

## ***OUR MUTUALLY-TRANSFORMING POWERS***

### **Chapter 6: Creating Liberating Disciplines**

This chapter focuses in detail on how we designed and conducted the huge introduction to business course at Southern Methodist University the third time we tried. More generally, the chapter focuses on how middle managers can structure their particular sphere of authority within a larger organization to encourage both inquiry and productivity at the same time. To do this, I present the general theory of liberating disciplines that I began to outline during the summer between my first and second years of teaching at SMU and then show how its characteristics and dynamics are illustrated by the activities that occurred during the fall 1971 version of the course, with 360 students.

This liberating disciplines way of organizing devotes continuing attention to three questions that are in fact deeply interrelated, even though they are usually experienced as in tension with one another. These three questions are:

- (1) how to reliably generate quality work among subordinates;
- (2) how to encourage increasing self-direction among subordinates; and
- (3) how to develop a sense of shared purpose among subordinates.

To begin with, I want to offer some simple heuristics that I use to create such structures and some brief illustrations to give the idea some life. Then, I present the more complex set of eight essential characteristics of liberating disciplines, as well as a dynamic model that shows how organizational conflicts can be used to increase quality work, self-direction, and an sense of shared purpose.

One heuristic for creating liberating disciplines is: *list all the limiting conditions* (e.g. lack of money, employees without the right skills, etc.) *that prevent one from accomplishing some desired goal; and then set about inventing a structure that recognizes and even uses these limits to reach the goal.* In principle, this is no more than the old saw: "turn problems into opportunities," or "turn lemons into lemonade." But this cliché is as rarely enacted as it is regularly espoused, especially in the domain of creating social structures for doing tasks. For example, faculty committees at universities typically argue themselves into terminal antagonism, depression, and withdrawal rather than agreeing to anything. Rather than attempting any number of complicated and covert means to overcome this limiting condition, a committee chair might simply recognize this issue at the outset of the committee's life and make a game of making fast decisions. Once several decisions have been made, the limiting condition no longer exists, so the structure temporarily set in place to make fast decisions may no longer be necessary.

The foregoing illustration also exemplifies a second simple heuristic for creating liberating disciplines: namely, *create a structure which, if it works, will become unnecessary.* The most fundamental reason why liberating disciplines are necessary in the first place is that few human beings today take full executive responsibility for the effects of their actions and treat one another as true peers. The most fundamental aim of liberating disciplines is to cultivate the development of subordinates toward becoming peers who increasingly take executive responsibility in all their interactions. Hence, when liberating disciplines succeed, we see

organizational members increasingly take executive responsibility, increasingly treating one another as peers, and increasingly creating their own liberating disciplines for themselves and their subordinates.

A third heuristic for creating liberating disciplines is *to ask oneself how to maximize both of two apparently opposite values, such as power and justice, or inquiry and productivity*. Usually, we think we have to sacrifice one of these for the other, or else compromise between the two. Totally new solutions to such dilemmas begin to suggest themselves if we disdain our competitive assumptions and seek counterintuitive solutions.

*Let us look at the experience of a company that created autonomous production groups. Here one value was the desire to be true to the vision of autonomous groups and have them be responsible for their own discipline problems. The opposing value was to centralize disciplinary decisions for efficiency, effectiveness, objectivity, and fairness (both within and across groups) in the decisions that were actually made.*

*Although it was initially assumed that these work groups would manage their own disciplinary issues, no definite logistics were put in place to do so. Two difficulties arose. First, work teams often had difficulty exercising discipline within themselves because to do so required confrontation and differentiation among members. This was both uncustomary and seemed intuitively likely to hurt team spirit and working relations. Indeed, some teams began to ask senior management to handle their disciplinary problems.*

*Meanwhile, a whole class of unanticipated disciplinary problems arose (e.g. a worker, unrelated to his team activity, stealing from the company). These seemed to require senior management action, but the difference in types of disciplinary activity had not been clarified; so, many workers reacted to such centralized discipline as a violation of the principle of work-group-centered discipline.*

*Eventually, when facing the need to reduce labor costs by a certain percentage during an economic downturn, the company (in response to workers' concerns) invented the procedure of offering the work teams a 48-hour period to propose their own solutions to meet this need. The work teams in fact offered a fully satisfactory set of proposals (whereby everybody accepted unpaid furloughs rather than anyone losing their job altogether), which were implemented. Even more important, the company realized it had invented a generalizable structure for future disciplinary issues - what I would call a liberating discipline, since it both constrained and empowered and since it maximized two apparently opposing values. Thereafter, the work team could choose either to deal with a given disciplinary issue within 48 hours, or else let senior management deal with it. Senior management, in turn, could either accept the work team solution, if one were proposed, or impose its own solution. If a given work team never exercised self-discipline, or if senior management never accepted a given team's recommendations, such patterns would raise further questions. In this way, both parties have well-focused power and responsibility for action.*

Because liberating disciplines can be created for subordinates, they represent a way for middle managers to simultaneously increase productivity and empower others. Hence, they can solve the difficult binds that senior management, often unawaredly, create for middle managers. Moreover, the effort to create liberating disciplines, and then the process of implementing them, will cultivate the further development of the middle managers themselves. On the other hand, many middle managers will hesitate to experiment with creating liberating disciplines because they bring to the surface more conflict than most managers are initially prepared to deal with (as the reader will see more clearly in the detailed illustration of A.S.I below). More middle managers are likely to develop the skills necessary to implement liberating disciplines successfully, if senior managers first generate liberating disciplines for the middle managers.

