
**THE CENTER/MARGIN LEADERSHIP DANCE:
INTEGRATING EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION AND FORMATION**
KAREN DALTON

“People—and particularly adults—learn from their own experiences at the edge of their own readiness to learn.”¹

Abstract: Pastors and other leaders today participate in contexts involving multiple and shifting centers and margins. They need the capacity to move between and connect them. This requires a complex skill set including self-awareness, imagination, empathy, relational capacities, and behavioral flexibility. Experienced-based, inductive methods that engage persons affectively and behaviorally as well as cognitively are needed for preparing and forming leaders who have these capacities and can help others develop them. The case-in-point teaching employed by Ronald Heifetz and researched by Sharon Daloz Parks is taken as a starting point for exploring a variety of such methods. Techniques for developing reflective practice are explored. The classroom context is primarily in view, but the assumptions and approaches can be applied to other settings as well.

Experience and learning from experience are not always the same. In our increasingly diverse and rapidly changing society, experiences of center and margin present themselves regularly. When such events and encounters stretch beyond a person’s ability to cope, the response may be to shut down and refuse to learn or change. Sometimes a person’s mental categories are so clear and entrenched that discrepant experience is kept at

Karen Dalton is associate dean of lifelong learning and director of field education at Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA.

¹ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 49.

bay: “Don’t confuse me with the facts; my mind is made up” becomes the de facto guiding principle.

So the question is whether people learn as a result of their experiences, including those related to center and margin. And a further question for those who teach leadership and those who lead in ministry is how to work with issues of center and margin in ways that maximize the likelihood that learning and growth will take place.

This question became more immediate for me during the spring 2009 semester. A leadership class I taught brought me into relationship with twenty-six students who represented diversities of centers and margins beyond what I had encountered previously. All were preparing for ministry—that was common ground. Beyond this the diversity of the group was multifaceted. The thirteen Caucasians included four Armenian immigrants. There were also five first-generation Koreans, for a total of nine non-native speakers of English. There were six African-Americans and one Latino/Native American. The twelve women included one transgender woman. Ages ranged from twenty-three to seventy. There were no U.S.-born straight white males. Seven denominations were represented, on a theological spectrum from Unitarian to Armenian Apostolic Orthodox. In the classroom everyone was in some sense on the margins yet also located centrally in some life contexts such as church, family, or identity group. In the class, how could we bridge understanding among so many backgrounds and experiences? How would we find a center of common understanding and purpose? How could the leadership knowledge and skill of each person be strengthened for the good of the whole? I was asking these questions as a teacher while being aware that the same questions are salient for pastors serving in contexts of diversity that include multiple center/margin dynamics.

It is safe to assume that all the students in this leadership class will be called upon to minister and lead in ways that are sensitive to issues of center and margin. They will need awareness of their identities and locations

in relation to the variety of centers and margins in their lives. They will encounter marginality that is imposed on them as well as perhaps self-chosen locations of center and margin. They will need openness and the capacity to perceive and engage people who are differently located with respect to these centers and margins. They will need the capacity to join with others across the margins in working for the common good. They will need to find and maintain personal and spiritual centeredness in their various contexts, whether they are centrally or marginally located. Indeed, all of us who seek to serve and lead need these capacities.

What pedagogy is effective in developing the attitudes and skills needed for ministry and leadership in contexts of center and margin? That is the question to be explored in this article.

Centers, Margins, and Leadership Skills

Center and margin are relational terms, describing where people are located with respect to one another in the context of some shared social reality. Jung Young Lee observes that the terms *margin* and *center* are defined in relation to each other. "Centers are created within margins; margins are also created inside of centers."² He further observes that:

The sense of being a marginal person is relative also to each individual. One may think of oneself as being at the margin, while others perceive that individual as being at the center....It is difficult to draw a line between centrality and marginality. Both are dependent upon the perspectives of the subject and the object, and are relative to the contexts in which we define our status.³

Centers and margins are associated with power dynamics. Often the assumption is that being in the center means having power, status, and other resources. As center and

² Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 31.

