more complex issues about it.

2. Planning and Preparing

Planning and Preparing for the courses has been a constant feature of my teaching over the past 25 years. Planning and preparing for the courses is a main portal for teaching to changing students in these changing times, as they require teachers to think about both their new students each term and what is involved in teaching them effectively under new conditions. Planning and preparing underscores the importance of keeping updated in the current content and practices in one's academic field and in the real world. A commitment to planning and preparing makes a teacher cognizant of what is needed for effective performance over the term and in each and every class. Without planning and preparing we may lose a great gateway to including the current developments and knowledge in the course content and process. Without them, the students might find the teachers out of touch with what is going on in the world today and may not find their teachers as an involved member of a changing world.

3. Practicing what I preach

Practicing what I preach is one of the most important teaching portals I have been using in my career. In my field of organizational behavior, I cannot preach to my students about the importance of motivational leadership if I teach them in a non-motivational way. I cannot teach them about evils of discrimination in organizations and act in discriminatory way against my students. I cannot teach them about the importance of group work in organizations and not conduct any group exercises in my class. Moreover, the list of examples of practicing what one preaches also concerns preaching certain pedagogic features, such as promising feedback on examinations and grading systems and actually providing it. Or in violation of this portal, covering a set of materials in class - e.g., from one's lectures - and testing students on a different set of materials drawn exclusively from the textbook. Failing to practice what one preaches results in the loss of the teacher's creditability in the eyes of students and frustrates and stresses them out. Teachers who practice what they preach would usually provide reliable gateways to students to explore new knowledge in their fields and set upon imaginative journeys, exploring new horizons in possible spaces outside the physical realm of the classroom. In absence of practicing what one teaches, teachers may run the risk of keeping students in the psychic prison of their course or classrooms as the students may be preoccupied with resolving the enigma of their teachers, rather than solving the puzzles of a changing world they face.

4. Playing games

Playing games and experiential exercises has been an enjoyable portal of my teaching in the past 25 years and I have rarely had students disliking it. Rather, most students get very excited and seem to be fully immersed in playing them out. For long, play has been considered as the main source of learning, social competency and a source of imagination. Ever since John Dewey (1938), experiential exercises are considered to be a major source of learning in the western educational system and they are generally considered as an effective and "well and alive" (Carver and Enfield, 2006) educational method. Through this portal, students will have a chance to express their increasingly diverse identities and express themselves in a creative way. Plays and experiential exercises provide a loose structure for the practice of models and concepts and thereby prepare students for constructing new relations, knowledge and interpretations in a world replete with change and unexpected events and situations.

5. Prodding participation

I have rarely taken participation of my students for granted. I have always actively sought it and produced it. I have never faulted students for the lack of participation; I have though, faulted myself in not fostering it. I believe it is through active participation in the course topics and exercises that students learn to shape and to be shaped by the current and future issues and trends. Meanwhile, I do not consider participation to be only of the vocal and oral nature in the whole class. I give a lot of value and encouragement to both small group participation, and dyadic and written forms of participation. Here, I have been mainly cognizant of the various cultures and personality types that may not necessarily lend themselves to large setting oral participation. Right

in the beginning of the semester, I define participating as a practice which both contributes to the class discussion and takes away from it for one's use in a form visible to one or all of the following: a) the whole class, b) one's group, c) one's classroom neighbor (dyadic communication), or oneself (i.e., written format). Prodding participation is a teaching portal that is conducive to critical thinking and learning from one another and is helpful in shaping and being shaped by the forces and issues making up a person in a changing world. Without it, students might not learn to be actively engaged in the world affairs within and beyond their fields.

6. Personalizing the interaction and content

Over the years, I have found out that it is best to connect to my students at three different levels: class, groups and individuals. I have more or less touched on some of the portals that deal with the first two. What I want to emphasize here is relating to students as individuals. Bedeian (2007) believes that "critical learning moments" are created through some teaching actions that leave a lasting impact on the individual student lives. I believe, that one way to begin doing this, whenever possible and depending on the class size, is through memorizing and calling on the students by their first names. This is a very powerful means through which you may connect with each of your students as individuals. Second is to have and display genuine respect for your diverse students. A teacher can achieve this by acting in the role of a servant class leader (Greenleaf, 2003). Listening to students whenever they ask a question or visit you in the office is another impacting way through which you personalize the interaction. Finally, relating the meaning and application of the theories and concepts in your course to the students themselves, helps to personalize the content for the students. For example, in strategic management, one of the courses I teach, I underscore the view that strategic management has immediate application to each of the students' own situations, such as having to make a decision on what to major in, or deciding on joining company X or Y after they graduate. Personalizing the interaction and content, as a teaching portal, is critical as it places the individual student in the center of the class for learning about the universe beyond the classroom. Without this, student may not be connected to the class or the teacher for finding linkages for understanding the larger environment.

