The Faculty Journey as Ontological Inquiry

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The Faculty Journey as Ontological Inquiry
Miriam Carey, Mount Royal University

Abstract: In this essay, Miriam Carey (recently retired Full Professor of Political Science and Policy Studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada) suggests a new form of faculty development based in ontological inquiry. Challenging the dominant educational paradigm, rooted firmly in epistemological approaches, she encourages us to explore what might become possible in educational development when ontological approaches are embraced. Finally, Dr. Carey suggests some of the many benefits to both faculty and students which become available when ontology is the focus of education.

Who am I and Why do I Care about Ontological Inquiry?

It is December 2014 and I am a tenured faculty member (Political Science and Policy Studies, Faculty of Arts) currently in the fourth of a five-year reassignment to our Academic Development Centre, our ‘teaching and learning’ center, our university’s locus of faculty development. In this capacity, I have worked with faculty on curriculum, assessment, classroom presence, and even teacher identity, but I had not worked with faculty on who they are in the world or who they want to be in the world. In short, my work with faculty development had been constrained within what might be called an “epistemological approach,” an approach concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, rather than an approach that is informed by ontological inquiry, an approach concerned with the ontological realm, that is, concerned with “being”: who we are as faculty.

I had recently become interested in the many and varied ways in which faculty embody leadership, whether or not they occupy formal administrative roles, and I started to explore this possible avenue of faculty development with our Centre’s Director. “After all,” quoth I, “we are definitely leaders in the classroom, and also in developing pedagogy, courses, learning activities, and assessments. Surely that’s leadership! We could support leadership development further with our faculty colleagues…” “But Miriam” she countered, “connecting ‘faculty’ with ‘leadership’ might cause concern within our senior administrative body. After all, they are the leaders in this institution.” It is almost needless to say, but I’ll say it anyway: faculty development offerings directly addressing leadership were, at that time, on the horizon of possibility, rather than directly in front of us.

Fast forward to today: I have recently concluded a two year secondment to that very Centre as its Academic Director. In the spring of 2020, I delivered a five part, two-hour per session webinar series on the foundations of leadership for fifty-five faculty within our institution and beyond, created during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face courses became an impossible dream. The webinar series was a hasty replacement for the already scheduled five-day, face-to-face leadership course, Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: an Ontological/Phenomenological Model, henceforth The Leadership Course, which I have delivered to students (for credit), to faculty and staff (for professional development), and to members of the public over a dozen times since 2016. I collected data and produced an article about the student experience of this leadership course (Carey 2020). I am now one of three Instructors of the faculty development program associated with this particular
leadership course, *Creating Course Leaders* (CCL) and, in that capacity, I work with faculty around the world who are equally committed to mastering and delivering this ontological leadership course in their institutions of higher education.

How did I get from there to here? The first step of this journey was my participation in a delivery to the public of The Leadership Course held in Bermuda in November 2014 (Erhard et al.). Although at that time I certainly didn’t “get” everything the course has to offer, I thought parts of the course had real potential for faculty development offerings coming out of our teaching and learning centre, and that led to my initial conversations with our then Director. Although those conversations did not result in any new faculty development offerings on leadership at that time, the next summer (July 2015) I participated in Creating Course Leaders so that I could deliver The Leadership Course myself; after all, at the end of my secondment, I would be teaching student courses once again and might find the opportunity to offer this unique leadership course to our students. And so it unfolded... As at the time of writing, in my university alone I estimate that I have delivered this Leadership Course, or parts of it, to around five hundred students, faculty, and professional staff.

Why this leadership course, you might be wondering? What is so special about this particular leadership course that I have committed significant time and effort training myself, have developed a team within my university dedicated to this work, have developed myself to become a CCL instructor and, in fact, go through my life now saying that I **live** (practice and embody the distinctions of) the Leadership Course?

It is because this leadership course is focused on the **being** of being a leader, not the knowledge or characteristics or skill sets which apparently successful leaders may have, all of which constitutes the content of “traditional” leadership courses, based on informative learning, with which so many of us are already familiar. It offers a decidedly ontological approach to leadership development, premised on the assertion that any person who desires to lead, to create change, can do so if they so choose; the key is in who they are **being**, not in what they **know** about leadership. This course, in short, provides **access**: access to the kinds of personal transformations which result in greater personal and professional satisfaction, greater efficacy in all domains of living, and the access to power to create new ways of being and action which are a match for real change or, as we term it in The Leadership Course, the effective exercise of leadership itself.