³ Lee, 32.

margin shift in our changing world, associated power dynamics also shift. When this happens, people may continue to think of themselves as central players but in the perception of others their location is marginal. Theologian Douglas John Hall, who has reflected extensively on the end of Christian dominance in the contemporary world, observes that this may be the situation of the mainline denominations today.⁴

A marginal location may be self-chosen or imposed by social constructs such as race, class, or gender. Imposed marginality is often associated with experiences of disempowerment and disadvantage. But whether chosen or imposed, a marginal location is often a source of change, innovation, and development:

Groups on the margins have knowledge, skills, and abilities developed through the very challenges of their marginality. These marginal knowledges are critical for the health of the center. In fashion and entertainment, it is well known that trends begin on the margins. And in studies on creativity and innovation, lateral thinking, peripheral vision, cross-disciplinary thinking are critical ingredients for innovation and breakthrough ideas....New knowledge is crafted, new perspectives developed, survival skills crafted.⁵

Since *center* and *margin* are relational terms, teaching for leadership from center and margin involves building relational skills.

Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence provides a helpful framework. Briefly stated, emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, the capacity to manage one's own emotional self including one's motivational level, awareness of others, and the capacity to develop and sustain relationships effectively. There is a tremendous amount packed into those simple

⁴ See Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

⁵ Julie Diamond, "Women, Leadership, and Power—Leading from the Margins," <http://juliediamond.wordpress.com/2008/05/08>.

statements—developing self-awareness, for example, is a lifelong process that includes attending to one’s behavior and thought patterns as well as emotions. Especially in situations of diversity, awareness of self and others needs to include awareness of the socio-cultural context and of cultural capital—the actions and attitudes that bring credibility within a particular cultural context.⁶

These relational skills are also needed for a person to move skillfully between various centers and margins. Joyce Fletcher calls this “fluid expertise,” which she describes as the “ability to move easily from expert to non-expert role, with a genuine openness to being influenced by and learning from others. Ability to acknowledge help and give credit to others with no loss of self-esteem.”⁷

Starting Points for Learning about Center and Margin

When asked if the relational skills of emotional intelligence can be learned, Daniel Goleman observed that a “neocortical approach” does not work. Training must include the “limbic system,” helping people break old behavioral habits and establish new ones. Such education for relational practice requires a whole-person approach involving mind, body, and emotion.⁸ As Sharon Daloz Parks puts it, we need a methodology that “can teach...below the neck—to the default settings that people act from in crisis.”⁹ Parks agrees that this teaching happens most powerfully when the whole person is involved in the learning experience. There is enough challenge to disrupt mental categories and habitual patterns but not enough to push people into shut-down

⁶ See George B. Thompson, *How To Get Along with Your Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).

⁷ Joyce K. Fletcher, *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 86

⁸ Daniel Goleman, “What Makes a Leader?” Best of HBR reprint from *Harvard Business Review* (January 2004): 5.

⁹ Parks, 8.

mode. The learning experience engages participants “at the edge of their readiness to learn.”¹⁰

A popular inductive method, the traditional case-study analysis, draws on experience but is usually “somewhat removed from the immediate experience of the student.”¹¹ Case-study work proceeds inductively and offers opportunities for students to connect theory and practice across a number of dimensions. However, “a standard outcome of the traditional case method is that students become adept at critiquing what someone else has done in the past, but do not as readily gain insight into how they themselves do or do not respond in complex situations.”¹² This is an example of what Goleman would call a “neocortical approach.”

A variation on the case-study method is to ask students to write and reflect on their own cases. One case-study method, based on the work of Chris Argyris and Anita Farber-Robertson,¹³ begins the analysis by asking students to examine their own assumptions and interpretations. The next step is to imagine alternative possibilities for action that they might choose in future similar situations. The method encourages self-awareness related to thought processes, motivations, and actions but tends to neglect the emotional component. The reflection is on an event in the past, and, although the discussion often brings a feeling of immediacy, the case is still removed from present reality.

