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Teaching management, spirituality, and religion: André Delbecq as a pioneer

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ABSTRACT

André Delbecq is remembered as a pioneer for his groundbreaking courses on spirituality for executive leaders. He generously shared his experiences with other educators in multiple presentations and articles beginning in the late 1990s. His writings provide insight into the content of his classes and practical teaching approach in the classroom. In this article and the accompanying video, edited from an interview with André in 2015, we provide an overview of André's entry into teaching management, spirituality, and religion, and we reflect on his teaching philosophy. The video provides the reader with a glimpse of André's warmth, passion, and wisdom on this topic. His work and approach stand as a guiding light for those similarly interested in preparing leaders for the spiritual challenges of leadership roles.

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Introduction

It wasn't anything that I aspired to or would have conceived of myself doing. My signature scholarship going into the turn of the century was managing innovation and change, and I was with leaders involved in really complex projects. The company projects impacted on humanity in serious ways and late at night in bars, in hotel rooms, they would talk about the fact that this is hard stuff. "Do you ever address the inner struggle of people involved in this?" And I said "No", but that theme kept coming up. I was just startled that this other deep dimension of the human story that I had never given myself permission, or didn't feel qualified to address, really was making a difference (André Delbecq 2015).

In this introductory article and the accompanying video, created from our 2015 interview with André (mostly unpublished), we provide readers with a glimpse of how André began his journey into teaching management, spirituality, and religion (MSR), and his approach to teaching MSR. We interviewed André on camera in 2015 at his home in San Francisco for an instructional video about MSR (Leadership, Religion, and Spirituality 2015) and met him for a second interview at the 2016 Academy of Management Annual Conference for an article we were writing about his career (Allen and Williams 2017). We also had the privilege of presenting on a panel with André about teaching MSR topics at the conference.

On the day he was hospitalized in 2016, he wrote to us after reviewing our draft of the article about his career, "I am sorry it has taken me this long to lightly edit your

light edits ... The delay is associated with a very critical health crisis. Do hold me in your prayers. I finished this this morning as my last task before hospitalization” (Delbecq, 1 October 2016, email to the authors). We heard of his death 11 days later. We were simultaneously astonished that he made finishing the review a priority and deeply saddened at losing a mentor. Every interaction with André echoed a spiritual and caring nature evident from the beginning of his career (Delbecq 2004).

André’s journey into MSR teaching and research

André wrote little about teaching in higher education in his early career, only touching on workplace training and executive development in the 1960s (e.g., Delbecq 1968; Delbecq and Kaplan 1968). His teaching career began in 1958 as a lecturer at the University of Toledo. In the 1980’s, with over 30 years of teaching experience, he began emphasizing management education in his writing (e.g., Delbecq and Scates 1991). Coinciding with the increased focus on MSR in management literature and conferences in the late 1990s, the topic of teaching about spirituality and religion in the lives of executive leaders became prominent in André’s writings and presentations (e.g., Delbecq 1998, 1999). In 1996 he had just completed 10 years of service as a dean, and in 1998 he was appointed Director of the Institute for the Spirituality of Organization Leadership at Santa Clara University. This late career shift (Allen and Williams 2017; Delbecq 2004) led to him becoming a leading author (e.g., Delbecq 2000) on integrating MSR topics into management education. At the time of his death, André was still actively teaching and writing as a senior fellow at the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education and Professor of Management at the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University.

The opening quotation is an extract from the 2015 interview and demonstrates André’s reluctance to be a pioneer in teaching about the spiritual challenges that executives brought to him. His journey into teaching spirituality to executive leaders mimics the classic narrative of the hero’s journey (Campbell 1990) with André receiving the call to address executives’ spiritual needs while living what appeared to be a normal but highly successful life as an academic. André initially rejected the call before beginning his “grand adventure” with many trials (Delbecq 2015). In 2004, he described how calling, discernment, and spiritual friendship shaped his teaching and scholarship.

In a story shared with us during the 2015 interview, André told of how he asked leaders at his Jesuit university to investigate the spiritual dimension of leadership. He later visited Rome with a group of Jesuit leaders where he further explored this question. André suggested to the Jesuit leaders that they should have a Jesuit examine this issue. Ironically, a Jesuit leader retorted, “that in his experience when people come to tell him what they should be doing it’s normally a calling that the person isn’t answering”. This led André to respond to the call and take a sabbatical to study at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley to gain further insight on this issue. It also led to his first experimental seminars with MBA students and ultimately the classes he described in his presentations and articles on this topic (e.g., Delbecq 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2010a). In this sense, André was practicing the spiritual concepts he taught such as responding to one’s spiritual calling (Delbecq 2004, 2008).

André’s earlier work with the African American community in Toledo developing innovative community programs established a pattern of identifying problems brought

to him by members of the community and applying interdisciplinary theory to establish pilot interventions to address the problems. In a similar fashion, André had observed executives' struggles with deep spiritual questions and decided to respond. His curiosity and sense of duty to address the social problems around him focused on seeking practical solutions which he then taught in his MBA classes, as well as to executive leaders in the Catholic healthcare systems and Silicon Valley (Delbecq 2000, 2010b). His teaching was therefore, in our view, an outpouring of compassion in response to practical social problems grounded in systematic scholarly discipline.

