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RHET 1010-03 Henry

Inquiry #1—Agency

“Shitty First Draft”

3 Oct. 2021

### What It Really Means to Be “In Charge”

Have you ever looked up to a leader in a group and thought, “I would sure love to be in charge!” If you have, I want to explain to you what it really means to be in charge. Agency is a load of bull malarkey. It’s just a fancy word that people use to make themselves and others feel better about the fact that they are just helpless, rats pressing a button to get food. I wanted to be a leader for my class group in high school. As a student body representative, I could make all the changes I always wanted to make to improve the school and make life better for myself and the other students. I had the best intentions. I was a good person. I had a handle on my studies. So during my senior year I started to campaign, spoke to people and I was happy to find that I received the most votes! It was my time to make a difference.

I worked hard that first month to recruit support for my ideas. I talked to other students, they liked what I wanted to do, I talked to teachers, they were also very supportive and I talked to the school principal, but he explained all the reasons why we couldn’t make the changes I wanted to make. It was so incredibly frustrating for me. I learned then that leaders don’t really have the kind of power that everyone thinks they do. They could only do what others with real power would let them do! So, I had a lot of work to do in this job that I couldn’t keep up. And there didn’t seem to be a point to it. Why all the busy work when nothing real was going to get done anyway! I got behind in my studies, felt myself slipping and feeling angry about it because I couldn’t make a difference anyway and I was sinking my own future by not focusing on my studies. Another thing that really bothered me is that no one really wants to help, they expect you to do everything. No, I take that back. That’s not entirely true. You have a group of friends who always have your back. But sometimes people say they can do things but then they don’t. They talk a good one. Sometimes they want you to do everything and then when you do the things they should have been doing with you they criticize you for what you did! I’d like to see them try it! I discovered that I really do not like politics. Everything is so political! People want you to kiss their butts and be nice to them. They don’t really want you to tell them the truth about things. It’s like you can’t get angry even when people do really awful things or really awful things happen. And sometimes people are just mean, mean! to you when they don’t get what they want. (This is 504 words, doctor. I know I should have stopped writing my essay now, but I wanted to write something else. Sorry.)

Or maybe they are jealous, and they want to see you go down in flames (I learned in my studies of Foucault that that is called *schadenfreude*—when people are happy when they see others feeling pain or suffering misfortune. I just don’t get that. I never laughed in the movies when Laurel and Hardy had troubles. I felt cringy and anxious for them.). What burns me up the most is that people think that you are the principals puppet and are just there to do the bidding of the school authorities and are fooling them, you don’t really care and doing what is best for us students! But that’s so not true!

But on the other hand, I did get agency in ways that I did not expect. People recognized me around school. They said my name and looked me in the eye. I was popular. They would say, “Yeah, I know you are that student council representative from 11<sup>th</sup> grade!” I would feel good for exactly 10 seconds but then wonder what they heard about me (good or bad?) and think how could knowing this person help with one of my projects. Could this be a friend to me? That’s not really a good way to think all the time, is it? I want to know people for people, not for who they are and what they can do for me. But I guess this is agency too. Knowing people gives you options. Another thing from my experience that gave me agency is that I kept to my guns. My mom raised me not to lie, not to cheat, not to steal, not to hurt other people. I believe in karma and that what you do in this world comes back to you in good ways and bad, 10 times over. So, I can honestly say that after this nightmare I have stayed true to who I am. I did the “right” thing. I know this is power. I

can sleep at night knowing I didn't break the rules or the my principles. Somehow this gives me agency. I had the chance to do some grey area things but I chose not to and that has made all the difference to me.

In conclusion, from my experience as a person who really wanted to lead and do some good, I walked away from the experience thinking that I really did not have any real authority or power as student leader. They say you have big things you can do but the choices you make are about really smaller things. Since I am supposed to end the paper in a life-affirming way, I will say that sometimes being able to change the smaller things is a good thing. I also learned a lot from my experience about being the one "in charge." If you can help it, it's better not to be in charge. To be in charge is a lot of work, no real power or choice, loads of frustration, and students start not to like you anymore.