A method for present-time, whole-person learning is Ronald Heifetz’s case-in-point teaching. Author of the influential book *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Heifetz teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and works with seasoned professionals from a variety of contexts. His colleague Sharon Daloz Parks spent several

¹⁰ Parks, 49.

¹¹ Parks, 8.

¹² Parks, 242.

¹³ Anita Farber-Robertson, *Learning While Leading: Increasing Your Effectiveness in Ministry* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2000).

years observing his work in the classroom. Her analysis is reported in her book *Leadership Can Be Taught*.

Making what goes on in the classroom an occasion of “learning and practice,”¹⁴ Heifetz’s approach “engages the immediate experience of the whole person, bringing together action and reflection in the most immediate way possible.”¹⁵ Explicit and underlying issues are examined as they are manifest in the classroom process itself.¹⁶ Everything is open to scrutiny, “including the actions, inconsistencies, and blind spots of the teacher.”¹⁷ A number of learning methods are used including presentation of ideas, discussion, simulations, coaching, and writing, but the key is that everything taking place is considered potentially a case related to the learning goals of the course. “Students are encouraged to see the class itself as a social system of which they are a part and a studio-laboratory in which they can practice acts of leadership and learn from their experiments.”¹⁸

Heifetz recommends taking an experimental approach to teaching and to leadership. As he points out, that seems to be the approach God takes in creating the world—evolution creates experiments in which you cannot predict what will happen and what will or will not work.¹⁹ In our time of complexity and change, when the tried-and-true often fails us, the open and even playful stance of experimenting is both freeing and productive. The classroom, seen as a laboratory for experimenting, is a place where risks can be taken and any outcome can be a source of learning.

In Heifetz’s classroom the teacher is at the same time a learner who shares power and leadership with the students. The fact that the teacher does not always play the role of expert may disrupt students’ expectations. The

¹⁴ Parks, 7.

¹⁵ Parks, 49.

¹⁶ Parks, 7-8.

¹⁷ Parks, 8.

¹⁸ Parks, 49.

¹⁹ Ronald Heifetz, comment in a talk given at the Lilly Endowment Forum on Theological Education, Indianapolis, January 27, 2005.

teacher provides the authority functions of structure and equilibrium along with “enough disequilibrium (confusion, frustration, disappointment, conflict, and stress) to help the group move from unexamined assumptions about the practice of leadership to seeing, understanding, and acting in tune with what the art and practice of leadership may actually require.”²⁰

The teacher-as-leader also models reflective practice: thinking while doing.²¹ Heifetz observes that this is a skill that itself takes practice. The stance that everything is potentially a source of learning makes the teacher more vulnerable, because the classroom process is unpredictable. He points out that this is tiring—but with time becomes less so. If reflective practice is a key leadership skill, the teacher’s modeling during the class can be a powerful aid to student learning. This is a way of instructing in a manner congruent with the approach being used to teach leadership.²²

Heifetz’s teaching also encourages and makes use of imagination—the human faculty that enables us to “transcend the particularities of our individual situation”²³ and enter experiences beyond our own. Empathic imagination—the capacity to imaginatively put oneself in the position of another—is especially important for connecting with others across center/margin distances.

Experiments with Immediate Experience

My leadership class in spring 2009 offered opportunities to experiment with Heifetz’s method. Early in the semester I stated the expectation that we would consider everything that took place in class to be grist for the mill of learning about leadership, and I

²⁰ Heifetz, 8.

²¹ See Donald A. Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987).

²² Schon, 59.

²³ Ellen Ott Marshall, “Practicing Imagination,” *Choosing Peace through Daily Practice*, ed. Ellen Ott Marshall (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 74.

encouraged the students to consider the class a kind of laboratory in which they could experiment with leadership attitudes and actions. “Case material” did emerge spontaneously in the classroom, sometimes in relation to issues of center and margin. For example, one student’s request for a change in the classroom norms was challenged by another student with a question about what gives a particular person the perceived right to ask for such a change. A spirited discussion ensued concerning how gender, race, and class influence people’s sense of centrality and their confidence in attempting to influence others. Later in the semester several discussions arose about patterns of class participation. Did speaking up frequently in class make a person feel more central within the class itself? Did others perceive it the same way? Were non-native speakers of English less central because they tended to speak less frequently? Some of the English-as-a-second-language students observed that they had taken the risk to speak up in class more often than they usually did, because other ESL students spoke regularly and were received with attentiveness and responsiveness by others.

