Stories: The Regenerative Educator Role in The Regenerative Life Book

Experiencing the Regenerative Educator Role

Sharon Molloy works in a small rural school system in southern New Mexico, teaching eight- to eleven-year-old children with learning disabilities and behavioral challenges. She is both passionate and skillful in this role but had recently faced an exceptionally difficult year. As she describes it:

> Behavioral issues were increasing, not decreasing. Students were openly contemptuous of me and other teachers, and passively defiant. It was hard to get through any kind of direct instruction without disruption. For the first time in my teaching life, I was sending kids to the office over behavior issues. I no longer looked forward to the school day; my joy in teaching had evaporated. As things got worse, my perspective narrowed. I kept returning to the idea of constancy—consistent rules and consistent consequences. I thought that if I could just get better at being consistent at application of the rules and consequences (never my strong suit), the problem would be solved.

> When I saw the Four Paradigms Framework, I realized that the dark tunnel I was experiencing was actually a manifestation of a transactional, value-return mindset. In the face of this very challenging environment, my view of what I was doing as an educator had collapsed to just getting through the lessons for a given day. Recognizing this helped open up a larger view, and I felt my inspiration return.

> I was particularly struck by the articulation of the core process of education as *develop intelligence*. It immediately became apparent to me that the so-called behavioral problems I was focused on were actually opportunities for developing the children's (and my) intelligence with regard to personal self-management and self-mastery.

The next day, I noted in my journal that although nothing overt had changed, the mood in the classroom was different. It was as though the students sensed a change in me and were responding in kind. At one point, Kendra was trying to address me, and kept calling me by other "M" names: "Mom, no (giggle), Mollie, no (giggle), Ms. Molloy . . ." We all laughed, and Justin—one of my most challenging students—turned to me, looked deep into my eyes, and said "Are you our mom?" Later, upon reflecting, I realized that only one out of all my students has an intact relationship with his mother.

Later the same day, Sharon was able to apply this insight, along with her understanding of the core purpose of the educator role—*transform value-adding processes*—to an interaction with a student named Mollie. Like all of the children in Sharon's classroom, Mollie is at an age where she is trying to discover her value, the contributions that she will one day make as she learns to navigate her world and future. Sharon again chose to make the essence framework her compass.

The whole school was rehearsing the Christmas program. Mollie rolled her eyes, refusing to listen to her drama coach. I motioned for her to come talk with me and took her aside. Before, I would have given "the warning." Instead, I saw the essence triad in my mind and told her that I had noticed that she has a powerful presence onstage, that she is not afraid to speak loudly and clearly, and that other people tend to follow her lead. I said that I believed she could develop these abilities further and mentioned that I was concerned that if she formed a habit of ignoring or being contemptuous of coaching from adults in charge of productions, it might limit her opportunities.

When we began the conversation, her arms were crossed, and she had a scowl on her face. Everything about her body language said, "Keep out!" But as I spoke, her face opened and changed, like a flower unfurling. She nodded

her head, said "I understand," went back onstage, and was fully engaged through the rest of the rehearsal.

A few days later, Sharon engaged her students in a deep and reflective conversation about their relationships with one another, their teachers, and their parents. The discouraging patterns that she had encountered earlier in the year were affecting everyone, and she wanted to help the children build a baseline for how they could do a better job of managing themselves. She described this to me as a memorable event, a mutual opening that they could collectively refer back to when things got tough in the classroom.

For Sharon, this was a chance to experience the core value of the educator role, *coevolve self and systems*. On the one hand, she was helping the kids become more accountable for themselves as a way of working successfully within their school and family systems. But equally important, she was gaining new insight about how to evolve the systems she is part of.

> Part of this "opening up" has included becoming aware of sources of nurturance, inspiration, and connection that had been invisible to me. For example, parents and community members began to show up with skills to offer—or perhaps I began to see and connect with them in a different way. Engaging in my work from the core value of self and system actualizing expands the scope of my work from classroom to school, community, and larger world.