7. Promoting peace

In a fast changing and increasingly diverse world against the continuation of violent behavior at the local, national and international levels, it is more than ever critical that teachers find a way or two to promote peace and understanding among diverse cultures and nations. A rapidly changing world intertwined with emerging and surging numbers of cultural and national identities requires peaceful interaction and co-existence. Over the years, I have achieved this by first and foremost preserving a total respect for diversity and treating every student in a fair way in my classes on a highly diverse

campus. Second, I have promoted peace by organizing or supporting conferences² that include the themes of peace and reconciliation on campus and taking my students to one or more sessions. For example, I regularly take my students to the Martin Luther King memorial program, which is held on our campus each year, and have them to write a paper on how Luther King was an agent for peace in general and what are the messages he has for students of strategic management. Please see Table 3 for excerpts of strategic management student's write-ups on the significance and relevance of Martin Luther King's dream after attending a commemoration program on our campus in January 2007. For another example, I was a co-organizer for a conference on Burma and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Victor, 1998) in April 2007 on my campus. I took my students to one of the sessions and asked them to consider Burma as a real country case study for deciding whether to make a business investment in that country or not. Third, I have included socially activist firms, such as Peace Cereals, Working Assets, and Body Shop in my coverage of the cases and examples. I strongly believe that promoting peace is a critical teaching portal in the world today. It is a basic condition in a progressively diverse and rapidly changing world. Without it, there is no progress possible, and there is no future to be educated for.

Table 3.

Excerpts of Students' Essays After they Attended the Event Commemorating Martin Luther King in January 2007

Student 1:

"The importance of strategic leadership and [the] importance of Martin Luther King came [to be seen] when he gave the powerful "I have a dream" speech in Washington, where over 200,000 people showed up. This set up the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited segregation in public places, and discrimination in education and employment. As a result of Dr. King's effectiveness as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement, he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize for peace. The strategic importance and lessons learned from Martin Luther King Jr. is [about] someone who represented courage and achievement, and [is about] a powerful and successful leader who had the ability to influence Americans to overcome racial division."

Student 2:

Martin's life from the beginning was not very simple, generally because [the] . . . life of every black human . . . [living in] XX century was really hard. From his early childhood he was raised . . . [with the] belief that black people are . . . [worse off than] the rest of [the] . . . population. His biggest dream was to integrate black and white race [together]. He was very . . . [consistent] in his actions to achieve his dream. His life was like one big successful strategy. In strategic management the first thing . . . to . . . consider is Formulation. MLK knew exactly what needed to be changed: the law[s] and mentality of

² Northeastern Illinois University hosts annual series of flagship Heritage Conferences and a newly found Peace Conference organized by the Dean of Academic Development. For more information, please see <http://www.neiu.edu/~acdevelo/heritage%20programs.htm>

population. Internal and External Analysis . . . [were] also made. MLK, . . . [following] a First Mover [strategy], was not discouraged by oppositions (competitors).

Student 3:

. . . and then be brave enough to follow your dreams - with appropriate strategy and [a] competitive product, dream[s] can become real! Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, that . . . the words in [the] Constitution of the United States of America, all men are created equal, would someday be applied [to our society] regardless of a person's skin color or race. One of King's major goals was to change America, to make people stand up for what they believed was right and [what they] deserved, which was to be totally free and to have equal rights as the Constitution proclaimed . . . King's lessons are very useful to the business world. For example, King recognized a problem in this nation, the problem of unfairness, of suppression, of inequality and the need for a civil rights movement to overcome those difficulties. As a manager of an organization, we must be able to recognize all the problems our organization is currently experiencing and be able to state the necessary changes that must be made [in order] to make our organization a more effective and competitive one.