Let us now examine in greater detail what these liberating disciplines are in theory and how they can operate in practice. The next section of this chapter presents the eight essential qualities of liberating disciplines, followed by a diagram of the dynamics of conflict resolution within liberating disciplines. The section after that presents an extended illustration of all eight qualities and their dynamic interrelations. Because the next section is highly abstract, some readers may prefer to glance briefly at the headline for each of the eight qualities and then go on to the illustrations. If you do read this next section, keep in mind that we are assuming that only a leadership team that has considerable experience attempting to work in a collaboratively inquiring manner in transformational situations is likely to have any interest in attempting this kind of leadership.

## **The Eight Essential Qualities of Liberating Disciplines <sup>1</sup>**

*One quality of liberating disciplines is deliberate irony.* The leadership (at whatever organizational level) that is willing to commit to generating liberating disciplines recognizes that most subordinates will initially interpret the organizational structure and the particular events unfolding based on a different model of reality from the one inspiring the leadership. Moreover, subordinates will not tend to interpret the resulting conflicts as caused by the different models of reality, nor will they be inclined to examine or test their own model. The leadership must at one and the same time succeed in "speaking the subordinates' language" and introducing them to a "new language" (e.g. the theory and practice of transforming, mutuality-enhancing power that generates a peer culture). The new "language" will motivate exploration of basic assumptions about reality by constructing tasks wherein members feel the limitations and self-contradictions inherent in their, relatively self-restricting view of reality. Organizational structures and leadership actions that meet these demands are deliberately ironic: they both acknowledge and bridge a gap in worldviews.

*A second quality of liberating disciplines is the definition of tasks that are incomprehensible and undoable without reference to accompanying processes and purposes.* Ordinarily employees or students treat tasks as meaningful in themselves or as meaningless except in terms of external rewards, masking the operation of their own interpretive scheme as the source of meaning. By contrast, liberating tasks are epistemologically transparent: the product and the process congruently embody and reflect the purpose. Members cannot successfully complete liberating tasks unless they challenge their usual ways of doing these tasks without awareness of process and purpose. Consequently, and ironically, liberating tasks will initially seem opaque, strange, and disquieting to many organizational members since they are unaccustomed to such tasks, even though what is strange about them is that they are actually epistemologically transparent and that they encourage awareness of this fact.

*A third quality of liberating disciplines is premeditated and precommunicated structural evolution over time.* Such evolution reflects the movement by organizational members as they advance toward conscious appropriation of the process and purpose territories of reality and thus toward the possibility of collaboration in the search for shared purpose, self-direction, and quality work. Such pre-communicated structural evolution also counters the tendency to treat a given structure as the ultimate substance of an organization and encourages the search for a continuing thread of meaning - for a shared purpose beyond structure. The premeditated and precommunicated phasing of this evolution helps to persuade members that some discoverable rhythms underlie even the most fundamental transformations.

*A fourth quality of liberating disciplines is that its tasks are so structured and its leadership so functions as to provide an ongoing cycle of experiential research in the midst of action, as well as empirical research to be analyzed and feedback over time.* This research highlights and helps improve the quality of participants' work, their changing relations to one another, and their different ways of constructing reality.

*A fifth quality of liberating disciplines is the use of all available forms of power by the leadership to support the first four qualities.* Instead of attempting either to hoard power or to give it away, the leadership uses the logistical, diplomatic, and unilateral powers granted it by its institutional status and by its members, as well as the transforming power granted by its own experiential authority. It uses all these powers to perform a kind of psycho-social jiu-jitsu whereby the members experience both more direction and more choice than usual. The leadership does not use power manipulatively — that is, covertly and in order to maintain unilateral, exploitative structures. Instead, it uses power openly to create increasingly collaborative conditions. These conditions can lead the members gradually to question their own assumptions about the nature of power and begin to experiment with the creative power to constitute a new worldview and way of acting. In so doing, the members increasingly join the leadership in a peer community of inquiry.

*A sixth quality of liberating disciplines is that the organizational structure at any given time is open, in principle, to inspection and challenge by organization members.* The organization requires the vigilance of all its members to determine whether its purposes are hazy and whether its specific structure, implementing behaviors, and products or services are congruent or incongruent with its purposes. But members' charges of organizational incongruities may well be untrustworthy so long as the members themselves are unaccustomed to searching for incongruities among their own presuppositions, strategies, practices, and effects. Thus, especially initially, charges of organizational incongruity by subordinates may mask an unwillingness to face personal incongruities. The attentive leadership will turn such conflicts into educational opportunities. To state this idea another way, the openness of the leadership is made possible by, and is limited to the service of, a principle of inquiry more fundamental than any particular structure.

*A seventh quality of liberating disciplines is that the leadership becomes vulnerable, in practice, to attack and public failure as soon as it behaves inauthentically* when its tasks, processes, and purposes become incongruent and it refuses to acknowledge and correct such incongruities. By promising much, designing unconventional (and therefore often uncomfortable) tasks, and inviting full inspection, liberating disciplines set the stage for members' dis-illusionment. If the leadership exerts power in manipulative and defensive ways, members will become disillusioned with the leadership. If the leadership shows appropriate strength, vulnerability, and integrity from moment to moment, members will shed various illusions about

themselves, about organizing work, and about the nature of reality.