And this course is an example of ontological inquiry in higher education.

**Ontological Inquiry in Higher Education**

The authors contributing to this journal are all, in one way or another, dedicated to asserting the value of ontological inquiry as essential to the mission of the Academy, writ large. So, what is ontological inquiry? And what is the mission of the Academy?

We assert that ontological inquiry is essential to the mission of the university. The traditional mission of higher education is focused around teaching, research, and service. However, our mission is also often discussed in terms of the cultivation and development of the student as a whole person: from maturation to creativity, critical thinking, and civic engagement, and frequently refers to the genesis of a passion for learning or life-long learning. Thus the university’s mission moves well beyond the how (teaching, research, and service often
associated directly with academic discipline particularly) and into the what (the personal as well as academic outcomes students can expect from higher education). In short, the mission of the university embraces both epistemological and ontological outcomes. We, in the Academy, pay great attention to the epistemological outcomes and the methods designed to produce those outcomes and far less attention to the ontological outcomes and methods.

This said, I assert that higher education involves more than the mere acquisition of information and/or skill sets: it evokes (or could, and perhaps should evoke) the development of the human person as a whole. Many faculty and students recognize the distinctive developmental growth that occurs for undergraduate students in particular as they move from late childhood to early adulthood in their college and university years. Not only is their identity becoming explored and perhaps consolidated, but their independence of decision-making and choice comes to the fore as schedules, courses, peers, and instructors all have to be navigated, more or less on their own, in this new environment. The possibilities of assisting that developmental trajectory more intentionally lie in the realm of ontological inquiry, not solely in epistemological growth.

As we use the term ontological inquiry (and we recognize that others may have different views of the meaning of this phrase), it is a distinctive method that discloses what it is to be a human being. And a human being is more than the mere sum of their knowledge, skills, or even experience: a human being is also all the potential of the creativity unleashed in their present and future as well. Ontological inquiry, then, takes the teacher and the students into the realm of inquiring into what it is to be a human being and the discoveries that follow from that inquiry.

To be fair, some of this kind of work is already happening in institutions of higher education in a variety of specialized courses, particularly those which deal (ontologically rather than epistemologically) with professional development and identity, for example. In some cases, the faculty engaged are explicitly and intentionally in cultivating ontological inquiry; in other cases, they would have no connection to this conversation about ontology and epistemology. But what is certain is that, generally speaking, the dominant educational paradigm today is firmly lodged in epistemology, and even discounts ontological approaches to a certain degree. Consider the number of courses still offered today for credit which actively discount the lived experience and opinions of students themselves in favor of academic ‘research’ which, in itself, appears often to be dedicated to the replication of the current knowledge base and perhaps its incremental extension, and not much more.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the possibility of faculty development which explicitly focuses on ontological inquiry. To date and in most institutions of higher education, most faculty development programs focus on how to be a better (more effective) teacher, or on the mastery of specific research skills (like grant-writing), and the like. We spend little time, if any, on exploring who we are being as academics and who we would like to be both as academics and in our lives more broadly writ. It is no wonder, then, that we are ill-equipped, even uncomfortable in many instances, with opening these kinds of ontological inquiries with our students, when we have not intentionally engaged with them ourselves.

What IS Ontological Inquiry?

Ontology has to do with being and, in the case of education, it has to do with the being of being a human being in an educational environment, whether a student, teacher, researcher, or staff.
colleague. To inquire is to seek out or investigate (or to ask for information as distinguished in the more British term, enquire). So, to undertake ontological inquiry within higher education would be to be seeking out or investigating what it is to be a human being in this particular context of post-secondary (adult) education.

There are other ways of thinking about ontological inquiry as well. In our call for proposals to this volume, we suggested that ontological inquiry is a distinctive method that discloses what it means to be a human being – the ways of being in the world we have inherited from our culture, traditions, disciplines, etc. In the process of distinguishing one’s appropriation of those ways of being, a new possibility of being becomes available. In short, by distinguishing the ways we wound up being, we can make authentic choices as to whether to default to those appropriated ways of being, or to create new ways of being which are more powerful or effective in various situations. Essential to this method of ontological inquiry is both discovering something for oneself and sharing those discoveries with others. And at the most personal level, another approach to ontological inquiry, then, would be seeking out or investigating who I am being and then making intentional choices about who I choose to be in any given situation.