Pedagogical elements in the class set up the likelihood that this kind of discussion and reflection would take place. In order to implement the norm that we would pay attention to and comment on the class process, during the first half of the semester each class session had a designated process observer who was given a few minutes at the end of class to report on observed patterns of participation. Using the case-in-point approach, my teaching assistant and I also made observations about the class process when the opportunity arose.

All the students participated in small groups that continued through the semester, meeting to discuss and otherwise work with the material being studied. Each group was also responsible for a presentation for which a group grade was given. During the semester, the groups were periodically asked to assess their own

process, observing how leadership was distributed and carried out in the group. When debriefing their presentations, I asked group members to comment on their leadership contributions and what they had learned from the process. Since I had assigned students to their groups and arranged the groups for maximum diversity, each group had plenty of opportunity to experience center and margin—and to develop a new sense of center within the group itself.

Each group did indeed become a kind of center within the classroom. Small group discussion provided a safer place than the whole-class setting for participants to talk about the material and themselves in relation to it. Group members could also talk about center and margin within the small group itself. They shared their personal stories more extensively in the small group than in the class as a whole. The ESL students especially found a home-base within their small groups and felt encouraged to take more risk within the large-group setting. This happened in part because groups were assigned to talk about their own process, something that these students had not often done previously.

The case-in-point approach can work effectively in the kind of extended time period that a semester-long class offers. There is sufficient time for trust to emerge as well as opportunity to work through what takes place. Topics can be revisited in a subsequent class session a week or more later, incorporating the insights that come when some personal distance has been achieved. Students have multiple opportunities to observe themselves and others and to experiment with different attitudes and actions. Feedback can be given and received in the context of an ongoing but circumscribed social context with established norms of respectful communication.

Other methods may be more appropriate for a workshop or weekend event, when there is less time to build trust, reflect on what takes place, and experiment

with a variety of actions.²⁴ And the case-in-point approach of waiting for a case to emerge in the classroom process can also be supplemented by intentionally designed experiences such as role plays and other learning activities.

The more immediate the experience being engaged, the more potentially powerful and also risky the process becomes. Early in the semester students commented that the energy seemed to go up in the room when process observers reported. But this energy can easily become too much—it is up to the teacher to regulate the intensity. In writing about change management Heifetz uses the image of the pressure cooker: keep the heat turned up enough that things will cook, but not high enough to produce an explosion. This applies also to his case-in-point teaching method. The teacher needs to be attentive to signs of heat such as lack of participation, long speeches by one or several students, behavior that distracts from the topic at hand, body indicators of discomfort, blaming and judging statements, expressions of discomfort, and so forth. The teacher must make repeated assessments of how much intensity is enough but not too much. The teacher can turn down the heat by acknowledging it in a non-anxious way, thus normalizing some discomfort as part of the learning process. Asking the question, “What just happened?” invites people to step outside the situation into a reflective stance. Use of humor can decrease heat but may give people permission to leave the uncomfortable topic before working with it.

²⁴ Some laboratory learning methods such as T-groups are designed to accelerate and intensify the learning experiences in a group setting, often by increasing the ambiguity of the situation. For example, there may be no designated leader or instruction about goals or processes. Part of the group dynamic relates to this ambiguity and resulting anxiety, and the process of leadership emerging in the group. In contrast, with the case-in-point process, the teacher retains the authority role of structuring the situation. But the fact that s/he may not act in the expert role as students expect can raise anxiety and thus turn up the heat in the learning situation.

And More Experiments...

