

A Liberated Professor Speaks¹

by

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also appointed as courtesy

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October 16, 2012

“I cannot imagine not being a professor,” I remarked to Dr. Josefina Tinajero, the Dean of the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso, this past week after an educational video shoot in her office. “What better vocation could there be than to be part of an ongoing learning community, buoyed and drowning in the vortex of ideas,” I emphasized. She nodded.

In the past 29 years, I have taught an estimated 4,500 to 5,000 students in 150 semester or quarter-length courses in 20+ subjects offered through universities in the U.S, Canada, Germany, Thailand, Malaysia, and India. The sailing has been smooth; enjoyable, in fact. My scorecard: A mountain of crests and a handful of troughs (happily forgotten)!



Photo 1: A joyful vocation: Arvind (left) with three freshly-minted Ph.D. advisees on way to hooding ceremony, Ohio University (May, 2007).

One thing for sure: My quality of life as a professor has risen sharply with the distance covered. I feel it in my bones. I sense it in my stride in entering a classroom. Need no Myers-Briggs, no empirically-validated scales; I know what I know. I feel what I feel.

Professors who revel in their vocational calling often hear their students say: “Professor, I enjoyed your class. I learned a lot. I thank you, and so on.” Such remarks, whether expressed orally, or penned in course evaluations and thank you notes, warm the heart and buoy the soul. I have been graced and buoyed by such warmth over the past 29 years.

However, in the past eight years or so, the nature of the student feedback I hear has noticeably changed. Qualitatively, it is deeper, more soulful. I increasingly hear: “This class changed my life;” “I learned so much about myself in this class;” “I am sad that this course is ending for I will miss my classmates;” and so on. And, I have even heard students say: “Thank you for teaching me about healthy communities. But thank you also for teaching me how to learn.” Such statements more than make a professor’s day. It makes a student’s life!

How do I explain this qualitative shift in student feedback? Perhaps, it is because I am getting older, wiser. Perhaps, my abilities to connect the classroom with the real world have multiplied appreciably. Perhaps I have learned to better manage classroom conflict. Perhaps I can at the drop of a hat pull out a compelling story to illustrate a point. Or, all of the above!

I believe, there may be one more explanation. In the past eight years, I have increasingly been exposed to, and have put to practice, some alternative ways to approach and design my classroom interactions.

These alternative approaches, called “Liberating Structures” were developed by my friends and complexity science practitioners, Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz, whom I first met in 2003 through meetings of the Plexus Institute in New Jersey. At that time, Keith and Henri had begun to experiment with, and codify and systematize, several Liberating Structures to replace or complement commonly-employed instructional practices such as straight lecture, or free-flowing brainstorming. By 2012, they had systematized 33 liberating structures (see www.liberatingstructures.com)

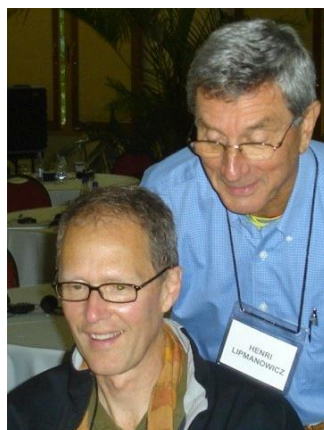


Photo 1: Keith (left) and Henri

In June 2004, Keith, Henri, and I along with a couple other colleagues served as co-facilitators of a three-day workshop on Complexity Science and HIV/AIDS at Princeton University. We used a variety of LS – celebrity interviews, fishbowls, 1-2-4-Whole, storytelling, pattern recognition, and others. I was intrigued and hooked. Since then Keith and Henri have served as my LS coaches, LS co-facilitators, and if I may say so, LS co-learners. I owe them a debt of gratitude.

Back to the point: What has the adoption of liberating structures done to my classrooms? One of my students (GC) wrote the following in her Spring 2012 learner reflections:

“In Dr. Singhal’s class we practice liberating structures in the way the class is structured and in the way activities are conducted. These structures provide an easy-to-learn atmosphere as they are adaptable methods for engagement that make it quick and simple for individuals from all backgrounds to integrate themselves into a discussion. This is exhibited by a simple rearrangement of chairs, removing order and hierarchy in conversation, and to even have space for a few moments to communicate free from course intentions. Through these practices we are working on decentralizing our thinking and actions. Through liberating structures we are learning to not adhere to an individual position and to not reject what others have to say.”