While André was passionate to share his learning in the classroom, his initial attempts to introduce the seminar as a new course in the MBA curriculum were rejected. His colleagues were also skeptical about students' interest in the topic (Delbecq 1999). However, in 1998 the pilot was launched:

I did an independent study program and invited nine CEOs and nine MBAs to a special seminar, and I proposed this seminar to the university and unanimously they disapproved it. But we were allowed to teach anything three times as an experiment and so I taught it three times. (André Delbecq 2015)

André's tenacity when faced with this challenge contrasts with his initial reluctance to accept the calling to respond to executives' spiritual needs. After hundreds of students had completed the course, and with the evidence to support the course's success (e.g., Delbecq 2003), it was approved as an elective. It is important to note that André's teaching and programs were highly respected by many, including his students, as evidenced by reviews of his course (Delbecq 1999, 2000; Levy 2000). For example, Ricardo Levy (2000), who participated in one of André's courses, reflected that he found the class: elevated his view of the importance of his calling as an executive leader; taught him that spirituality is core to the everyday life of a leader; exposed him to readings that opened his mind about different religions and spiritual perspectives; aided him in discovering how to retreat into his inner spiritual sanctum; and provided him with exposure and experience in a variety of spiritual practices he could adopt. André was also the recipient of numerous awards for his scholarly work on teaching MSR (e.g., Distinguished Service to Management, Spirituality and Religion Award, Academy of Management Annual Meeting Boston, August 2012). Consistent with the hero's journey, André returned from his journey into the unknown with many rewards and gifts, including a treasure-trove of knowledge and experience to share with other educators interested in teaching MSR. He also expressed his deep satisfaction with his experience describing it as a fountain of youth for a senior scholar.

Teaching philosophy

A few of André's articles include brief sections on pedagogy which describe issues of content and logistics, but less frequently delineate his views on the interaction of student, teacher, content, classroom, and learning process typical of a teaching philosophy. What is evident from his previous MSR-related publications (Delbecq 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2012) and those written by others about him (Levy 2000) is summarized below. Citations are excluded from the summary to improve the flow, as all points are taken from articles authored by André, along with

our interviews with him. Our intention is to frame the uniqueness of André's approach, but also provide insights for those who might follow in his path.

We have not summarized the content he taught in detail, as it is extensively described in his previous articles (e.g., Delbecq 1999, 2000, 2003, 2010a, 2012, 2013). For example, his 2003 article includes a comprehensive syllabus in the appendix. André's courses included 12 to 15 modules or classes with the final modules being presented at a retreat. Students completed readings prior to attending the modules (e.g., readings about the major world religions to module 1), which were presented in a seminar format. In addition, most seminars included spiritual practices from different faiths such as prayer, meditation, and reflection (e.g., Lakota Sioux Living Circle to listen to the voices of elders and future generations impacted by organizations). The themes in his modules typically included:

- An introduction with a definition of spirituality and ground rules for class interactions, as well as motivating the need to learn about spirituality as leaders
- Leadership as a calling and spiritual journey
- Listening to one's inner voice and the voices of past and future generations
- Psycho-spiritual development (integrating the self)
- Discernment and strategic decision making
- Spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, reflection, contemplative practice)
- Hubris in leadership (e.g., abuses of power, need for humility)
- Serving others in the greater community (wealth versus poverty)
- The mystery of suffering
- Learning from the spiritual masters (e.g., Thomas Keating, Mahatma Gandhi, Black Elk)
- Conclusion and celebration of the leadership journey

André valued preparatory readings, class materials, and activities drawn from multiple faiths, and his classes, even though presented at a Catholic university, were filled with religiously diverse participants. He fully embraced this diversity in learning content and activities believing one could remain rooted in his or her own religion while learning from other religions. He valued dialog, especially dialog rooted in real listening, teaching students to listen deeply to each other, themselves, and to God (used as a broader term encompassing the religious deities or a deeper inner consciousness). Guided by the masters of interfaith dialog, André encouraged and expected students to share their faith, thoughts, and reflections during class. While there is no evidence of them being compelled (his courses were electives), such sharing certainly seemed to be a norm and suggested an implicit pedagogical view that was rooted in living out faith and spirituality with others, as well as alone, but never hiding in the "ghetto" of one's own faith.

André's classes were guided by a set of ground rules (e.g., confidentiality, appreciative inquiry) and a process to build trust between the instructor and class, ensuring psychological safety for his students to share their stories and reflections. He emphasized lived experience and an appreciative approach to exploring religion and spirituality more than focusing on theological positions, doctrine, syncretism, or any divisive approach. There is little evidence of conflict in his classes. The appreciative approach of listening to others' experiences and journeys, and automatically accepting

the integrity of what was shared without the automatic need to criticize, compare, or interrogate, enabled André to achieve what might seem risky to other educators.