Role-plays and simulations are also powerful whole-person methods. Sometimes a simple set-up is all that is required to produce an experience that is real and present in its impact. A famous example was a role play developed spontaneously by Jane Elliott, an elementary teacher in an all-white Iowa town, the week after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. Distressed that her students had no idea “how it feels to be something other than white in this country,” on the spur of the moment she set up new classroom rules:

Blue-eyed children must use a cup to drink from the fountain. Blue-eyed children must leave late to lunch and to recess. Blue-eyed children were not to speak to brown-eyed children. Blue-eyed children were troublemakers and slow learners. Within 15 minutes, Elliott says, she observed her brown-eyed students morph into youthful supremacists and blue-eyed children become uncertain and intimidated.²⁵

This example illustrates how powerful role-plays can be. They are pretend situations that evoke real responses in immediate experience. After a few hours Elliott ended the role play and asked the students to drop their roles and talk about what happened. She engaged them in reflection—essential because the experience itself was so powerful. Elliott’s role play lasted just a few hours but the discussion and learning continued long after that day.

A variation on role play is to ask a group to act out a parable or other Bible story, an activity that is probably familiar to anyone who has ever led a youth group. This can be done in a shorter period of time than role plays often take. In a setting with sufficient trust and openness, acting out a story can offer learning possibilities to groups of adults too. The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) or either version of the parable

²⁵ Corina Knoll, “Thanking Her for Opening My Eyes,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2009, 1.

of the wedding banquet (Matt. 22:1-14 or Luke 14:15-24) will take people straight into experiences of center and margin and related issues of power. Other biblical texts—or stories from other contexts—could be used as well.

It is important to reflect on the activity soon after it takes place. Begin with questions that keep people close to the experience itself, such as: What did you notice about what happened? How did you feel? What were you thinking about? What did you want to do? After questions that are grounded in people's observations and experiences, then the discussion can move to questions of interpretation and application: What does this mean to you? How does this role-play connect with other dimensions of your life and observations? How is God present in what we have done and discovered?

Donald Schon and others have explored the development of reflective practice in professional education. Schon maintains that professional education should build the skill of “reflection in action (the ‘thinking what they are doing while they are doing it’) that practitioners sometimes bring to situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict.”²⁶ Such reflective leadership is an important skill for ministry leadership, both the capacity to reflect on one's own behavior and the skill to help others reflect. As reflective practice is modeled and students have the opportunity to engage in it, they develop this skill and become more able to learn from their subsequent experiences in ministry. They gain skills to help congregations and other communities ask “What just happened, and what does it mean?” so that those they lead will become more able to learn from their experiences.

Beginning with the body and with movement can open up learning possibilities about experiences of center and margin. For example, ask people to place themselves in a room by walking toward or away from the center according to where they locate themselves in a variety of contexts such as church community, academic setting, or

²⁶ Schon, xi.

family or origin. While they are standing in their chosen spots, ask them to respond to questions such as: What is it like for you to be in this location? Why do you think this is where you are? What do you want to do? Where would you like to be? What are the advantages and disadvantages of your location?

Commenting on this activity at a recent event, one participant said, “Hm, I realized something I don’t think I would have known if I hadn’t moved to a different place in the room.” Role plays, acting out parables, and moving around the room—all these take us to a literal different place because they begin with physical movement. This is powerful partly because it is unusual in an academic setting. The act of moving the body can also “take us to a different place” mentally and emotionally, as anyone who has dealt with writer’s block by taking a walk knows. Because body, mind, and emotions are so interconnected learning can start with any one of these as a point of entry.

These kinds of activities, mild as they seem, may take people out of their comfort zones. Before leading one, it is best to experience the activity first so as to be familiar from the inside. It is important to explain the activity and invite people to participate in a way that conveys respect for all, confidence in self and others, and honor for the level of participation each person chooses. Humor helps, especially the kind of silliness that is not at anyone’s expense. In any experiential learning method, there is always some guesswork about how much time will be needed and how much disequilibrium is optimal for learning. The teacher/leader needs to be grounded, flexible, and willing to risk her or his own discomfort as well as the students’.

