

We (Still) Need a World of Scholar-Leaders: 25 Years of Reframing Education

J. B. RITCHIE
SCOTT C. HAMMOND
Utah Valley State College

In this article, the authors argue that management education has been corrupted by a "down loading" metaphor of learning that has created a culture of mediocrity. They argue that students should become scholars; that learning has inherent value, that discovery and critical thinking are essential for the leaders of tomorrow. The authors argue that students acting as scholars should not rely on organizations for direction, but should assume responsibility for making organizations havens for self-responsibility. This article is widely used to launch a discussion about student responsibility.

Keywords: *learning, students, scholarship, education*

COAUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

"We Need a Nation of Scholar-Leaders" was first published by Brigham Young University's *Exchange* magazine 25 years ago (Ritchie, 1980). I read it as a student in J. B. Ritchie's (or Bonner's) organizational behavior class 20 years ago. The essay created a new life possibility for me as a scholar. Prior to reading this essay, I thought of scholars as intellectual elite. After reading it, I thought becoming a scholar was everyone's responsibility. The article distinguishes between a student who asks for requirements and a scholar who makes proposals. It shows how an instructor should nourish the learner first before the needs and demands of the institution. It framed my approach to learning, and it now frames my approach to teaching.

An example of the best of scholarship came a few years ago when I ran into a former student in a store parking lot. This student had taken a class at the University of Utah 5 years before where my colleague Reba Keele and I had assigned students at random to groups and required them to observe changes in an organization. One group that struggled with finding a project was particularly diverse, including different races, genders, and life styles. Finally the group decided to interview the homeless. They figured out that the best way to find homeless to interview was to set up a breakfast on Sunday mornings under a freeway bridge in downtown Salt Lake City. They served breakfast for 3 weeks and then made a memorable presentation.

After I chatted with my student, as he was leaving, he mentioned that they were still doing "scholarship." "What do you mean?" I asked. "In 5 years the group has changed a little, but we still get together every Sunday and cook breakfast under the bridge for anyone who needs a meal."

Scholarship is the holy grail of education. It is our highest and noblest goal. It cannot be assessed, programmed, or required. However, when it occurs, teacher and learner are changed.

Every year teachers make thousands of copies of this essay to distribute to students in hopes that they will envision and realize a life of scholarship. In the past year, as Bonner and I have team taught together, we have updated the essay in hopes that among this generation of students we will find more scholar-leaders.

IN SEARCH OF SCHOLAR-LEADERS

In the book, *The Once and Future King*, T. H. White (1966) retells the legend of King Arthur. In so doing, he captures an interesting dimension of growing up, learning, and accepting responsibility. When the young Arthur, affectionately referred to as "Wart" in the account, is despondent, a little confused, and sad, he goes to Ector and asks what he should do. Ector says he should go see the magician, Merlin, for some advice as to how to handle his frustrations. When he approaches the magician, Merlin responds as follows:

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you. Look at what a lot of things there are to learn—pure science, the only purity there is. You can learn astronomy in a lifetime, natural history in three, literature in six. And then after you have exhausted a milliard of lifetimes in biology and medicine and theocriticism and geography and history and economics why, you can then start to make a cartwheel out of the appropriate wood, or spend fifty years learning to begin to learn to beat your

adversary at fencing. After that you can start again on mathematics, until it is time to learn to plough." (p. 183)

We subscribe to that advice. The solution to life's aggravations is to learn. And the solution to a frustrating life is to develop an attitude of learning. Each of us needs to develop an attitude toward life, toward organizations, toward the university, toward the church, toward the state, toward the corporation, and toward each other of learning and of growing. We reduce the anxieties and confusions of life by developing a criterion for thinking that is based on analysis, interpretation, extrapolation, and extension of ideas rather than on judgment, classification, and rigid acceptance or rejection.

The Student or the Scholar

The term *student* is a revered term to us. However, a more common conceptualization does not reflect this reverence toward students. A few years ago, during a training project for executives, one young manager kept referring to her responsibility in "downloading." We later learned that she was the training manager in her division and *downloading* was her term for training.

In too many situations, teachers are treating students like a computer, waiting for a download to be determined by something such as a professor, a textbook, or an expert source to tell the student what is appropriate, what is desirable, or what is true. The information is put into the student and, by some previously designed operational system, is classified, processed, and then stored in some way for future retrieval. That retrieval is triggered by something like a question in a classroom, an assignment to write a paper, or a question on an examination.

This student model has a high probability of corrupting our ability to learn and to grow. This is a problem for students and teachers. Teachers in this paradigm master a semester's worth of material within an accepted pedagogy and stop learning from students and the environment. Students are seen as blank hard drives waiting for a download of management skills. Students in this paradigm abdicate their responsibility for critical thinking to the willing teacher and live the illusion of learning when all they have done is simply mastered the art of taking a class. Many academic studies have shown that most students forget a majority of the course material within weeks of completing

the course. Something more is needed: a student mastering course content for short-term feedback is hardly the preparation needed for future success.