(1,034 words 😊—This is definitely an A-paper, right, doctor?).

## Reader Response Activity

Writer: My 16-year-old self

Responder: A much older version of myself

### Rubric

**An A paper:** Is *excellent*. The focus reflects a significant insight that is the result of careful and extended interaction with a clearly defined topic, and the body of the writing supports that idea with examples and clear, thorough discussion. The development of each section is balanced. It is logically organized and employs transitions that express how each idea is related to the one before it. The writer's personality is present and appropriate to the context, and the writer has established his/her credibility to write about the topic. The concluding paragraph does not summarize, but instead, brings the writing to a close and helps the reader understand why the discussion has been important. There are few, if any, grammatical or mechanical errors. Formatting is careful and clean. In short, the writing looks as if the writer cares about his/her thoughts, and it genuinely teaches the reader. The reader leaves richer for having read it.

**A B paper:** Is very good. It offers a clear focus and original thought, but it may lapse in analysis and/or discussion from time to time, missing opportunities to explain ideas fully. **Obvious effort made toward saying something meaningful.** There is also a clear organizational mode, good paragraph coherence, and cohesion. **The writer's voice is present but may shift at times, and credibility is presented briefly.** The conclusion may feel uncertain or rely on quotes for impact. There are few grammatical and mechanical issues. The reader feels as if s/he has read a good, solid essay.

**A C paper:** Is competent. **There is an attempt to express a central idea,** but the ideas within the piece may seem basic or lack originality. **Support for the main idea may be sparse or illogical, and the writer may depend on restating ideas or offering multiple examples rather than analyzing or explaining the importance of those examples.** **The writer does not clearly express a voice or credibility.** **The conclusion may summarize the ideas given in the essay rather than bringing the writing to a satisfying and illuminating close.** Grammatical and/or mechanical issues may detract from the focus.

**A D paper:** May be simplistic or biased. It is clear the writer has not understood the assignment and/or the subject matter fully and struggles throughout to have enough to say. It may appear that the writer has given little time to the discussion or moves away from the focus. The writer's voice and credibility are not present. The conclusion may be weak, **unrelated,** or not present. **Grammatical and mechanical errors are so significant that the reader struggles to understand.**

**An F paper:** The final product reflects a lack of process and critical reflection. Does not contain a clear focus, development, or structure. The writing is very limited and falls far short of a university-level assignment. There may be elements of plagiarism.

Actions	Responder's ideas
Describe	I can't really find a focus statement anywhere, but I know the writer is talking about how the person who has some authority does not really have agency. I think she means influence or power to change things and choice to act. The body of the writing all relates to that unwritten focus. The main ideas are that she was really excited about being voted in so that she could make some changes in the school, but once she got there, she found many obstacles such as the principal set boundaries on what she could do, too much work which affected her schoolwork, lack of help from other students, the politics of dealing with other students (?) when you are "in charge," the way people are mean, and how people think you

