Thinking Beyond Oneself – Additional Thoughts

For a number of reasons, I have been thinking more about the notion that it is important to think beyond oneself. It is important not only for the sake of creativity and critical thinking. It is important for the sake of developing a humanistic (other-oriented) perspective to guide what one does.

When I reflect on my personal life and think about things I regret doing, what comes to mind are instances when my actions and decisions were guided by thinking about myself first. To avoid self-abasement, I shall not offer examples as nearly all of them involve my children. Had I been a better parent, I would have been putting my children first and foremost all of the time.

When I reflect on my professional life and think about things I regret doing, what comes to mind are instances when I was thinking about my own welfare and values rather than those of others. Again, there are many examples but those cases would be less flattering than I care to reveal in a public blog. I imagine that every person could find both personal and professional cases of thinking primarily about oneself first and not trying to think beyond oneself. I also imagine that many of those cases might have resulted in things that person regrets.

On the other hand, when I think about a few cases when I made an overt effort to think beyond myself, I find things in which I take some pride. For example, I think about a comprehensive school reform quality initiative project that I led with poorly performing rural K-8 schools in the southeast. Normally, a project has a beginning and an ending, and that was the case with the U.S. Department of Education project. However, a typical educational project also involves service and support. The problem with so many educational projects is that the service and support ends with the project. This did not happen with one of the 8 schools involved in that effort. After the project ended, I managed to invite a school representative to participate in a smart education conference in Beijing, China. A year or so later, I gave the school a 3D printer knowing that the innovative teachers there and the very supportive principal would make good use of it. I am about to donate another technology involving geography education some 6 years or so after the end of that project.

Another example that comes to mind is the USAID Distributed Basic Education project in Indonesia in which I participated for 5 years. That project ended about 7 or 8 years ago. I have maintained contact with a number of Indonesian educators ever since. I helped initiate the AECT Asia summer research meetings based on the interest of Indonesians and participated in the Educational Technology World Conference in Bali in 2016 co-sponsored by Indonesians and AECT.

Those two examples are cases in which I managed to think beyond myself and think about service to and support of others over and above my own personal interests as an academic interested in publications or as a principal investigator or co-investigator interested in funding. Things that may begin as projects often involve service to and support of others. It is important to remember that fact and make an attempt to ensure ongoing service and support.
I often say that it is not about the technology - it is about the learning. Likewise, it is not about the publications and funding – it is about service to and support of others. Or, as Bob Gagné said on many occasions, our job is to help others. Or, as my father demonstrated on so many occasions, the task is to listen, reflect, encourage, guide and not turn away. Or, as Rabbi Hillel said, “if not now … when?” (see https://www.voices-visions.org/content/poster/collection-poster-rabbi-hillel-pirke-avot-114-daniel-bennett-schwartz).

First Thoughts

I have recently noticed a tendency of many, including my students, to respond to complex situations and issues based on their own rather narrow personal experience. This seems completely natural as we come to have beliefs, habits, and predispositions based on our experience. However, the nature of many complex situations and issues exceed things we have personally experienced yet many still based their beliefs about those situations and issues on personal experience that is somewhat removed from the problem or situation being judged.

For example, with regard to online learning, someone who has taken an online learning course might have experienced feeling that the instructor was distant and perhaps aloof and not very involved in their progress. Is that sufficient reason to conclude that many or most online courses have instructors who appear distant, aloof and uninvolved to their students? Perhaps not.

I have on occasion argued that the primary job of being a teacher is to get students to have questions, which involves (a) admitting that one does not know, (b) committing time and effort in searching for a suitable resolution, (c) being open to alternative explanations, (d) being willing to question one’s own assumptions, and (e) perhaps revisiting the problem and explanation more than once.

I am now thinking that such an inquiry process is basically learning to think beyond oneself – beyond one’s personal and direct experience. I recall in high school when I was on the debate team that part of the preparation was to argue both sides of an issue. That seemed reasonable at the time. I remember learning in a college literature course that there was a dramatic turn toward the self and writing in the first person several hundred years ago, and that turn to the self impact how stories were told and what was told. At the time, I related that to Descartes’s cogito ergo sum or je pense, donc je suis – I think, therefore I am (or I exist). We are after all thinking beings. Is it not remarkable that consciousness and self-consciousness exist at all?

However, over-reliance on one’s beliefs and prior experience can lead one to make many errors of judgment. I have made my fair share, and now when I consider the ones that come to mind first, I notice that my errors were due to an overconfidence in my own beliefs. I had a wrong-headed confidence in the absolute truth of what I believed to be true, and many of those so-called truths turned out not to be true.

Rather than further embarrass myself with true confessions, I only wanted to point out that I have often believed more than I could possibly have known. At an advanced age, I am just learning to think beyond myself.