Experiments in Imaginative Experience

The activities described above all draw on that wonderful human capacity, the imagination. In role plays, simulations, or move-around-the-room activities participants willingly enter a play-space where through imagination they can develop more awareness of self

and others. Through imagination the experience of another can become part of our own immediate reality, strengthening the skill of empathy, a component of emotional intelligence and an essential capacity for ministry.

When there is sufficient trust in a group, plus time and invitation, people begin to tell their stories. By listening attentively with compassion and empathy, it is possible to imaginatively enter the life-space of another. This can and does happen in classroom settings; such story-telling took place in the leadership class small groups and occasionally in the setting of the whole class. People told their stories in ways that conveyed their own emotions and also evoked emotional as well as cognitive understanding from their listeners. As they listened, students could put themselves in the “shoes” of another whose context was different.

Another approach is to intentionally ask people on the margins to be the teachers. For example, the City House in Minneapolis pairs up clients of secular social service agencies with trained spiritual directors. But contrary to what might be expected, in these partnerships the well-educated middle-class *directors* are the ones who put themselves in a position of learning from their marginalized companions.²⁷ Empathic imagination is encouraged as the directors learn from those whose life experiences are vastly different from their own.

Finding and claiming authentic voice is part of the leadership process. When those who have been frequently ignored or silenced are genuinely heard, their previously-silenced voices are clarified and strengthened. When those in leadership listen to people they may have previously ignored, their reflective practice is strengthened as they develop fuller understanding of others and other perspectives on events. Emotional intelligence is cultivated as awareness of others and capacity to form and sustain relationships are developed.

²⁷ Tom Allen, “Listening for Spirit on the Margins,” *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, 12(2) (June 2006): 20-25.

Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers a meditative practice for entering this imaginative empathic space. His non-duality meditation is grounded in his idea of *interbeing*: “To be” is to inter-be. We cannot just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.²⁸ In his book *Peace Is Every Step*, Nhat Hanh describes his experience of working on placing Vietnamese orphans. His job was to translate the applications from Vietnamese to French in order to seek sponsors for the children. He writes that he would begin by looking at the picture of the child:

Afterwards I realized that it was not me who had translated the application; it was the child and me, who had become one. Looking at his or her face, I felt inspired, and I became the child and he or she became me, and together we did the translation.²⁹

Through his empathy and imagination, Nhat Hanh entered the experience of the other. His meditation emphasizes the relationship between people rather than the distance or difference. Such empathic imagination can be encouraged in students. For example, invite them to think of someone different from them (perhaps different in a way related to centers and margins) and try to imagine and then describe what life is like for that person. Or, pair people up and ask one to talk about a situation or issue. The other then physically moves to the other person’s seat and tries to describe the situation from the point of view of the first speaker. This is more than a paraphrase—one person is asked to imaginatively enter the experience of the other. Such activities strengthen the capacity for reflective practice in ministry and in leadership by enlarging and enriching understanding of others. As students engage in such learning activities they can develop the skills to lead others in doing the same.

²⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 96.

²⁹ Nhat Hanh, 101.

Conclusion

Attention to group process itself, role plays and simulations, move-and-reflect activities, empathic imagination—all these are experiential methods for learning about center and margin. They are experimental in that the process itself is usually somewhat improvised and the outcome unpredictable. Such pedagogy requires particular skills and attitudes from the teacher, primarily the skills of emotional intelligence and reflective practice. Using these skills and approaches models the leadership being taught, helping students develop the same skills and approaches for leading and strengthening the leadership of others.

Theologian Jung Young Lee offers a new definition of marginality: being “in-beyond.” The in-beyond person participates in two or more contexts but is completely bound by none of them. The marginal location in-beyond connects two or more worlds: “The margin is the locus—a focal point, a new and creative core—where two (or multiple) worlds emerge.”³⁰ Leadership today involves being *in-beyond*—the capacity to move between and connect various centers and margins as *in-beyond* person. In doing so we contribute to God’s work of opening the centers and margins to make room for all.

³⁰ Lee, 60.