	<p>are just a puppet for the principal. She then talks about the agency she did have—networking and keeping her principles while in the position. Finally, she ends with a mixed message—she learned a life lesson about what it means to be “in charge” and advises the reader to avoid it if possible, but then she also refers to small things she can change.</p> <p>It seems that she is talking from the position of someone who has experience and wants to share that experience with other students who may think that being “in charge” is something they want to aspire to.</p>
<b>Diagnose</b>	<p>The writer is being honest about a bad experience. The voice is very clear—maybe a little sarcastic and sometimes funny, but also sad. She sounds very disappointed in what happened. It is clear that she is writing something meaningful for her to a peer group—other students—but sometimes she shifts to talking to the doctor as the reader. She also appears to have good intentions to advise them, so that they do not have a misconception about this position of power, or they do not make the same mistakes that she does. However, I think it may be a little bit biased toward the negative aspects of the experience. (1)</p> <p>In terms of development, she gives the broad descriptions of the subtopics, but does not provide detail. Yes, she has written a great deal of her thoughts, but she lacks in specific, concrete examples. She doesn’t really use any outside sources to support her ideas. (2)</p> <p>I also noted some problems in organization, the overall mode is clear—parts of the whole—but she shifts a bit from subtopic to subtopic. Sometimes she doubles back to an idea. (3)</p> <p>The conclusion summarizes at the end and brings in new ideas which she did not mention before (small things are good). Who is “They” who say these things? (4)</p> <p>The grammar and mechanics make the writing unclear sometimes. She uses a lot of exclamation points, too, which seem like she is shouting the entire paper. The contractions also make it sound too informal. (5)</p>
<b>Direct</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I would recommend that she try to find those good things from the experience and write about them more. That might make the writing less biased and more balanced.</li> <li>2. I would recommend that she explain details more. For example, she said that she went to the principal to ask for something and he said no. What was it? With a specific detail, we can understand if the frustration was justified.</li> <li>3. I would recommend reorganizing the ideas. Make each frustration a separate paragraph and give details.</li> <li>4. Try to revise the conclusion in a way that does not just summarize/list and does not bring in new thoughts. Perhaps think of a question or quote in the conclusion and then end with that.</li> <li>5. Edit, edit, edit. Once you have your paper in good shape with 1-4 above, then you have to go back and edit your work. I saw a lot of sentence-structure problems (comma splices and run-ons). Some of the language might not be appropriate for the context. Remove the lines to the doctor in parenthesis.</li> </ol> <p>Good luck!</p>

**Writer's Revision Plan:** What revisions will you make based on your conversation and feedback from your responder? List them below.

I need to immediately

- Write a clear focus statement.
- Organize the body paragraphs around ideas.
- Work on my transitions between paragraphs and ideas.
- Provide specific examples of what I describe to support my points.
- Use my Covey source somewhere??? And put in my works cited page.
- Try to balance out my perspective with some of the positive small things
- Revise the conclusion
- Finally, edit. I'll do some now and save some for the final "dental draft!"

Michelle Henry

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Inquiry #1—Agency

The “Up” Draft

3 Oct. 2021

### What It Really Means to Be “In Charge”

We have all heard the famous Spiderman quote, “With great power comes great responsibility.” I recognize how true this statement is when I think about my experience in high school as a student council representative. Before I ran for office, I thought, “I would sure love to be in charge! I could make some big changes!” I did not know then what is really means to be in charge. I thought I would automatically have greater agency as a student leader. Sociologists define agency as “the capacity of an individual to actively and independently choose and to affect change; free will or self-determination” (“agency”). For me, agency as a student leader meant that I could make different choices for the students and more power to make changes to improve the school and make life better for myself and the other students. I had the best intentions when I began campaigning to become a student leader. After receiving the votes from the student body and taking office, my experience was very different from what I had expected. My agency was extremely limited by the situation.

One of the major obstacles I faced was lack of support. I worked hard that first month to reach out to other students and teachers to get their thoughts on what we needed to do and get support for some of my initiatives. One initiative that I had was intended to encourage more students to get involved in different after school activities. Usually, students would sign up at the beginning of the term for the activities they wanted to participate in, and then they would be committed to them and no one else could join after the sign-ups had closed. I thought it would better to allow for flexible days every week where students could join in different activities to explore and branch out to try new things, maybe meet new friends. The students and teachers were all very supportive, but when I proposed this idea to the school principal, he explained that this system would be too “confusing and chaotic” and is not guaranteed to have the impact I proposed. Well, this lack of support was so incredibly frustrating for me. I also lacked support from my student team. I recruited a small group of students to help me with some of the campaigns, like the CORE Values awareness. Every month was devoted to a different CORE value, and members of the team were responsible for designing a poster to be sent to all the students and setting up an activity booth (the activities were supposed to help students learn about the value through a game or something). The problem was that some of the team would not show up to planning sessions, or they would show up and then not do the task they had agreed to do. Now, to be fair, some of the students on the team were supportive, but it was just those few who we were counting on who did not come through for us which prevented us from reaching out goals.

I learned from these experiences that even leaders are limited by those who have more authority and by those who are working on the team.