With this in mind, we could be approaching ontological inquiry from the various perspectives of the constituent groups mentioned above; in this essay, I would like to invoke the faculty perspective in particular. What could ontological inquiry look like for faculty?

**Ontological Inquiry for Faculty**

Let’s begin to look at what ontological inquiry might look like for faculty. As noted above, there are at least three distinct and different approaches to such an inquiry:

1. **seeking out what it is to be a human being as a faculty member** in an institution of higher education;
2. employing a **distinct methodology** to access our acculturated and appropriated ways of being (in short, the ways we wound up being) and challenge/change them when desirable;
3. **undertaking a personal inquiry** into who one is being and who one chooses to be as a faculty member working in higher education.

What could this kind of inquiry look like for any faculty member? No doubt, many different things, but faculty development seems to be a natural home for explorations of these kinds. Consider the journey of a fictitious faculty member named Jones.

Jones joined their institution as a contract or adjunct faculty member some time after completing their PhD. Having received no instruction concerning teaching whatsoever in their doctoral program, which was strictly focused on research excellence and accomplishment, they turned to their university’s teaching and learning center to improve their confidence and competence in teaching, and undertook a variety of faculty development programming in areas concerning course development, learning outcomes and assessment, classroom practices, and the like. Eventually, Jones was successful in competing for a tenure-track position, and over their tenure-track period, they became more confident in their teaching ability and continued with their research program, taking on service opportunities as they opened up. They felt their teaching ability had improved, but they began to feel overwhelmed by competing responsibilities and did not know where to turn for assistance with balancing the complex portfolio of the early
career academic. Programs from the teaching and learning center focused on the tried and true, epistemologically-grounded and evidence-based practices, not on questions of the nature of being for a human being developing an academic career in a post-secondary institution.

Jones, like many of us no matter where we work or at what, began to question, very deeply and personally, what they were doing and why; I guess that this is an almost universal question for reflective human beings. Without supports for such an ontological inquiry in place, Jones was rather lost and felt rather stuck. Who could help them? Who would guide them? Fortunately, shortly after Jones received tenure, their teaching and learning center started to offer programming about teacher identity and presence, largely based on the seminal work of Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*. With like-minded colleagues, through facilitated conversations and exploratory practices, Jones started to, as they would express it, “discover themselves,” literally discover who they were being while teaching, and they were astonished to find they were being the kind of teacher they had admired as a student, and not particularly being themselves. No wonder they suffered a bit of Imposter Syndrome, which apparently is not uncommon for many academics. With this discovery and the encouragement of their colleagues in the Palmer work, Jones started to more authentically express themselves in their teaching portfolio and began to enjoy both their students and their work much, much more.

Late in their mid-career, Jones heard about an ontological approach to leadership development, The Leadership Course I mentioned above, and they decided to enroll, using their professional development funding. They felt that this course would be something different – a change from the normal course of faculty development conversations and programming offered in their school, and they were curious. Jones had, like many faculty members, experienced ebbs and flows in their participation in faculty development programming, often experiencing a cycle of high participation being followed by a period of consolidation and practice. At this particular point in their mid-career, Jones didn’t really see anything new to engage with from their teaching and learning center. At the same time, Jones had come to realize just how much leadership they and their colleagues actually exercised in the classroom in all kinds of ways, from leading the unfolding of the curriculum to leading critical conversations, never mind the obvious power and responsibility for assessment and grading student performance. They began to wonder why the faculty role was generally not seen as one of leadership; only administrative roles appeared worthy of this kind of development opportunity. In fact, the entire discourse around academic leadership seemed only to include administrative positions from Chair or Department Head upwards. Jones wondered why this was so…

This particular leadership course, with its ontological objectives and phenomenological methodology for inquiry, provided Jones with a distinct approach to accessing their acculturated and appropriated ways of being (in short, the ways they wound up being) and challenge or change them when desirable. The course introduced, for example, foundational factors of leadership (integrity, authenticity, commitment, and accountability to express them in brief), each well-defined and presented as points of access to transformation. The power of context to shape being and action was explored. Universal and idiosyncratic ontological constraints were exposed. And as Jones practiced the various distinctions developed in The Leadership Course, things started to shift in their life in dramatic and unpredictable ways.