*A final quality of liberating disciplines, implicit throughout the foregoing discussion, is a leadership committed to, and practiced in, seeking, recognizing, and righting personal and organizational incongruities.* The leadership leads other organizational members: 1) in learning while improving quality; and 2) in creating social settings that encourage simultaneous learning and quality work.

Figure 6.1 outlines the dynamic processes and effects of liberating disciplines. It illustrates the free choice that well-constructed liberating disciplines repeatedly offers organizational subordinates between two different cycles of activity - a "Development and Quality Improvement Cycle" and a "Conflict Cycle." Obviously, the "Development and Quality Improvement Cycle" is the more rewarding pattern for both the subordinates and the organization as a whole. If the liberating disciplines are in fact well-constructed in their details (fitting both the particular limiting conditions of the industry and the particular limiting conditions of the workforce), the vast preponderance of activities will rapidly shift toward this cycle.

There are three reasons, however, why a considerable amount of supervisors' and subordinates' energy early in the career of liberating disciplines will tend to enter the other cycle - the "Conflict Cycle." One reason is that prior to encountering the liberating disciplines form of organizing, organizational members are very likely to have dealt frequently with dilemmas by avoiding them or passively conforming to an expected but ineffective norm of how to respond. Heretofore, they may not have been confronted for such responses; on the contrary, such responses may have been tacitly or explicitly rewarded. After two or three trips through the "Conflict Cycle," many subordinates will catch onto the new system. They will realize at least that they are not going to get away with low quality work; they may also realize that the new approach in fact improves both organizational effectiveness and the quality of their working life through creating a learning environment. Hence, they will tend to more regularly choose the "Development and Quality Improvement Cycle" by more actively experimenting when they face a dilemma.

Of course, any given set of liberating disciplines will *not* be a perfectly constructed work of political art at the outset. This is another reason why energy will initially enter the "Conflict Cycle" at the outset: the structure will to some degree not properly reward, or not properly explain the advantages of, active experimenting in response to dilemmas. This difficulty can only be addressed and rectified by experiments that change the liberating structure itself, as indicated in Figure 6.1 by the third cycle - the "Structural Improvement Cycle" - that stretches across the bottom of the figure and then up the right side.

Because reality does not present itself to us as neatly as the analytic distinctions and arrows of Figure 6.1, the different reasons for conflict outlined above present themselves in intermixed fashion in particular cases; different organizational members will see different elements of each such case; hence, a considerable number of experienced-cases may be necessary before a commonly perceived pattern begins to emerge. Indeed, you, the reader, are very likely feeling at sea amongst all these abstractions at this point and may appreciate some case-illustrations, in order to help you imagine more concretely what these 'liberating disciplines' and 'conflict cycles' can look like.