Finding the Right Level

Shelly Portoff is an assistant professor in the School of Architecture at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, which has traditionally served African-American students. In recent years, she has been teaching a regenerative design course that includes a group project on behalf of a low-income neighborhood in her city. This has revealed

a number of inherent tensions between her training as an architect and the need to adopt a fundamentally different approach, for the benefit of her students as well as her community. As she puts it,

> I have an analytical mind that easily discerns problems and lays out the most efficient method for arriving at the "right" solution. The practice of architecture has been codified into a "set-the-problem, solve-the-problem" framework, which is a perfect example of the arrest disorder paradigm. I know that this is at odds with the creative process, but I happen to be kind of good at it. So it is difficult for me to avoid reverting to it when the pressure is on.

> In addition, architectural education exhibits a strong bias toward outcomes over process. In other words, at the end of the day what really matters is the product rather than any learning and development that might occur along the way. Five years ago, when I first started teaching, this was my primary operating framework. Success was gauged in terms of knowledge transfer as evidenced by the final product. The actual development of intelligence within the student was hardly considered.

> My desire to work from a regenerate life paradigm has forced me to take a good hard look at why I teach. The potential of a historically black university is to create the conditions in which students and faculty can self-actualize without having to overcome barriers that are typically present in society at large. If in addition I can link my students' self-actualization to system actualization, then they will be well equipped to address the persistent diversity issues that continue to plague the architectural profession. Even more important, they will be able to proactively address the profession's struggle to serve minority populations and communities.

It is clear to me that I need to disrupt the status quo. It's also clear how often I fail and how miserably! My task-master takes over, especially when I know that a class has an important deliverable that has been promised to the community. I become afraid that the students might fail to deliver the project, even though I know that not allowing for failure is a backhanded way of cutting us off from our essence and potential. I can go unconscious and start to take over some of the students' responsibilities. In these ways, I buy into the old paradigm that the project is what's important, rather than the development of people. Through my participation in the *Regenerative Life* research project, I knew that managing *me* was going to be my biggest challenge.

When the end of the semester came around, I was prepared to allow things to unfold. The final deliverable was a ten-minute video telling the story of the neighborhood we work with. I knew that my students were way behind and went into the final presentation with low expectations, reframing this for myself as a milestone within an ongoing work in progress. By the time class started the video still wasn't done. So while we waited for the person working on the video to finish, we reflected on the class in general and how to continue regenerative work in the world.

Then a heated conversation between two students broke out in the back of the classroom. Soon it pulled in everyone's attention. Basically, they had resorted to finger pointing about why the presentation wasn't done and why the quality wasn't where it could have been. Everyone in the class started to chime in. I had to make a choice.

What I chose was to not interfere. I decided in that moment that this was the deep personal work that was really being asked of them. My job was to let it play out. I needed to take on a resource role, dedicated to developing my students' systemic intelligence in this moment. I listened in a non-

judgmental, non-reactionary way. I didn't allow myself to get sucked in but instead created a reflective space for everyone to explore a triggered state of being.

Eventually, one of the conflict's instigators asked me to take his side. I didn't. I instead pointed to the lessons on self-reflection, internal locus of control, and external considering. I took right-and-wrong off the table and encouraged everyone to use this conflict as an opportunity to work on these new skills of self-management. I encouraged them to reflect on how their own personal engagement throughout the process right up to that moment either did or did not serve our intentions for the team and the project. These conversations continued after class and over the next couple of days.

Incidentally, the project ended up being a pretty decent first draft. Even better, a group of students signed up to continue working on it after the end of the semester.