The student model has a high probability of undercutting our capacity to cope effectively in a complex world. We must develop a lifetime rather than a semester perspective. What is needed today is a scholar model.

A student asks what to do, a scholar searches and proposes what to do. A student blames the system for failure; a scholar has no need to blame anyone. He or she accepts responsibility for correcting a failed system or improving one that is inadequate. A student listens to judge, a scholar listens to learn. A student transfers to the university, to the professor, to the boss, or to God credit and blame that the individual should accept. In the process of so doing, we default in the most important function we have to perform: deciding the meaning of life for each of us.

The Scholar and Personal Responsibility

From the scholar perspective, we do not just search for the meaning of life, we actively define it, we develop it, we create it. We seek out responsible sources, listen to helpful feedback, test our assumptions, and then define our role. Students expect someone else to define them, scholars accept the responsibility of defining themselves. Students expect the textbook to have the answer, and they want to know whether it is A or B. Scholars accept the fact that A may be more appropriate today, but B may be tomorrow.

A scholar's approach to personal health is one example of the need for a shift in paradigm. Such an illustration can be found in the story of Lance Armstrong. In 2003, this American cyclist won his fifth Tour de France, tying the record for consecutive victories. It is impressive to note that he won an event that the conventional wisdom said belonged to Europeans. It was assumed that Americans did not have the endurance or discipline to compete in this multistage sporting event that requires so much talent and years of training. Of course, what was even more impressive was that Armstrong was a cancer survivor. In his biography, Armstrong described how he became part of the healing process. He applied the power of the active participant, rather than that of a passive observer; he was not going to just sit back and defer to an expert doctor; he became a cancer scholar and an expert himself. And, he recovered.

Another example comes from the tragedy of the holocaust. Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1974) describes the fate of people in the concentration camps in Nazi captivity. He argued that what was needed was a fundamental change in individual perspective. Attitudes toward life, he said, had become too self-indulgent, too narcissistic, too self-serving to really understand what was going on and to survive the brutality of the camp. In talking about those in his camp, he said,

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude towards life. We had to learn ourselves, and furthermore we had to teach others, that the issue was not what we expected from life but what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking what the meaning of life was and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life daily and hourly. (p. 122)

We must become an involved part of a dynamic process rather than an observer or victim of another system.

The Self in the Center

Frankl's ideas and experience stand in contrast to the recent plethora of reality television that follow sexy women and men through real-life dating, survival, or job search situations that reflect only the so-called reality of corporate indulgence in self-centered behavior. As we define this sense of individual responsibility, we must not become so ego centered that we fail to see ourselves as part of a larger world beyond the two dimensional television portrayals. Life ultimately means accepting responsibility for defining appropriate strategies for each situation where we are active participants with other individuals. It is too easy to be trapped by the survival psychology that previous generations labeled as "looking out for No. 1," "greed is good," "winning through intimidation," "pulling your own strings," and "being your own best friend." Philosophies that just describe how to beat the system or to indulge our own self-centered behavior can desensitize us to the needs of others, as we engage life as only a competitive game. The more we buy into the reality television assumptions of winners and losers, the less capable we are of turning each of life's events into positive learning experiences. This issue of egoism and self-serving behavior is, of course, not new. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1954) described some of the landowners of the 1930s:

Some were kind because they hated what they had to do. Some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel. Some of them were cold because they long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one was cold. And all of them were caught up into something larger than themselves. Some of them hated the mathematics that drove them and were afraid. Some worshiped the mathematics that drove them because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling. (p. 26)

Students' Overreliance on Organizations

Many of us demand so much of our organizations that we can only, ultimately, feel betrayed by them. Our economic, political, academic, social, and religious systems cannot satisfy all of the demands that we place on them. Organizations, or their leaders, cannot be aware enough of each individual. Even with sophisticated human resource software and knowledge management, they cannot have enough information to acquire, digest, analyze, and resolve all of the complex and contradictory data received. There is ample evidence of the failure of organizations just as there is evidence of shortcomings in the student perspective of life. Consider these examples.

Fifty percent of organizational decisions are ignored. For many years, Ritchie has been collecting observations of managers, executives, and administrators—people who seemingly are in positions where others expect them to make decisions and to be responsible for running organizations. One of the most surprising observations is that about 50% of the decisions these people make are never carried out. Not 50% of the comments that might be made in the hall or in an informal encounter, such as “why don’t you look into this,” but of formal decisions you can trace to minutes, memos, and e-mails that are distributed in an organization. One half of those decisions are not carried out! One executive we interviewed said, “Yes, I think that is right, or, maybe it is even a little low. As I think about it, if 50 percent of my decisions got carried out, I would be delighted.”