They found themselves struggling less with the burdens of their various academic activities and enjoying everything much, much more. They felt capable to offer themselves in more significant leadership capacities and did not feel any sense of being overwhelmed or
depleted. Their personal relationships felt deeper and richer. Their appreciation for the daily joys of life, such as the sunset or the movement of the wind through long grass, suddenly expanded, and Jones felt more alive altogether. And finally, Jones realized that they don’t have to work so hard in order to enjoy all these mundane and more sophisticated pleasures of living a life of contribution – they felt like they were really living for the first time in many, many decades, not merely and only surviving it all.

Finally, Jones came full circle and began to undertake a personal inquiry into who they were being and who they would choose to be as a faculty member working in higher education as well as in their life as a whole. They expanded their ontological inquiry beyond their professional activities and into their life more broadly. Jones would say that they had begun to live the various distinctions they had learned about in that ontological Leadership Course and, as they continued to discover things about the ways they wound up being and what was getting in their way, Jones decided to move beyond that and intentionally create who they were being in their professional and personal life. And they began to look beyond their professional world as an academic and created who they wanted to be in their family, in their community, and with the various groups of people with whom they shared interests and commitments. Jones loosened the grip of acculturated and appropriated beliefs, behaviours, and ways of being they had rather unconsciously lived into, and began to actually create change in their life. Jones began to lead. Jones was intentionally and purposefully creating new possibilities in their professional and their personal lives; in fact, the distinction between professional and personal lives was dissolving as Jones began to experience their whole life as an integrated and exciting opportunity to contribute wherever they could.

Of course, as you might have already surmised, Jones’ journey was my journey. It has been a wonderful and challenging journey, a journey of creation and change, and a journey which is not typically supported in workplace environments, especially the Academy, where the dominance of epistemology over ontology remains strong. And it is the case that I cannot prove to the reader, with third-person verifiable evidence as is expected in our western epistemological worldview, that I have created great change in my own life and experienced guiding others to discover access to generating the same for their lives. Nonetheless, it is certain that in my subjective experience, my experience of my being in the world, my ontological experience, I have changed and created change around me.

I now deliver this ontological Leadership Course wherever I can to whomever wants access to it through our university under various auspices. And, as mentioned, I have recently offered an online series addressing the foundational factors I mentioned above as well as an online delivery of the entire leadership course itself. The Covid crisis is creating more opportunities and different opportunities in which to share this ontologically developmental work. Faculty development would seem a natural home for this kind of ontological inquiry.

And there are other places in the Academy where ontological inquiry could make a significant contribution. I offered The Leadership Course to three classes of students a few years ago and have published the results of my study into the impact of the course on them (Carey 2020). It is my experience that this leadership course can be easily adapted to academic credit situations, where the various concepts within the course may be critically assessed in terms of both conceptual understanding and application in life (or practice, as we might call it). Further, I could see this kind of ontological course being delivered in a wide variety of disciplines, not just as an access to leadership per se. There are already many disciplines in which traditional
leadership courses are in place and oriented toward applications in those professions (like business and medical schools, education and social work programs, and likely many more). But I can imagine this kind of ontological inquiry being undertaken in virtually any discipline within the Academy, and/or as a distinctive “capstone course” in which students are encouraged to create themselves intentionally in the world as they graduate, rather than more passively adapt to the situations with which they are confronted as they leave the university.

What Can We Faculty Do?

I think the first step in the ontological journey interested faculty could take is to distinguish the dominant educational paradigm under which we live and work, and to discover how limiting that might be for both our students’ education and our own. Epistemological objectivity is the privileged form of knowledge in the Academy, and most of (historically all of) our educational practices derive from the view that objective (third-person verified) information/practices can be transferred successfully to students. Success, in this paradigm, is defined by the students’ ability to regurgitate that information or demonstrate those practices back to professors in agreeable forms. The stereotypical position of professor as “Sage on the Stage” in a traditional lecture, where students are assumed to be able to follow the erudite pearls of wisdom articulated by the expert and somehow absorb them (by osmosis?), is slowly being challenged by the newer view of professor as “Guide on the Side.” There are even some professors today who see themselves as co-learners and their students as co-teachers in the relationship of teaching and learning together. So, some new approaches are afoot….

For those of us who question the traditional university and its dominant epistemological paradigm, there has been little opportunity to engage in a conversation where other forms of teaching, learning, knowing, and being can actually even be acknowledged. By identifying the different realms of epistemology and ontology, we are reminded that we all learn (ontologically) by doing and, very importantly, by failing to do (again, in the world of knowledge transfer, the current educational paradigm, trying and failing is more often punished rather than rewarded). Further, the academic lack of recognition that ontological subjectivity is also knowledge leaves the great swath of living unavailable to either teachers or students in the Academy.