Photo 2: A Liberating Structures conversation underway in a seminar on LS facilitated by Arvind at the Clinton School of Public Service, Little Rock (March, 2012).

Acadia Roher (Center, with notebook on her lap, Photo 2), who took my once-a-month *Liberating Structures* elective seminar at the Clinton School of Public Service in Spring, 2012, summarized her classroom experience with the following sketch and narrative:

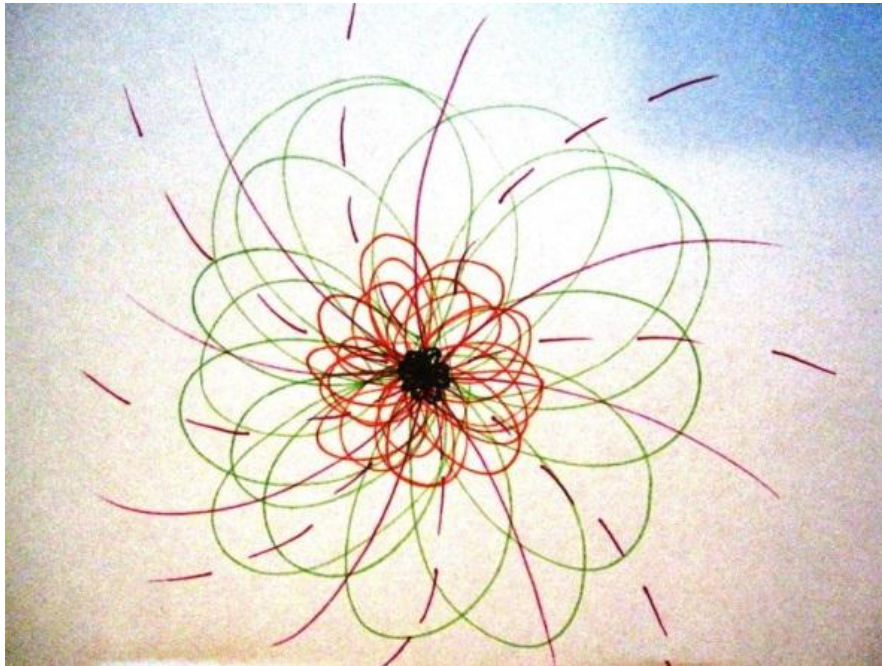


Photo 3: Acadia's portrayal of Liberating Structures and what they help accomplish

"My sketch represents the energy, focus, and expanding humanity that I have witnessed by using liberating structures in different settings and groups. I chose bright, vibrant colors to represent the electrifying energy that liberating structures seem to create in a room full of people. But the energy is not chaotic, it is instead focused and often creates more substance, connections, and ideas than traditional structures. The purple nucleus represents the focus that liberating structures bring, from which the ever-expanding circles of energy and ideas bounce outward".

When I read comments such as GC's and Acadia's, I grin from ear to ear. To hear that liberating structures help create more substance, connections, and ideas in a classroom -- priceless! Interestingly, LS allows for such to happen with no extra resources. The classroom, the teacher, the students, the chalkboard, the laptop, the projector and the time spent in the classroom remains the same. What changes with LS are certain structural conditions that enhance the quality of interactions among participants, leading to very different outcomes.

Let us give some simple examples. By physically moving the students from a traditional rows and columns classroom configuration into a circular seating arrangement changes the nature of the learning environment and the nature of the interactions. The circle structure allows each participant to be equally seen, heard, and acknowledged. There are no back or

front benchers. No scope for hiding. The circular setting invites richer participation, allowing those who are present to verbally and non-verbally affirm, support, or question others. Laughter ripples through a circular classroom far more rapidly and inclusively than in a traditionally structured classroom. I for one have noticed more smiles and nods. Sighs and gasps are also more visible, creating opportunities for deliberation, and spaces for corrective action. As professor, I experience more winks and nods and quizzical looks and my antennae are constantly processing feedback that is more authentic, accurate, and timely. Such feedback enables one to be nimble, to improvise, to change course, or maintain it.