Applying the Seven First Principles

Brandon Costelloe-Kuehn teaches design students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York where he has experimented over the years with how to craft contexts for developmental experiences. Nevertheless, his participation in the research for this book revealed a relatively unexplored opportunity to make student evaluation a far more developmental and self-accountable process. In Brandon's words,

Before the research project, I often asked students to offer feedback on each other's work. But I had never placed self-evaluation at the center of the process in a way that could take into account the individual, specific, unique background, positioning, and potential of each student. I always struggled to know each individual student as best I could, a daunting task with as many as

100 new students each semester. But I had never taken full advantage of how well they know themselves; nor had I offered experiences that could help deepen this self-knowledge. I wanted students to take their education personally, including grading themselves.

Brandon knew that he was going to have to address a tricky problem if he took this approach. He wanted students who were seriously invested in their education, for whom self-evaluation could enhance learning. But he knew that there was a real chance that the approach he was taking could attract students who wanted to game the system.

I didn't want students to take my classes simply because they heard it was an easy A. By getting away from a focus on grading (in a standard way, by the professor), I could ironically end up with a bunch of students who were taking the class *because* of a focus on grading. On top of that, grade-motivated students could crowd out students who have a legitimate interest in the classes. As a primary goal, getting an A seems like a perfect example of what it means to operate from the value return paradigm. It certainly isn't consistent with the regenerative approach I was trying to introduce.

After wrestling with this question for a while, Brandon decided to commit himself fully to student self-evaluation.

I asked students to hold themselves accountable and evaluate their work in relation to their own understanding of their evolving and specific potential. As a way of keeping them honest, I asked them to take self-evaluation very seriously and informed them that anything less than forthcoming, accurate, and thorough assessments could have a major negative impact on their overall grade.

The outcomes of this self-evaluation process were incredible. Students seemed to really build their capacity to take responsibility, not in a self-flagellating, finger-wagging kind of way, but in the sense of an ability to respond based on their specific situations. In addition, students made great strides in developing the intelligence required for understanding themselves in terms of their nestedness in larger systems (including the system of higher education). Many students naturally identified multiple, interlocking inner obstacles, even though I hadn't offered them this precise language (something I will certainly do next semester). Students were also incredibly honest and accurate in their evaluations. I was quite surprised that the only modifications I had to make were to increase a few of the students' grades because often students from less privileged backgrounds had been overly harsh toward themselves.

It is not difficult to recognize the seven first principles of regeneration in Brandon story. First of all, he thinks of his students as *whole* human beings, with their own *essence* and *potential*. By allowing each student to have their own starting point and their own learning process, he avoided the fragmentation and dehumanization associated with typical grading processes, which locate students in relation to one another on a curve. He also built new energy and potential into the process by giving students full responsibility, while setting a boundary to prevent anyone gaming the system.

This provided just enough containment to create a *field* within which students could give themselves fully to *developing* (and monitoring) themselves. As a result, the students (and the school itself) became quite conscious that they were participating in a radical challenge to the teaching profession's usual practice. This helped students maintain a high degree of awareness of the *nested* systems (self, classroom, institute, higher education) that they were influencing and being influenced by.

Finally, the *nodal* opportunity that Brandon intuitively recognized was to bring together three processes—ideation, creation, and evaluation—that have been split apart to the detriment of nearly every aspect of modern life. The fragmentation and devaluation of human beings arising from this split has undermined the potential of all of our institutions, from families and schools to businesses and governments. Brandon's insight was both simple and profound. For students to become whole and integrated human beings, they needed to take responsibility for—and indeed to insist upon responsibility for—all three.

Managing Inner Obstacles

Maya, educator and head of innovation at a school in north London, has struggled to reconcile the conflict between her own sense of what it means to be an effective educator and the demands of her department to produce tangible, measurable outcomes. At the time she joined the research the *Regenerative Life* research project, this conflict had become acute, to the point that she actually feared she might lose her job. As she puts it,

> We were working on a social innovation project. My plan was to use design thinking as a basis for community engagement and project development, as well as for an inner journey in which students would identify their learnings and the evolution of their being. I was keen to explore using this approach, as it resonates with my understanding of what education should be. I deeply believe that self-discovery and understanding, which come through conscious, experiential learning, result in longer lasting skills and transformations.
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> However, I was immediately faced with push back from both students and staff. "Your methods will not produce tangible results—having students account for their own learning is too unreliable. And there is no pre-existing

project underway." In a meeting with the department head, I was asked to demonstrate proof that learning would happen.