8. Covering contents

Covering the essential and fundamental contents and topics of a course is what I consider to involve the actual coverage of the theories and the knowledge base of the course topics. While coping with change requires imaginative capacity and while I agree with the famed saying by Albert Einstein that "imagination is more important than knowledge," I, following him, maintain that knowledge remains and continues to be important. The main idea is to give an emphasis to the coverage of the grand theories and concepts that each field has, and not become a robotic presenter of every single point pre-wrapped in the power point packages. This type of coverage is what Palmer (1998) makes a compelling case for in his book, "the courage to teach." This portal of teaching reminds us that we need to cover the fundamental concepts and the grand theories of the field. Without seeing this portal in action, students might be lost with regard to the knowledge and tradition that is the basis of current practices and technology in their field, and they might be unprepared to grapple with the changes affecting the current state of affairs in their fields.

9. Constructing creativity

Nothing is worse than a boring classroom. I wrote this sentence and then I googled it, which gave me so many hits confirming that I am not alone in this view (see Cleghorn, 2006). Constructing a creative, flexible and democratic classroom will allow for most of the above P portals for functioning well. For doing this, I need to be creative myself by including interesting materials from my planning and preparation, such as movies, Youtube clips, and relevant and fun examples. I also need to allow for creative assignments, such as poster presentation, video production, Youtube clip productions, etc. This portal is so clearly relevant in supporting students to develop a learning and intellectual capacity in expressing their diverse and changing selves, as well as being able to initiate in or adapt to a world demanding inventiveness and innovations in weeks rather than months or years. For example, such a capacity is what is required for

working in a company like Google, which demands and supports ongoing and instant innovativeness (Lohr and Helft, 2007).

10. Community building

The most important glue bringing the above Ps and Cs teaching portals together is the grand portal of community building. I would never consider myself an effective teacher if I get a sense that I am teaching just a class rather than a group of students who come together once or twice a week in a classroom community. In my view and in agreement with Palmer (1988), the classroom should be treated as a community. In a classroom community, people give each other care, education and support. In this community, teacher and students rely on each other for their performance as they listen and interact with each other with a feeling of security and mutual respect. In a classroom community, students are interdependent on each other as they preserve their own independence of thought. Such community creates trust between the teacher and students and among students. It teaches them the value of collaboration and sharing of their knowledge and identities. This sharing sometimes happens, as I and other teachers have done it, through sharing food or through sharing artifacts of culture. In the classroom community, members respect the rules of being there on time, fulfilling the promises to their group members, and being considerate of the differences. A sense of community is what is needed to confront a world of vast and sometimes unbearable changes. It provides an oasis of a network of individuals and relations that might be preserved for the lifetime in the real world beyond the classroom. This portal underscores the importance of community building and constructing networks of relations and support in a fragmented world. It teaches students about the vitality of having a community base and belonging to a number of friends and colleagues in an otherwise fractured world. This portal is conducive to being connected with other individuals in flesh and blood, and not just as virtual beings. It reminds us of the main value of the physical classroom. Indeed, the existence of this community is the fundamental difference between classroom and online education. In an increasingly virtual world, this portal reminds both the teachers and students that "no man is an island" (Donne, 1997).

11. Performing as the main teaching act of teaching: The concluding portal of portals

Teaching as performing (Dawe, 1984&1994) is the underlying portal of all the above portals. It is the main thrust or premise running through all of the portals presented. Brent (2005) presents two prevailing views of teaching: as a thing and as a performance. He states (under the third heading): "For most of the vast history of the pedagogical exercise, it has been no contest. Through all the intellectual storms of history, teaching has remained, above all, a performance art that unfolds in real time." The basic idea here is that teaching is fundamentally a rhetorical performance that develops and promotes dialogue with and among its audience. Brent sees the current wave of technological changes creeping and in some online universities sweeping across our classrooms as presenting two competing views of teaching over the past 500 years of technological advancement. One is a thing, currently embodied in electronic textual object. The other is the view of teaching as performance. He concludes (under

conclusion heading): "If the group that values teaching as performance has the most influence, we will put more energy into developing flexible courseware that promotes social engagement and interaction . . . If the group that sees teaching as textual has the most influence, we will develop more elaborate technologies for delivering courses as online texts, emphasizing the role of the student as audience rather than as participant." My P and C portals proposed in this article, based on my personal experience based research for the past 25 years, provide a view of teaching as a performing act. They might be helpful for serving to the interested colleagues as some possible elements for designing flexible courses that meet the challenge of teaching to the changing generation of students in an increasingly and rapidly changing world conditions. However, I hope, more than anything else, my proposed portals help to sustain our collective dialogues within the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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