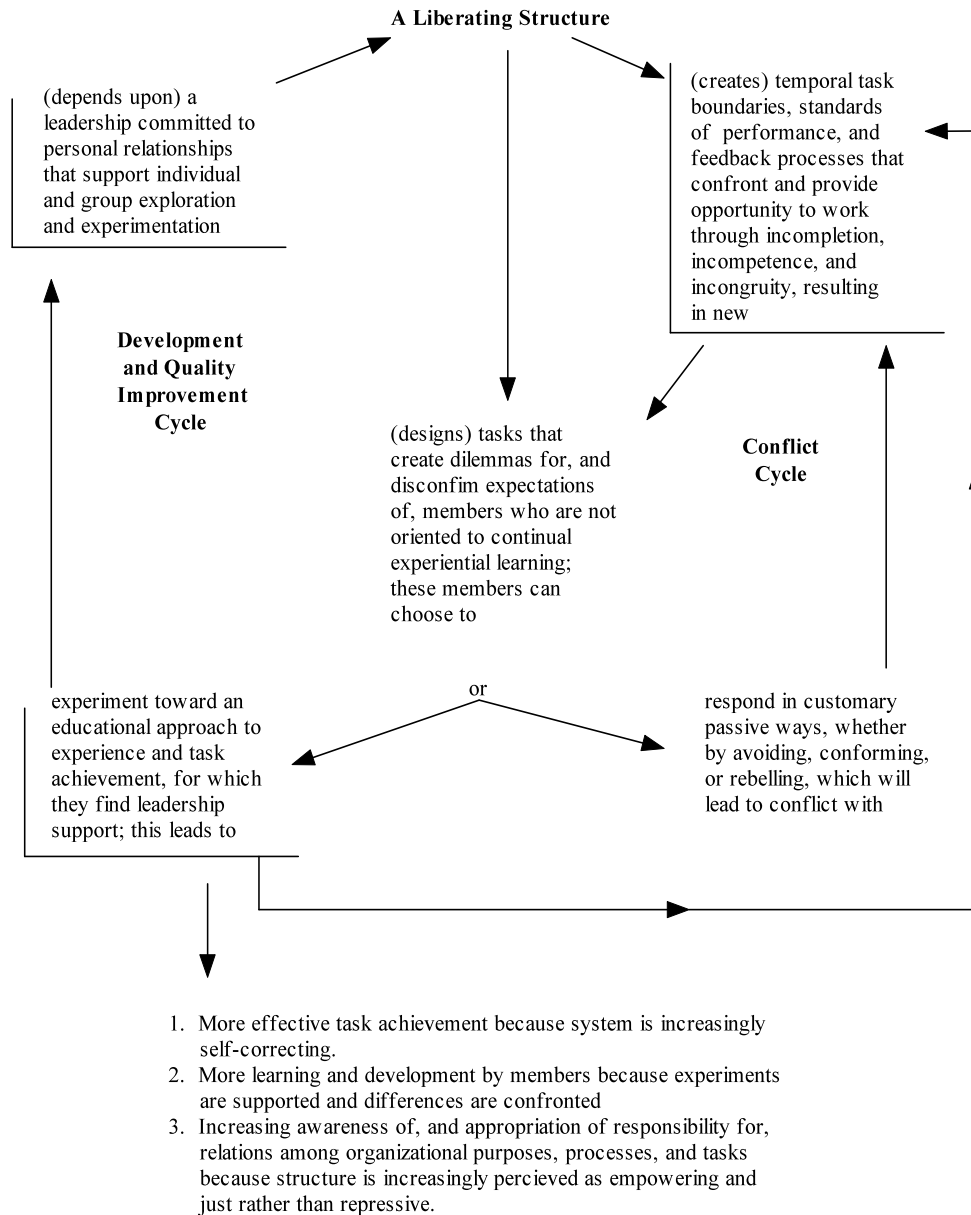


Figure 6.1. Dynamic Model of the Operation of Liberating Disciplines

### An Extended Illustration of Liberating Disciplines

The purposes, plans, implementation, and effects of our fall 1971 version of A.S. I, the only required undergraduate course at the Southern Methodist University School of Business, can illustrate this theory of liberating disciplines. The course membership consisted at the outset of 360 students, twelve undergraduate teaching assistants who had taken the course before, and four

faculty members of whom I was one. As an assistant professor, newly hired from graduate school the year before, I was in many ways a typical, young middle manager (i.e. surer of myself than I deserved to be), in other ways perhaps a bit atypical (i.e. more obsessed about developing a workable theory of leading and organizing).

As noted in Chapter 2, this single, introductory required course had replaced a much larger set of required courses the year before, consistent with Dean Grayson's philosophy of preparing students to become self-directed entrepreneurs rather than passive and reactive bureaucrats. On the one hand, the dean and the task force on curriculum, which specifically recommended the course, wished to encourage self-direction within the school itself, for both students and faculty, and therefore advocated the severe reduction in required courses. On the other hand, they realized that students entering the school, given their previous education, expected external direction and thus required an experience that would offer them the opportunity to begin the transition from externally directed learning to the self-directed learning.

In order to highlight the *deliberately ironic* quality of the course (references to the eight essential qualities of liberating disciplines will be italicized and underlined) when describing its purpose to others, I have sometimes paraphrased Rousseau, saying that our task was "to force students to be free." And, indeed, I believe that the theory of liberating disciplines represents the 'missing link' in Rousseau's political theory (Section 3, Chapter 13 will review the political theories of Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls to show how they relate to the politics of liberating disciplines). In fact, of course, students were not "forced to be free." They could drop the course instead, if they wished to escape whatever forces we may have wielded before the end of the term. By the end of the term, twenty of the 360 students who started the course *did* drop it.

Another example of the *deliberately ironic* quality of the course was that, in preparing for the fall 1971 version of the course, the course staff chose to practice a *deliberate irony* on itself. It chose to change the structure of the course in order to respond to criticisms that it did not regard as valid. The story of these events also illustrates in several different ways how liberating disciplines build a continual cycle of research and feedback into their ongoing operation (and this cycle, in turn, corresponds to the "Structural Improvement Cycle" in Figure 6.1).

Toward the end of each term the previous year, we had administered a short questionnaire to students, asking them how much they had learned in general and in particular respects in this course, as compared to how much they had learned in an average course that term. The results both terms showed that a large majority of students perceived themselves as learning *less* theory and facts in this course than in an average course. At the same time, a large majority perceived themselves as learning *more* than in an average course in the areas of self-direction, action competence, awareness of interpersonal process, and awareness of personal learning style. They also judged that they were learning significantly more in general in this course than in an average course. These limited findings indicated that the course was generally succeeding in generating outcomes congruent with its purposes.

Based on more direct experience of the course, both the school's administration and the course staff had evaluated the course as basically successful. In addition, another event that might be interpreted as confirming the success of the course was the selection by students of one of its faculty members as the Outstanding Professor at the School of Business.

On the other hand, another research and feedback process had yielded more negative evaluations of the course. The course staff had convened a conversation among the school's

faculty about the course at the end of the previous spring. During the conversation five criticisms of the course emerged:

- (1) it was not hard enough; there were too many A's;
- (2) it was too frustrating for students; many did not seem to know what was expected of them nor how course activities related to business skills;
- (3) there was not enough emphasis on facts and theories (the student feedback presented two paragraphs above had already been made available to the faculty);
- (4) the emphasis on working in groups in the course was generating conformity rather than encouraging individual entrepreneurship; and
- (5) there was too much emphasis on learning issues in the course and too little on business.

The course staff heard these criticisms in the context of knowing that more than half of all faculty members would have voted to continue the course, and that all the relatively new faculty and the administration were very enthusiastic about it, while all but one of the critical faculty members had received tenure before the arrival of Dean Grayson and disagreed with much of what he advocated and did. So, in terms of where 'the power dragon lay,' we might have turned a deaf ear to these criticisms.

But even though the course staff sometimes disagreed with both the factual basis for, and the implicit assumptions of, these criticisms (the only one we accepted without reservation was "not enough emphasis on theories")... We decided to try to restructure the course for fall 1971 in such a way as to respond to *all* the criticisms. Thus, we managed to test simultaneously the validity both of the criticisms and of *our* assumptions. Instead of deciding, as we were initially tempted to do, that to respond to these criticisms would violate the integrity of the course, we decided to find a way of responding to the criticisms without violating its integrity.