I absorbed their doubts and fears, mixing them with my own inner obstacles (which were already strong, given that I was in a new role, feeling like I was in hostile territory, and needing to show success quickly to get buy-in). As a result, I shut down my own thinking, my own innate knowledge and beliefs, and reverted back to trying to show some kind of tangible deliverable. I began to design the program to suit department expectations.

As Maya became more conscious of the inner obstacles that were at work in her, she began to find ways to manage them so that she could get back on course and serve the education of her students rather than the fears of her institution:

First I identified the effect of *attachment* on me. I could see that I had unconsciously adopted the beliefs that the environment and status quo of university education is fixed and that I have to adapt to succeed within it. With this realization, I reminded myself that I was brought in to create something new, with a new language and framework, and that this is important and necessary to the long-term health of the university. I began to reframe my project in line with the changes that I think we need to see in education.

I also struggle with *fabrication*. I suspect that many of the perceived issues of resistance within the school are actually being imagined by me. I particularly have to be on guard against *fear*, especially the fear of getting fired for not toeing the line. I realize now that the best way to get fired from my position is to abandon my own experience and sense of what is right and effective for students. Going forward, my real work is to articulate the value of my approach within the overall principles and goals of the university, and this is a work in progress.

Generating a New Pattern

Rachel Greenberger is the co-founder of Food Sol, a program housed within the Lewis Institute at Babson College, a Boston-area business school specializing in entrepreneurship. The institute focuses on social innovation, helping businesses in the U.S. grow their effectiveness as change-makers. After graduating from Babson, Rachel teamed up with Cheryl Kiser, executive director of the institute, because they wanted to create a program focused on innovation with regard to every aspect of the American food system.

In addition to creating platforms and events designed to stimulate innovation within the food industry, Food Sol works with graduate students interested in making this their area of focus. Thus, Rachel finds herself in the role of educator in her work with food-related businesses and entrepreneurs, as well as within Babson's academic programs. But on reflection, she realized that she was playing the role at a pretty low level.

> I often feel pressed to be an expert, to earn my keep by proving that my presence has value. I am well aware of the professorial game, which is based on capital "K" Knowing. When students come to you with questions, they believe your answers. This is the root story of academia. Most people live by it, whether or not their particular answers fit a particular student.

> When it comes to food, I am recognized as someone who knows a lot of people and a lot of things and who studies the industry daily. Naturally, students come to me looking for direction, advice, and contacts. If they come in quick succession, I tend to feel bombarded. Under pressure, I default to just pushing out answers. "Here's a carrot. Now go away."

This has never felt particularly great, but I've *always* thought it was my job to dole out answers, based on my expertise, as efficiently as possible. I've believed that I was being helpful. When I've been energetically tapped out, I've also seen it as a way to move people along, like an assembly line, so that I can get back to whatever big, quiet-time project I'm working on. Whenever a student is excited or grateful for the loot I hand over, I consider it a good outcome, pat myself on the back, and move on to the next student.

For Rachel, participation in the research for this book was revelatory.

One of Carol's assertions caused me to completely rethink the way I was working with students. She said, "Everything alive has the ability to regenerate what it is uniquely." She went on to unpack one of the implications of this idea, which is that from a regenerative point of view there are no commodities.

This led me to reexamine my image of an "assembly line" of graduate students waiting at my door to have new parts and pieces installed. This queue of students is *not* an assembly line, but a powerful array of precious, one-of-a-kind beings, every one of whom holds a unique power and potential to influence food and industry.