His courses were personal, experiential, and practical, involving walking, meditating, reflecting, and listening to music. In his 2010 article he described his classes as “‘action learning’ rather than mere theoretical synthesis” (185). Action learning is underpinned by the idea that learning cannot occur without action, where action might include trying new approaches to solve problems or exploit opportunities in a real-world context (Revans 2011). For example, in André’s MBA elective Spirituality for Organizational Leaders, students were required to practice different forms of meditation each day and apply their learning to their leadership in the workplace between seminars. At each subsequent seminar students reported on changes in their perspective and behavior, creating an expectation of ongoing application.

André’s teaching was grounded in his applied scholarship and interdisciplinary approach, which was evident from early in his career. He also differentiated between leadership education and leaders’ spiritual formation (e.g., Delbecq 2013). It was clear that his classes and seminars aimed to form his students as leaders with meaningful spiritual lives, more than filling students’ heads with knowledge. André similarly emphasized doing and being, noting that many of his students were experienced executives who were good at doing, but needed to learn more about *being*, *receiving*, and even *surrendering*. A substantial part of his courses was devoted to practicing and experiencing spirituality, such as practicing Lectio Divinia, a monastic practice of scriptural reading, prayer, and reflection in which scripture is the living word and to engage it is to commune with God. Implicit in his approach was the belief that the Spirit is a teacher. Spirit can be read either as the Holy Spirit for Christians or more generically as soul or inner consciousness in other religions or in secular humanism. Time spent in meditation, reflection, journaling, or similar activities in André’s classes supported deeper spiritual learning and a deeper relationship with God. Initially students would be guided in class through new practices like meditation but would later be expected to continue these practices on their own. André combined the work of a spiritual director and management educator, addressing an issue he knew to have profound implications for executive leaders and their organizations.

André had great respect for the leaders he taught, appreciating the difficulties and challenges they faced. He applied his own experience as a leader and executive (e.g., dean, board member) to his teaching, being sensitized to the contexts and experiences of those he taught. He was also sensitive to students’ individual needs and coached them personally as needed. While we did not find any deep discussion of learning styles in his writing, André varied his teaching delivery method with lectures (with slides), videos, dialog and silence, classroom and outdoor activities (e.g., meditation, retreats), field exercises, and guest speakers, enabling students of different learning styles to benefit. However, his classes were clearly experiential and focused on experiencing and practicing spirituality more than gaining knowledge. André also gave his students homework, expecting participants to continue to journal, practice meditations, reflect, and write between class meetings. His expectation or hope seemed to be that his students would be further transformed by experiencing and practicing their learning at home and in the workplace.

In his classes, André emphasized charity, humility, and developing an understanding of the position of the executive leader and the organization within a greater context. His teaching emphasized integration of self, believing that leadership was service that requires bringing one's whole self to the task. He proposed that leadership and business can be spiritual and sacred callings, elevating his students' sense of purpose. True to his Catholic faith tradition and principles of justice, he suggested that "attention to the poor, marginalized, vulnerable, and in need remains a litmus test of one's spiritual growth" (Delbecq 2008, 502).

Balancing classical and contemporary approaches, André included the teachings of centuries old spiritual masters and current scholars, applying both to the current challenges that executive leaders face. His approach was especially attuned to the mature student who sought sophisticated and challenging learning materials, content, and activities. André also believed that executive leadership could be overwhelming, confusing, or even dangerous without a spiritual and moral compass as guidance and support. His students and the executives he observed validated this understanding through expressing their desire to be present to the moment, to discover their true selves (or be on the path to doing so), and to experience spiritual fulfillment.

André was systematic in evaluating and critiquing his own teaching, enabling continual improvement in his seminars as well as the sharing of his lessons with other instructors. It is important to note that he always included quotations from his students as evidence in his articles (e.g., Delbecq 2000), echoing his learner-centered and appreciative approach, focusing on the lived experience of his students. He saw that leaders' progress through the stages of the spiritual journey was tied to their psychological and ethical development, their achievement of maturity as leaders, and their organization's performance. This informed his pedagogical approach which assumed that full development of the leaders he taught was not possible without engaging the issue of spiritual development.

If we could ask André another question, it would be about his teaching philosophy in relation to MSR. While it is possible to glean likely tenets of that philosophy from his writing, his own words would provide a more direct understanding of his view of students and their learning, as well as his subsequent teaching response.

Conclusion

From our interactions with André, and as evident in his writings, it is clear that he was a unique person who responded to a unique challenge or calling. While he appreciated theory and research, he was grounded in applied contexts and real-world challenges (Delbecq 2005). This made him an exceptional teacher for the CEOs, leaders, and MBA students he taught. In our second interview he spoke of the youthful vigor that studying spirituality created in him. André was excited to share his learning, generating an impactful and notable encore in his already successful publishing and teaching career. Combined with decades of experience in working with, teaching, and consulting to leaders, he could make connections to various concepts and practices that others might overlook, as well as pioneer a new area of teaching where less experienced educators might fail. This introduction provides context to the video, where readers can experience André's wisdom and compassion as an example for future MSR teachers to follow.

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