In this way, as you will see in the following description of what occurred, we surprised ourselves and made the course even better. We learned, among many other things, that a more conservative grading philosophy – conjoined with a more directive class structure at the outset of the course... and with our own greater clarity about what liberating disciplines are and do – altogether generated a still higher learning curve on the part of both students and staff.

### **The Plan of the Course**

The design of the fall 1971 version of the course consisted of three *premeditated phases of structural evolution over time*. This design was communicated to students the first meeting of the course as in Table 6.1, below. Overall, the course progressed from a relatively high degree of external direction by the faculty toward increasing self-direction by the students. During the first third of the term, the faculty took primary responsibility for structuring all class time and homework assignments, seeking to introduce students to the scale of, and skills involved in, learning from experience how to work effectively with others to create new value. In the middle of the term, the faculty continued to provide overall designs for each session, but now the teaching assistants took primary responsibility for implementing these designs, seeking to help arbitrarily formed small groups to generate creative, responsible, individuality-enhancing, effective group processes, rather than conformity-producing environments. During the final third of the term, students contracted for and carried out self-defined projects, either individually or in groups of their own choosing, to create new value.



The structural evolution of the course was also reflected in the grading procedures. During the first third of the course, the course staff did all the grading. Each week, each student wrote a short "learning paper" which the staff graded, and students' performance in some class sessions was also graded. During the second third of the term, students conducted peer and self evaluations structured by the faculty. This process occurred in two rounds, the first a practice round during which many of the habits and fears that usually inhibit honest peer- and self-evaluation were confronted and overcome, then the second round counted. During the final third of the term, the contracts for students' self-defined projects included standards and methods for evaluating whether the projects were completed effectively. Thus, students moved from working within predetermined criteria of evaluation, to taking responsibility for the purposes and processes of evaluation as well as the task to be evaluated. It should be noted, however, that even during the last third of the term, the staff designed the contract itself and reserved the right to confront and negotiate with students if, for example, a proposed method of evaluation seemed unlikely to yield impartial and valid information.

The learning papers themselves deserve further description because they represent so many different facets of the spirit and practice of liberating disciplines. The first learning paper

**Table 6.1**  
Purpose, Process, and Task---Central Issues in Human Enterprise:  
Their Phasing and attributes in A.S. 1, Fall 1971

	<i>Primary Emphasis</i>	<i>Successful Completion Indicated by</i>	<i>Basic Question</i>	<i>Fundamental Mode of Learning</i>	<i>Primary Resource</i>
Purpose	Early in term	Organizational consensus on model for common effort	What is generalization and active experimentation?	Abstract generalization and active experimentation	Faculty
Process	Middle of term	Honest assessment in groups	How to make conscious, creative group decisions?	Reflective observation and active experimentation	Teaching assistants
Task	End of term	Completion of freely created projects	How to operate with administrative effectiveness	Concrete experience and active experimentation	Students

concerned a specific experience shared by all the students, but thereafter students could choose in each paper to describe any experience they wished from their past or present lives. Moreover, students could choose any theory they wished to try to shed light on that experience. Thus, the assignment provided more freedom of choice than students were accustomed to in papers. But the assignment also included more different kinds of constraints than students were accustomed to. The constraints were that a student must describe (at least some of) his or her *behavior* and *feelings* in the experience chosen, must refer to some *theory* in the literature in seeking generalizations about the experience, and must propose a way to *experiment with new behavior* if a similar situation were to arise again. To receive a grade of satisfactory, students had only to include two of the four required qualities, no matter how ineptly they did so (later in the term they would have to include all four qualities to receive a satisfactory). The grade of honors was

reserved for work judged to be of unusually high quality.

In providing both more freedom and more constraint, the task exhibited the first quality of liberating disciplines: *deliberate irony*. The task also exhibited the second quality of liberating disciplines: it was *incomprehensible and undoable without reference to the process* it represented, (namely, the process of actually learning while writing a paper) *and to the purpose* (choosing to reflect upon experiences from which one could learn something significant). If a student chose an experience in order to show competence or avoid struggling with difficult issues, the exercise not only became meaningless, but the student could rarely identify a future experiment. Nevertheless, the reader may feel that the task is hardly incomprehensible or undoable as a sheer exercise in conning the teacher. Certainly, the students themselves did not anticipate much difficulty. If, however, the reader considers how rarely students are asked to write about their own behavior and feelings, and how rarely students are asked to integrate personal experience and scientific theory in a paper, it may come as less of a surprise than it did to the students themselves to hear that in their first learning paper, 44% of the students in the course included no more than one of the four qualities asked for. This 44% received a grade of "no credit" as well as extensive written feedback and an invitation to discuss the four criteria with a staff member if they wished.

The way grades were used on the learning papers illustrates the fifth quality of liberating disciplines: *the use of all forms of power* - unilateral, diplomatic, logistical, and transforming - *in a way that encourages collaborative inquiry and the gradual obsolescence of unilateral exercises of power*. At the beginning of the term a grade of "no credit" motivated further inquiry more often than any amount of feedback. But many students went through several "no credits" (several experiences of the "Conflict Cycle"), confident each time that they had discovered the key to the staff's game, before their inquiry came to include attention to the staff's written and verbal feedback. In general, as students struggled to master what seemed like strange, external requirements to pass the course, they began to experience the logic of the steps, the excitement of actually learning as they wrote, and the joy of searching conversations with staff members and other students in response to their writing. Consequently, students very quickly mastered the requirements, and the grades ceased to be a significant aspect of the process. At the end of the term, less than 2% of the class received an overall "no credit" for their learning papers.