Why are these decisions not carried out? There are many reasons, of course, but one critical dimension is that no one person, or group, knows enough to account for all the variables in making those decisions. “Democracy by default” may not sound elegant; however, it comes from the inability to account for or control all the variables.

The wrong decisions are carried out. This same respondent mentioned above went on to make another point about organizational failures. After confirming that many decisions are, in fact, ignored, he went on to say, “But I would argue that the survival and success of organizations may depend on the 50 percent that are not carried out.” That is a telling argument, the fact that many decisions should not be carried out. Now again, that is not comfortable for the administrator or the executive who sits back, frustrated because orders are not followed. And, unfortunately, we have observed that often it is the wrong 50% that are not carried out. The good decisions are resented by the rebellious deviants, and the bad decisions are implemented by enthusiastic zealots. Somehow we need a world of scholars, a world of leaders, to discriminate as to which decisions ought to be carried out. However, the more important point is not to sit back in judgment of which 50% but to become part, in a responsible way, of that process.

This is an important idea for students, because they should not assume that they are always being taught the right things in the right way. Is it possible that 50% of what is being taught is irrelevant, unimportant, or wrong? Is it possible that the greatest gift of education is not the data found in the textbook or lecture but the opportunity to critically determine if that data is relevant, important, or true?

A Deluge of Data and a Drought of Information

Poet David Whyte wrote, “This is NOT the age of information. This is the age of the loaves and the fishes, where one good word is meat for a thousand” (1997). Some time in 2003 or 2004 the World Wide Web grew to the point where there are more documents on the Web than there are people on the earth. We are swimming in data points, surrounded by documents of dubious relevance. Management guru Peter Drucker (1988) observed that “information is data imbued with relevance and context.” Perhaps it is the role of this generation of organizational leaders to rise above the deluge of data and use reasoning and contexting to create information that is relevant to resolving the complex problems of the world.

A Crisis in Organizational Leadership

In early 2004, David Eisner of Disney Corporation faced strong pressure to resign, executives of Enron

and Worldcom faced investigation and indictment in the largest financial schemes ever, Martha Stewart faced charges of lying to investigators, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharron faced accusations of corruption, and Haitian President Jean Bertran Aristide was in exile. There is clearly a crisis of leadership. There is a crisis of confidence in governments, corporations, unions, military organizations, educational systems, and many types of voluntary organizations.

During the past 40 years, original author J. B. Ritchie has been measuring attitudes and assumptions that people have about characteristics and abilities of themselves and those above and below them in the organizational hierarchy. Starting in the late 1960s, people rated those three levels on 10 so-called leadership traits (i.e., judgment, creativity, dependability, self-confidence, etc.) on a 7-point scale. Consistently, the average of self-ratings came out about 5.7. Now there is nothing very significant about that particular point until we use it as a reference point for comparison. The interesting comparison comes as that score is compared to the average ranking for their bosses and their subordinates. For many years, there was a consistent pattern where people saw their bosses at about a 6.0 (three tenths of a point above themselves), and they saw their subordinates at a 4.2 (about a point and a half below them). That difference was quite consistent regardless of organizational level. Vice presidents saw the president at about a 6.0, themselves at 5.7, and the department heads at about a 4.2. First-line supervisors saw themselves at about a 5.7, their foreperson at about 6.0, and their subordinates at about 4.2. These people saw themselves as quite a bit better than their subordinates, and almost as good as their boss. Therefore, when they communicated with their boss, they expected the boss to have full confidence in them and to think of them as almost equal. Conversely, however, they expected subordinates to be inferior, and, therefore, they might talk down to them, disregard them, or belittle them. They had limited confidence in subordinates' ability to function independently, and, therefore, they would micromanage or harass them.

Those indicators held for several years. However, during the 1970s, the data starting looking different. People still rated themselves at 5.7 on an average, still put their subordinates at about a 4.2; however, now the bosses were rated at a 5.7 also. They now saw themselves as a lot better than subordinates, and as equal to their boss. Many people now felt that they could do the boss's job as good as the boss. They were losing confidence in their superiors. By the 1980s, the

pattern changed again. Individuals still rated themselves at about 5.7, subordinates about 4.5, and bosses were averaging 5.5. Now the interpretation changed one more time: People saw themselves as a lot better than their subordinates and a little better than the boss. The assumption was that nobody was as good as they were!

In the 1990s and beyond, we see slight variations in these patterns. As the economic and political environment improves ratings of superiors and subordinates tend to go up slightly, and as conditions worsen, the ratings go down. Regardless of the specific context, however, with the exception of a few exceptional organizations, leadership confidence is a critical problem in our modern world.