Getting more caring people into the business of transforming food is the reason I got into my work in the first place. So I've been trying a different mindset, a different lens, even though it feels a little risky because I am not following the root story of academia. The results have been noteworthy and encouraging. For example, in preparation for a visit from a second-year MBA student whom I know well, I began by grounding my energy. I knew that I needed to center myself if I was to practice the level of silence I intended. I wanted to let the student lead the conversation. I also wanted the courage to leave spacious pauses in our exchange so that she could continue her line of

thinking—a line that is typically cut off too soon in the high-speed back-and-forth that is typical of business culture.

Being clear, empty—or at least emptier than usual—and present, I refrained from interrupting and from the nervous habit of rushing to fill pauses. This created a profound result. The student both asked the questions and answered them. She went further in revealing and voicing her insights than ever before. I had left her the space for it! She was deeply listened to, which is its own form of teaching.

This student sensed the difference in the nature of our meeting and commented on it. She talked about feeling clearer and retuned. At the end of the conversation, I gave her resources for the new plans she had formed, rather than for the ones she'd walked in with. What surprised me most about this new approach was how energy conserving it was. I was trying something new—which can easily be tiring—and getting potent results. I left the encounter refreshed!

Going Forward

Rachel Greenberger

I want to establish a new pattern in my relationship with students. I've committed to arrive at meetings armed with nothing but a few great questions, questions that are deliberately spacious, inherently philosophical, and require a bit of wrestling in order to understand. I'm also committed to meditating before meetings, practicing silence, and leaning back to create more space, physical and energetic, for the other person.

After all, if everyone is a unique being, then any predetermined, formulaic process is going to get really clunky, really quick. Space feels *essential* to generating clarity in the one seeking to be drawn out.

Maya

I will keep these insights in mind as I reevaluate next term's design. I want to ensure that there is sufficient space and time for learning by doing, developing key questions to unlock the intelligence in students, and supporting the practice of reflection. I aim to create high quality project results, while also ensuring that the full selves of students can be expressed. In addition, I will continue to clarify and articulate my values and paradigms so that they will advance rather than hinder the program.

Brandon Costelloe-Kuehn

I plan to push my experiment further by utilizing self-evaluation processes throughout the entire semester and giving students a greater degree of freedom to develop their own criteria for evaluation.

What surprised me, blew me away even, was how readily self-actualizing and system-actualizing work came together in this process. I'm inspired by the great task of bringing my values into greater alignment with my everyday choices. I'm excited about helping students shift from seeing values as a form of moralistic drudgery to an exploration of how individual purpose and will can resonate with biospheric health and wellness.

Shelly Portoff

I've distilled what I learned into three principles to guide me going forward.

- Provide the learning environment and guidance that helps each student discover their essence and unique gifts.
- Incorporate self-reflective processes as the framework through which all other work is pursued.
- Design projects to facilitate the formation and development of guilds that will pursue the project. Make the development of people primary and the project secondary.

Additional Insight

Geoff Stack is GIVE Fellowship Leader with Business Volunteers of Maryland, in Baltimore. The fellowship is a 10-month capability-building program, with the aim to prepare rising leaders who are "motivated and passionate about making a difference in their community and career." While Geoff was participating in the *Regenerative Life* project, he was also designing the structure and content of workshops for the 2019 fellowship cohort, the majority of whom were women working in the corporate sector.

> I am an educator, even though I'm not working with what people usually think of as students. GIVE fellows are professionals, twenty-five to forty years old, ready to take their community engagement to the next level. They are focused on building their personal and professional networks and have only about five or ten hours a month to give to the fellowship.

> This was the first year that I undertook the lead role in designing workshops for the program. One of the main lessons I'll take away from the research project is that true educating requires the engagement of everyone—not just participants but my teaching collaborators as well. I see an opportunity to evolve the program as a whole in order to fully embrace the working of the regenerative paradigm throughout the fellowship year. By educating

collaborators and fellows about a living systems perspective, we all become more conscious of when we're moving between different levels of paradigm. This gives everyone a way to watch paradigms at work.