As the term progressed, many students challenged the structure of the learning papers, and the way staff responded to these challenges illustrates the sixth characteristic of liberating disciplines: *conditional openness to challenge*. A typical complaint early in the term was that it was unfair to "grade people's feelings." Our reply – that we did not grade the content of people's feelings, only whether their paper explicitly described any feelings – might well be met by the charge that, obviously, a student could not expect a good grade by expressing negative feelings about the course. In response to this charge, we could always offer numerous examples of papers that had received full credit for expressing negative feelings about the course. We also offered to re-grade and re-discuss any paper over which students had doubts. In actuality, the grades almost never required revising because the staff regularly traded papers among themselves, before handing them back to students, in order to test the validity and reliability of feedback and grades. As this kind of concern subsided, a few students challenged the adequacy of the learning theory on which the learning paper itself was based.<sup>3</sup> The staff invited these students to write papers which explicated, illustrated, and were structured by alternative learning theories. For these students the whole structure of the learning paper assignment became a useful foil against which to clarify how they really learned. Thus the staff did not change the learning paper structure simply because students did not like it initially, but only when some students demonstrated that their challenge was based on a commitment to deeper inquiry.

Finally, the learning papers also exemplified, in two different ways, the fourth quality of liberating disciplines: *a constant cycle of experiential and empirical research and feedback*. Most obviously, the papers represented experiential research by, and feedback to, each individual student. Also, as the term progressed, about half of the students' papers concerned events in the course. Consequently, the papers became an unsystematic but extremely potent form of empirical research and feedback for the staff about what was happening to groups and individuals within the course.

## Implementation of the Course

The discussion of the design of the learning papers has already moved beyond a description of plans into a description of the implementation of the course. This movement occurs almost unnoticed because the theory of liberating disciplines is not just a theory about the qualities of liberating organizational designs, but also suggests the qualities of liberating purposes and liberating actions. The theory of liberating disciplines is not a neutral technique that can be put to the service of any purpose, nor does it prescribe actions in a way that makes them mechanically deducible from a given design. Quite the contrary, the theory of liberating disciplines provides guidance in creating a special kind of social arena—a kind of social theater in which everyone is both participant and observer—and this arena, in turn, requires of the leadership the most profoundly spontaneous inquiring behavior. Only authentically inquiring leadership behavior in combination with liberating disciplines reliably succeeds in "converting" others to the practice of collaborative inquiry.

The events of the very first meeting of the course yielded an example of the eighth quality of liberating structure: *the leadership's moment-to-moment commitment to inquiry*. The staff had organized a multimedia "show" in an initial attempt to convey the special qualities of the course. This show included not only the usual media - such as music, movies and slide-tapes - which render the "audience" passive, but also such additional media as conversation and decision making, which render everyone participant. At some point in the sequence - after the laughter at the Frankenstein slides that accompanied an interviewed student's description of the previous term's course as monstrous, after the groaning that greeted the announcement of an exam on the assigned reading next week, and after applause for the Alleluia chorus accompanying a movie about the raising of a plastic, student-built coffeehouse the previous spring - one of the faculty members, using an overhead projector, introduced a series of statistical tables as part of his explanation that active, experimenting students enjoyed and learned more from the course than passive students.

Perhaps the incongruity between the message and the medium was too great in this case, although I seriously doubt that any of the students consciously analyzed the discrepancy. In any event, the previous balance of tension and excitement quickly began to dissipate into irate confusion, inattention, and side conversations as the faculty member talked. After questioning what was appropriate for what felt like an eon, I interrupted my colleague, causing an immediate, shocked stillness among all 380 persons in the auditorium. But the other faculty member said he would finish briefly and continued, to growing rumbles of discontent.

Now, I interrupted again more forcefully, and this time he actually listened to what was going on and stopped. One of the teaching assistants began to introduce the film of the steel foundry research team of which he had been a member the previous spring. But this time a third member of the faculty interrupted to suggest we discuss the previous incident for a few moments,

since he saw it as symbolic of the courage, skill, and mutual trust required to learn in action and to generate managerial quality improvement.

Although the rest of the evening was entertaining and informative, a skeptical person might dismiss it as slick public relations. This incident, by contrast, could alert students to the possibility that they were encountering a rare sort of social system dedicated to something beyond short-term goals, easily definable objectives, and saving face. In their first learning paper two weeks later, more students spontaneously referred to this incident than to any other event in the course.

### **An Experiential Exam**

The second week we gave an examination as promised, but, to the students' surprise, it was an experiential examination. That is, we asked them to enact the ideas about education in the assigned reading, thereby beginning to become more directly aware of the possibility of learning from immediate experience. As the following description will show, this experiential examination particularly illustrates the second, third, and fourth qualities of liberating disciplines: tasks that are incomprehensible and undoable without reference to accompanying processes and purposes (as already stated, 44% received "no credit" on their learning paper about the exam); structural evolution over time from great supervisory guidance to little outside guidance; and a continual cycle of research and feedback on participants' actions.

The examination was conducted in a large open space. Students were given an examination sheet (Figure 6.2) and were told they would be led through a series of concrete experiences, reflections, generalizations, and experiments, which they were to summarize on the examination sheet and on the basis of which they were to write their first learning paper the following week. For their learning papers, they were asked to consider such questions as which of the four types of learning had seemed easiest, or most eye-opening, or most risky to them and which aspects of this learning cycle they wished to concentrate on during the remainder of the semester.