Organizational Lying

One additional piece of evidence of organizational crisis is found in corporate public relations, where the emphasis is often on the facade rather than substance. One public relations (PR) educator we heard tell her class that corporations are not accountable to the truth, "Image is not just important, it IS the only thing that is important." The target audience may be the financial market, customers, competitors, citizens, or employees. They are often suspicious of stated intentions or accomplishments; however, still leaders and the PR people they employ try to make themselves and the organization look better than they really are. Organizational rewards are seen as coming from positive external reports, valid or not, instead of honest criteria of genuine performance or service. In the case of Enron, Worldcom, and others, this house of cards was quick to collapse.

There are pressures to lie and to misrepresent in all organizations. These need to be identified, understood, and corrected. This is one of the hardest and most demanding of organizational imperatives.

The Organization as a Haven for Self-Responsibility

The organization has become a mechanism that many of us use to absolve ourselves of the burden of accepting responsibility, making decisions that only we can make, and of acting with integrity. Organizations cannot substitute for the individual's responsibility to become a scholar-leader—people who actively participate in the dynamic process of gather-

ing data, analyzing alternatives, evaluating evidence, making decisions, acting strategically, and assessing outcomes. We cannot be spectators. We cannot shift the burden for decision making or self-development to others.

As a so-called student society, we have come to expect of organizations functions that only we as individuals can perform. And when organizations fail to meet these expectations, our confidence in organizational leadership (and in teachers) drops. We all need to be scholar-leaders. Our contemporary world is so complex, that it behooves each of us to move beyond a minimally informed, passive member, and become a well-informed, active, and constructive member of a variety of political, educational, economic, and social organizations. The burden and opportunity to improve the world rests on all of us. We should not make fewer demands of organizations in terms of morality or ethics, but fewer demands of organizations in serving needs that we must ultimately be responsible for as individuals. We must demand of leaders, teachers, and ourselves dignity, integrity, and accountability. In his beautiful poem called *The Two Trees*, William Butler Yeats appealed to "gaze no more in the bitter cup." He says in the opening lines, "Beloved gaze in thine own heart, the holy tree is growing there."

Our civilization depends on that so-called holy tree in the informed citizenry in a way we have never depended on it before. The technology and information available is too complex, the demands and opportunities for immorality and misrepresentation are too high, and the opportunity for organizational encroachment in private lives is too great.

However, the positive opportunities are also great for accepting responsibility for our own involvement in life as scholars, defining our own learning and performance objectives, evaluating ourselves, making proposals instead of simply asking questions, and listening to learn rather than to judge. We hope students as scholars can do that. We hope we can become enthused, committed, informed participants rather than ones who sit back condemning the system because it does not define things our way. And in the process, we hope that we clearly can gain an increased confidence in ourselves. We hope that we do not wait for this class, the university, or for the nation, or the state, or the corporation to change our world—but instead, accept responsibilities for being part of it.

When organizations fail, do not just blame the system but accept the opportunity for creating a better, more honest, more sensitive, more exciting, more productive world.

Classroom Discussion Questions

This article serves as an excellent introduction to any course, especially one in management, where teachers and class members need to examine the learning process. The following questions might serve to stimulate discussion:

1. Name a time when you behaved as a student and not a scholar. How was that class different from the typical?
2. Is it safer to be a student or a scholar? Why?
3. How do the roles of student and teacher change in a "scholar" environment?
4. Has access to the World Wide Web helped or hindered critical thinking skills?
5. How important are critical thinking skills for democratization and globalization?
6. Are students too reliant on schools, colleges, and universities for learning?
7. What would happen if all of us (students and teachers as scholars) accepted responsibility for our own learning?
8. What are your highest hopes for this class if everyone were to behave as scholars?

REFERENCES

- Drucker, P. (1988). The coming of the new organization. *Harvard Business Review*, 66(1), 45-53.
- Frankl, V.E. (1974). *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Ritchie, J.B. (1980, Fall). *We need a nation of scholar-leaders*. Exchange, Brigham Young University School of Management, 28-32.
- Steinbeck, J. (1954). *The grapes of wrath*. New York: Bantam Books.
- White, T. H. (1966). *The once and future king*. New York: Berkley Books.
- Whyte, D. (1997). *Crossing the unknown sea: Work as a pilgrimage of identity*. New York: Riverhead Books.

J. B. RITCHIE is Professor Emeritus of organizational behavior at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management and Scholar in Residence at Utah Valley State College. He has spent a career researching, teaching, and consulting in areas of leadership, ethics, change, and conflict management. He has worked extensively in the Middle East on Arab management practices and the Middle East Peace Process.

SCOTT C. HAMMOND is an assistant professor of business management in the School of Business at Utah Valley State College. He is also an organizational development consultant and specializes in whole systems change processes in scientific, technical, and medical organizations. His

research program is in complex problem-solving processes, dialogue, and cross-cultural communication. He has published articles in academic and professional journals on dialogue, dialogic teaching methods, and faculty development.