Photo 4. Arvind facilitating a Master Class in Netherlands using a circular seating configuration (2012)

I often introduce a “talking stick” when doing small-group work in my classrooms. The talking stick represents a simple structure: whoever holds the stick (can be a pen) will talk, the others will listen. The talking stick has been used by the Navajos for centuries to bestow respect on the one who is talking. After one is finished talking, the stick is usually passed on to the next person. This goes on until all have spoken. In a small group situation, the talking stick can go around several times so that participants have an opportunity to widen and deepen their own thoughts and to build on the thoughts of the others. No one person dominates and the conversation does not Ping-Pong (bounce from one to another) as is customary in a traditional classroom brainstorm.

The talking stick, perceptibly, slows the conversation down, making it deeper and richer. Once the stick is in circulation, participants often get into a zone, playing off each other –like a jazz improvisation. In 10 to 15 minutes, a small group can have an orderly, respectful, deep, and creative conversation. And, multiple small group conversations can be simultaneously carried out in a classroom, ensuring that all class participants are engaged and participating at the same time.



Photo 5: Multiple small groups engaging in multiple conversations at the same time at the University of Texas at El Paso (Fall, 2011).

Simple structures like sitting in a circle, introducing a talking stick, and providing people an equal opportunity to be seen and heard changes the quality of the connections and interactions in a classroom. Imagine if such happens twice or thrice a week over a 16-week long semester course! More diverse inputs lead to a wider and deeper understanding of the issue at hand. Interestingly, within the first week or two, the classroom feels more dynamic, arms begin to uncross, words begin to flow, smiles and laughter rises, and sighs and gasps become more visible and acceptable. Trust rises as relationships deepen over time.

By the third week of classes, even before I enter the classroom, the din of conversational chatter greets me at the door. Multiple conversations are underway, telephone numbers are being exchanged, and most people know the others by their names. After class, participants feel comfortable to hang around. Compassion for others is palpable: someone offers a ride to another, someone puts the chairs back in rows and columns, and someone erases the chalkboard clean. When such happens, and with repeated frequency, I experience immense joy, realizing that the class has begun to act like, feel like, an interconnected whole. I am reinforced, convinced, and affirmed that we, collectively, must be doing something right to build a sense of community, a safe collective space.

I have often reflected on how the practice of Liberating Structures has enhanced my quality of life as a professor. How do I prepare differently? What am I mindful of when in class? Who is the arbiter of knowledge? When do I speak up? When do I let go of the conversation, and so on. There are no clear-cut answers, nor any prescriptions to dole out. But, my experiences suggest the following.

The practice of LS has helped liberate me from bearing the sole burden of “professing” in a classroom i.e. being a Sage on Stage, a knower, and content deliverer (photo below shows a “liberated professor”).

The practice of LS has enabled me to see the vast experiential and intellectual resource participants bring into a classroom, individually and collectively. These resources are usually hidden, lurking, and need a safe environment to find utterance. When such happens, participants learn from peers, a less hierarchical and often more effective mechanism for co-learning than just being at the mercy of the professor.



Photo 6: Liberated professor Arvind Singhal (extreme right) facilitating a workshop in Tokyo, Japan (December, 2011).

Operationally, by just “letting go” of the thought of “professing,” profoundly changes the way my classroom is designed.

I am now deeply mindful about how seats are configured – e.g. in a circle where everyone can be “seen” versus in rows and columns, and how these spatial configurations (geography) affects pedagogy.

I am now deeply mindful about my positionality vis-à-vis the participants. Am I seated with the class participants, one participant among many, or am I behind a podium -- in control with a PowerPoint clicker. What do such spatial positionalities symbolize?

I am constantly thinking about how do I create and frame the structural parameters so that participant conversations are focused and yet are allowed to expand and deepen. I am strategizing about how all participants can be engaged at the same time, whether as individuals who think in silence, or with a partner in a conversational space, or in a small group as a contributing or listening member.

Now, when I prepare to walk into a classroom, I ask not “What is it that I need to do?” but rather “What is it that WE need to do?” I focus on what the participants are “doing” in the classroom for it is the experience of doing that validates that learning has occurred. I have to constantly remind myself to curb my urge of lecturing, or professing an answer when a question is asked, for efficient as it may seem, learning can be quite superficial when people are just passively watching a PowerPoint, taking copious notes (so they could study for an exam), or listening uncritically to the one behind the podium.