**Figure 6.2.** Experimental Examination Sheet

Concrete Experiences				
1.	2.	3.	4.	
Reflective Observations				
1.	2.	3.	4.	
Abstract Generalizations				
1.	2.	3.	4.	
Active Experimentation				
a.	Planned experiment:			
b.	Actual behavior:			
c.	Feedback from group:			
d.	Conclusion:			

Because students were to explore "how to encourage individual creativity and collective effectiveness in groups" beginning the following week, the particular theme to be examined during the second session was how feelings and their expression affected interpersonal relations. Students were asked to pair with someone they did not know, to report their initial feelings toward one another, and to enter their first four comments verbatim as their four "concrete

experiences."

Definitions of feelings and of opinions were offered, and each pair was asked to reach agreement about whether to classify each of their four concrete experiences as "feeling" or "opinion" in the section of the examination sheet entitled "reflective observations." (A straw poll determined that only about 20 percent of the original statements had in fact been expressions of feeling, whereas about 80 percent had been opinions.)

In the next period of time, the pairs were asked to form groups of six and to discuss what generalizations they thought they could make about the relative interpersonal effects of expressing feelings or opinions. Each individual was then asked to formulate a behavioral experiment that would test the generalization about effective behavior most plausible and interesting to him or her.

The final activity of the session consisted of another conversation within each group of six, sharing feelings about the examination and about one another's performance. Each person was to attempt to carry out his or her planned experiment during the conversation. Afterwards, they were to share what their experiments had been and what effects these experiments had on the other group members.

Throughout the examination the faculty and teaching assistants wandered among groups, offering help when requested, sometimes confronting groups that seemed to be shirking the task. The overall reaction of staff members to the session was highly enthusiastic. They felt that the design, along with their interventions, provided significant leverage in acquainting students with new kinds of learning, with personal responsibility for learning, and with active participation in learning.

The students were understandably more ambivalent, but generally agreed by the end of the evening, even though they had begun the session anticipating very little learning. At the outset of the evening, on a scale of 1 (no learning) to 7 (extraordinary amount of learning), students had expected 2.86 learning on the average, and only 6% expected a great deal of learning (6 or 7). At the end of the session, students reported 4.14 learning on the average, and 21% reported a great deal of learning. (At the same time, 12% of the students reported learning less than they had expected to learn.)

### **Learning New Ways to Manage Conflict**

During the third to sixth weeks, the students were formed into arbitrary groups, focusing on what kinds of behavior facilitate individual creativity and collective effectiveness. Readings on this topic were put to use analyzing tape recordings of each group's own behavior as it struggled to make various decisions. The kinds of decisions the groups were to make were specified. They were to divide the readings among the members, choose a time to meet outside class, tape the meeting, discuss the readings, choose one behavior-categorizing procedure they wished to use, and decide how to prepare multiple copies of two pages of transcript for analysis during the following class. At the same time, the content of the decisions was up to the groups.

When the staff reviewed groups' scoring of transcripts after the next class, we discovered that, in general, when a conflict began to develop in the transcribed conversations, two things happened. First, the group would avoid facing the conflict insofar as possible during the remainder of the transcript. If one member advocated facing the conflict, he or she would tend to be derided or ignored. Second, the group would seriously mis-score the part of the transcript during which the conflict threatened to emerge when they analyzed it later. These findings led us

to change our plans and create another structured group exercise, in facing and resolving group conflict openly. This exercise began with staff members' feedback to each group about its current characteristic process. Here we see an example of the "Conflict Cycle" occurring.

Meanwhile, students who had received "no credit" for their learning paper about the experiential examination moved through their incredulity at failing in such a "rinky-dink" course; and through their denunciations of the teaching assistants; and through their rewriting of the paper and (often) their next "no credit"; and their first really serious talk with the staff; and their third rewrite; and their gratification at receiving some positive comments and a "satisfactory" for their third try. By this time, some students had been through as many as eight different kinds of experience in and out of class in relation to the learning cycle theory. And, of course, they were writing additional learning papers following the learning cycle each week. This series of experiences with the learning papers also demonstrates the "Conflict Cycle" an organization member finds himself or herself in if he or she responds to liberating disciplines in a customary, passive, or defensive way.

### **The Self-Created Projects**

During the final third of the term, students contracted for projects of their own creation, working either as individuals or as self-constituted groups. Whereas during the first two-thirds of the course the staff generally had to take primary responsibility for confronting individuals or groups operating in ways that inhibited learning or effective performance, students themselves initiated such confrontations as they internalized values and skills consistent with self-directed learning and collaborative responsibility. For example, in one group, five of the twelve members ended up doing most of the work on the preliminary three-week project conducted in the arbitrary groupings. Despite confrontation, other members seemed content to remain passive and do the minimal amount of work. Nevertheless, the group as a whole enjoyed the preliminary project and judged it successful, as did the teaching assistant who monitored that group and one other.

When it came time to plan the six-week project, everyone in that group agreed that they wished to continue working as a group rather than to break up. But, as the planning session continued, the same division between the five active and the seven passive members became evident. At that point, the five active members agreed openly that they didn't trust the commitment of the others. The five decided to form their own group and decided to create a market for arts and crafts on the campus. The group struggled with all aspects of a business enterprise, including efficiency and profit, and finally broke even financially (despite losing the cash box at one point!).