My ability to take action to support the school was also limited by the critics. It is ironic that some students had such high expectations for what I should accomplish in office, but then would not support by helping out on projects, and then when I would do the work, they would criticize me for what I did manage to achieve. In one situation, I managed to convince the principal to open locker use again (it was closed during the worst of COVID). When the locker assignments came out, the critics did too. They thought it was too small, too far away, or too inconvenient on the lower level. It made

me feel that the work I had done had no meaning for the students, so why should I try to do anything? Why did they not want to celebrate this smaller victory? Could it be that they were jealous because they were not the ones given credit for the idea or the work? Could it be that they just did not want to see me achieve a goal? I am still not 100% sure, but I felt their response was petty and discouraged me. The critics would also try to put down some of my efforts to make changes, saying that I was doing this because the principal wanted it, not because the students wanted it. For example, my student team and I organized a neighborhood street cleanup, which did not get too much support because students were saying that this was just a plot to get cheap labor and not really to help us learn responsibility or good citizenship. They said that my work in organizing this initiative was just to make the principal happy. Of course, I took offense by this because it just was not true.

Looking back, I see that while I had agency to plan some good initiatives, even the best actions can be limited by critics who may not want to see these plans succeed.

My agency as a student council representative was also restricted by my own busy life. I always remember that Shakespeare quote “Unease lies the head that wears the crown” (*King Henry IV* 3.1). I really do not know what this mean for Henry IV, but for me, I had no time to relax as the student representative because I had so much to do and so much on my mind. I had all these great plans—to create a memorial rock garden, sponsor a reading group, organize student outings to promote inclusion—but I could not act on any of these great plans. I had so much responsibility as the representative which left little time to do what I really wanted to do. For example, I had to motivate my student team, have regular meetings with the school board and principal, and keep up with projects we got approval on, that I had so little time to keep up with my own studies. I felt my grades slipping, and this was unacceptable to me, so I had to back away from some of the projects.

This taught me that my own agency is limited by what I do in reality while still having a balanced life.

It would be easy for me to say that I had no real choice or influence as the student representative, but this would not be true. Stephen Covey, the author known for his book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, wrote in an article for the Business Standard, “Perceiving yourself as a victim, without choice, is the greatest inhibiting factor to achieving what matters most to you. We all have the power to make choices in our personal lives as well as within the workforce.” Although his argument is in the business context, it applies to me because I recognized that I did have some power, just not the power to make huge changes right away. What I did not expect to find from this experience was that the small choices that I made along the way actually had some good influence. Students, Teachers, and Staff from around the school knew who I was. They would come up to me and start conversations about some little projects we were doing, share with me their ideas, and sometimes, offer help. Knowing more people and seeing how they respond to me was encouraging because if I knew more people to call on for help, I had more options. It also made me feel that my efforts were having a positive influence on others. Another small choice that made me experience agency is that I stayed true to myself. My mom raised me not to lie, not to cheat, not to steal, and not to hurt other people. I believe in Karma and that what you do in this world comes back to you in good and bad ways, 10 times over. There were times that I could have broken my principles and not gotten caught. For example, I could have gone to the principal and told him that all the students wanted to have a dance-off after school for Halloween, when in fact, it would have been just me and maybe one other student who really wanted it. The fact that I did not try to lie or manipulate others and that I did not take advantage of my office for my own benefit has made all the difference to me. Covey talks about this also in his article. He argues that major changes can happen even by people who have no real authority when “their character, competence, initiative and positive energy — in short, their moral authority — inspired and lifted others.”

Even though I felt that I did not have much influence because of all the restrictions, I was surprised to discover that my small actions really meant a lot to people.

I walked away from my experience as a student representative thinking that I really did not have any real authority or power as student leader. When I started to reflect on what happened, I noticed that there were situations out of my control that limited the choices I had and the way that I could act for a positive change. However, the experience is life-affirming for me because being the one “in charge” taught me that some of the best power comes from small choices we make, like keeping my integrity or finding great people who were changed somehow for the better. So,

if you choose to be the one “in charge,” my only advice is to think small choices and actions, focus on others, and stay true to your principles, and you will be a lot more satisfied with your achievements.

#### Works Cited

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