In creating such conditions, the professor in me experiences deep humility. He realizes that no ONE person is (or can be) the arbiter of learning, but rather knowledge is created by the collective in the conversations they have, and the processes they experience.

Liberating structures create the enabling conditions for people to contribute, to ask for help, to develop skills in listening and paraphrasing, and to build trust and safety, while valuing (rather celebrating) diversity and difference.

The design aspects of Liberating Structures go way beyond the frame of “what we need to do in a classroom?” In order for meaningful, collective conversations to occur in a classroom, I am now deeply mindful of what individual class participants need to do prior to coming to class – what texts to read, what lectures/talks to watch in advance, what problems to solve, and what questions or reflections to bring to share with the collective.



Photo 7. A liberating structure in process in one of Arvind’s classes at the University of Texas at El Paso to discuss “ahas” from readings (Fall, 2011)

As a professor, one asks how the class participant might prepare themselves to come into a designated interactivational space once/twice/thrice a week at an appointed hour, and

benefit from the presence, knowledge, and experience of others, including the professor. This mindfulness also influences the design of what the class participants do, individually or in small groups, in-between class sessions to widen and deepen their understanding, to engage in actions and reflections, and such.

My professorial role is now one of a Chief Enabler whose responsibility it is to design and enable a process so that all class participants feel invited, engaged, and allowed to contribute as “whole” people. As an enabler, I bear the responsibility (and challenge) to create the safety and supportive conditions for such invitations, engagements, and contributions to potentially occur. Poetic as it sounds, this process of “enabling” can be difficult and challenging, as the control of the classroom space, time, and content is no longer solely with the professor. The professor exercises some degree of control over the process, and can help provide the frame for structuring conversations, but cannot completely control (or predict) what surfaces from the collective. That means liberating structures, necessarily, create the conditions for “surprising” and emergent classroom outcomes – both of a substantive and relational nature. I have seen how, for the most part, these outcomes result in opportunities for deeper, experiential learning for individuals and the collective and deeper friendships and relationships.

With liberating structures, a classroom, its participants, and a professor are always a work-in-progress. And, that is what learning is all about, no?

Resources for Liberating Structures:

Web: www.liberatingstructures.com

Videos: *UnScripted: Liberating Structures* by Arvind Singhal <https://vimeo.com/51546509> 10'20"

Liberating Structures: Inviting and Unleashing All: Lipmanowicz in Convo with Singhal <https://vimeo.com/50352840> 8' 30"

Liberating Classroom: Lipmanowicz in Convo with Singhal
<https://vimeo.com/50347352> 8' 20"

¹ A professor is essentially a learner for life. I have learned about “liberation” from many of my teachers: My grandfather, the late Om Prakash Gupta, a Professor of Mathematics at a university and a grandpa-teacher at home. My 7th grade Hindi teacher, Mr. D. C. Pant, at Oak Grove School, Mussoorie, India, whose classes were a string of life-changing stories. My Ph.D. advisor and mentor, Professor Everett M. Rogers, a master storyteller whose classes were always safe, humane, joyful, and curiously non-linear. Curt Lindberg, Henri Lipmanowicz, and Keith McCandless who introduced me to the science of complexity, liberating structures, and so much more. Jerry and Monique Sternin who taught me about positive deviance. Other colleagues and co-workers with whom I have co-learned, co-authored, and co-grown: Drs. Ronny Adhikarya, Michael Papa, Martine Bowman, Peer Svenkerud, Nagesh Rao, Lynn Harter, Rafael Obregon, Thomas Tufte, Kate Winskell, Saumya Pant, Ketan Chitnis, Ami Sengupta, Devendra Sharma, Karen Greiner, Virginia Lacayo, Rob Ulmer, Avinash Thombre, Do Kyun Kim, Toru Hanaki, Motoko Nagao, Yoko Kawamura, Han Hong, Sarah Ryan, Helen Wang, Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty, Lucia Dura, Harry Meeuwesen, Sarah Lubjuhn, Laurel Felt and countless others in classrooms, workshops, and meetings.