Meanwhile, the remaining seven found themselves stranded, with no one but themselves to rely on for further transportation. Since they had no positive sense of identity as a group, they each went their own way, some to significant learning experiences, which they would probably have avoided if the active members had been "kind enough" to carry them through the project.

### **Research and Feedback Throughout the Course**

*The constant cycle of experiential and empirical research and feedback* characteristic of liberating disciplines has already received several illustrations in the foregoing episodes. What is perhaps not yet clear is how the staff itself used empirical and experiential research to analyze and improve its own performance as the term progressed. Twice during the term, in the middle and at the end, students were asked how much they were learning in the course as compared to

their other courses. In the middle of the term, when conflict was high, all of the students, taken together, reported learning about as much as in an average course (3.9 on the 1-7 scale).

Within this overall finding, groups associated with different staff members reported significantly different amounts of learning. Before presenting specific results of the research to the staff, I asked it whether it saw any common characteristics among the three with whom (I alone knew) students perceived themselves as learning most and among the three with whom students reported learning least. The staff characterized the three members with whom students perceived themselves learning most as warm, personal, and encouraging of identification. On the other hand, the staff characterized its three members with whom students perceived themselves learning least as relatively distant, task-oriented, and encouraging of internalization. The staff did not evaluate the first three as more competent and the second three as less competent. In fact, ultimately we preferred to encourage students to develop an internalized value system, rather than to encourage them to identify with us as models. But these findings seemed to confirm Harrison's theory<sup>4</sup> that students come to expect to *comply* with external directives in learning and must go through a stage of *identifying* with an alternative model of behavior before they can *internalize* their own individual learning values. As a result of discussing results in this way, both the apparently successful and the apparently less successful staff members found directions for further experimentation in their teaching styles.

Staff members also administered semantic differentials about their leadership style to their groups. Before analyzing the results, each staff member made his or her own judgments about *ideal* leadership style and attempted to predict what student perceptions of his or her *actual* leadership style would be. In this way, existing discrepancies were highlighted as areas for further reflection and experimentation.

Beyond formal empirical measures of performance, staff members invited other staff members to observe and criticize their performance. Indeed, in one case where communication between staff member and group seemed to have seriously broken down, two staff members switched groups.

It should be obvious that persons can invite and learn from formal empirical research only in a fundamentally friendly and caring atmosphere, the informal aspects of which are also dedicated to learning about how one organizes one's attention. To put this another way, the leadership of liberating disciplines must experience itself as a community of inquiry if its members are to become increasingly objective, impartial, and mutually trusting through the conflicts and failures they will encounter, rather than increasingly defensive. It will suffice to offer here the barest outline of the different ways staff members engaged one another in continuing experiential research and feedback. Staff members would meet for a beer at a nearby pub after each week's evening session to begin the process of assimilating our experiences. Then, the next afternoon we would meet more formally and compare our experiences to stories about other personal and collective adventures of inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Often someone would give a party over the weekend. Then early the following week teaching assistants would meet individually with faculty members to calibrate final plans for particular groups.

## Outcomes

At the end of the term, 20 of the initial 360 students had dropped the course, as stated earlier, and another 52 received "No credit." Thirty-six students received "Honors," the rest

"Satisfactory." By contrast, slightly over half the course had received "A's" the previous year. Although the staff had changed the grading system as a whole, it seems clear that the grading was harder, as had been requested by the critical faculty the previous spring. Two weeks before the end of the term a higher percentage and absolute number of students than ever before (300 of 340) responded to the questionnaire on learning and judged the course to be generating significantly more learning in general than their average course (5.4 on the 1-7 scale) and significantly more than the same course earlier in the term (when they rated their learning at 3.9), as well as significantly more than students during either term the year before had rated themselves as learning.

In response to the faculty criticism that the course had been too group-oriented, too frustrating, and too weakly related to business, the six-week project at the end of the course had provided an arena for more overtly businesslike enterprises than had tended to occur the first year and had encouraged both individual and group entrepreneurship. Seventy-one percent of the 300 students answering the questionnaire reported predominantly enjoyable experiences in the course, and 76% reported that the course was as appropriate or more appropriate for the business school than their average business course.

The questionnaire results also seemed to indicate significant improvement in regard to communicating facts and theories, another area criticized by some faculty. Whereas at the end of the previous spring only 9% of our students regarded themselves as learning more facts than in an average course and only 20% reported more than average learning about theories, at the end of the term described here 33% reported more than average factual learning and 67% reported more than average theoretical learning.

The staff was pleased, of course, with these quantitative findings and even more pleased with our own qualitative impressions of having introduced many students to radically new approaches to their work, their relationships, and their life-aims. We also felt pleased that this introduction was not merely to a new verbal language, but to new attentional and behavioral languages as well, and that the introduction did not merely paint a rosy picture, but actually confronted and worked through many conflicts.

Nevertheless, we did not believe that our students had so deeply internalized the theory and events of the course that they could now describe or enact liberating disciplines for others. There was no evidence, for example, that more than a few students picked up the language or logic about the interrelations among purpose, process, and task. Indeed, we decided to drop this language from our design for the following term's version of the course even though the logic continued to play an important role in the staff's planning.

That the course itself did not "move" students to the point of enacting liberating disciplines is not at all surprising. I myself required seven years of very intense and diverse existential learning experiences with remarkable teachers and colleagues, as well as the previous two terms experimenting with the particular conditions of the S.M.U. business school, before I could take a role in enacting the well-defined liberating disciplines reported here.