One of the beautiful aspects of being in the larger conversational domain (world) of this Leadership Course is that, as a professor in the Academy, I feel restored to my human beingness in this educational environment. No longer do I have to pretend to agree with the limited academic view of knowledge and what to do with it; nor do I have to fight against it. Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* spoke of the various ways in which teachers have to break off and deny certain aspects of themselves in order to do the job as it is meant to be done within this paradigm of education; now there is a logical and rational epistemological reason to move beyond that limited conception of knowledge which demands a certain fracturing of the professional self.

This depiction of epistemological objectivity and ontological subjectivity opens up a world for me – a world in which both forms of knowledge and both means of accessing it are available to both teachers and learners. And it opens up the literal conversation itself for me – I mean I have literally been given the language with which to have this conversation with colleagues and students.
From there, once we have begun to see the possibilities for creating our own being more powerfully in our work and in our world, we might be more able, and certainly more willing, to try to guide our students in these ontological inquiries as well. We can do that through opening up the question about what it is to be a human being in a higher educational environment and thus relate to each other in more productive and teaching/learning focused ways. We might share with them a particular ontological course, such as The Leadership Course referred to, as a particular methodology of opening up ontological inquiry in their lives. Or we might start intentionally to include ontological inquiry where it fits in our disciplinary coursework and conversations with colleagues. Finally, we might undertake our own personal inquiry into ontological transformation as a faculty member, or encourage and support others as they do so, by expanding our view from the world of knowing into the world of being, specifically discovering who we have being, and accessing what power there is to make change. Ontological inquiry, in short, can strongly complement and dramatically extend the power of higher education both in terms of process and outcome. It might seem risky, but we could embrace it in its many and varied forms.

What seems certain is that, if we do not embrace ontological inquiry as part of higher education, we are limiting both ourselves and our students to the ways of being and knowing with which we are already familiar, and which, to many of us, do not occur as empowering for each and every one of us.

Conclusion

I began this essay with a bit of discussion about who I am and why ontological inquiry matters to me, and it occurs to be as fitting that I close in the same way.

Who was I being before I began this ontological inquiry? I was a middle-aged faculty member, resigned to and frustrated by much of the politicking and grandstanding I saw occurring in my university. I felt unacknowledged for what I offered in my teaching, scholarly, and service portfolios, and I was not seeing anything new in terms of faculty development or room for me to grow in my role(s). I knew well enough how to deliver my courses and have my students succeed in terms of grade point average, but I did not know how to empower them for the challenges they would surely face post-graduation; that seemed not to be my business, and yet somehow it concerned me. And certainly, I found myself struggling with some of the challenges which confronted me in my faculty position, from personal conflicts to tired, old debates, and I did not know how to move beyond them.

Who am I now? I am an empowered and supportive faculty member offering whatever I can to my teaching, scholarly, and service responsibilities. I am a person who created myself as a contribution wherever I am and who is her word in that matter. I am dedicated to access for the ontological Leadership Course I have mentioned in this essay because it has opened up the access I now have to create myself and my life in ways which were unimaginable to me but a few short years ago, and I want to create opportunities for others to engage in this ontological inquiry as well. I no longer struggle with much at work or in my life, to be honest; I realize as I write this that it sounds a bit crazy, but who I am now is not hooked by things or struggling with things in the ways that I did in the past. I feel free and strong and resilient, able to connect with my students and colleagues in ways that were unimaginable to me before.
This is why ontological inquiry matters to me: it empowers us as human beings, no matter what environment in which we find ourselves. It lifts us up and beyond the various unexamined appropriations we have made about what is knowledge and what is truth and what is possible and who we really are. Who we really are is the most powerful creators on this planet, and ontological inquiry allows us that realization and the life that flows from it.

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Miriam Carey has taught political science, policy studies, and general education courses to undergraduates both in Canada and abroad. She also worked as an educational developer and was the interim Director of Mount Royal University's Academic Development Centre before retiring in 2022. Miriam's interest in ontological inquiry began when she took the leadership course herself, and she developed a research project around its impact on undergraduate students of the course (published as Creating Leaders: a pilot study of an ontological/phenomenological leadership course; https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/vol14/iss2/5/)

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