who was there to support them along the way—not only in making the changes their school needed but also in understanding how they made those changes by sharing leadership and focusing on learning. The planning team became a model of a learning organization and an inspiration to the rest of the school. Every constituency believed that it was important and had played a significant role in making this change happen. They could never have made these changes individually, but they did it together, proving an age-old adage: Together we stand, divided we fall.

CHANGING THE APPROACH TO TEACHING
Storyteller: Isabel

A few years ago, I was invited to teach a course on change management with a colleague as part of the Master's in Human Resources program at a South American university. The students were in their mid-thirties and were employed full-time, so they attended classes in the evenings.

The Intent

As we prepared the syllabus, I reflected on the outcomes I would like for students who took the course. What did I want to achieve? I determined that, at the end of the course, I would want students to have explored the characteristics of change, the factors that make it challenging, the enablers and blockers, and the key aspects that require attention when designing or implementing change processes. I wanted them to be able to read materials that could contribute to and expand their understanding. I wanted them to have the opportunity to identify and review their assumptions about change, to explore their own roles, both current and potential, in influencing change. I wanted them to find answers to their questions about change. And I wanted them to come up with a tangible product resulting from the application of their learning.

My colleague agreed to the outcomes, following my suggestions to craft the course in line with the ARL approach, which was new to him at that time.

The Kickoff

In the first session, in order to guide the introduction process, we asked the students what they wanted to know about us. This was an unusual start, which caused uncertainty and baffled smiles.

Unfamiliar Environments ▶

After the introductions, we explained that the course would be successful only if it met their expectations, so we wanted to give them a moment to collect their thoughts and write down their expectations, both in terms of content and from us as instructors. This was the second puzzling request, for the common assumption was that students attend classes to learn from expert professors who know best what students need to know and how to teach it. More than an assumption, we knew this was part of the educational culture, and we were aware that we were deliberately challenging that belief.

Ownership of the Learning ▶

After some murmurs, a student spoke up and said, "Professor, we cannot tell you what we want you to teach because we don't know the subject!" We were happy to hear that comment, because it gave us the opportunity to explain that we were asking them simply to write down what aroused their curiosity or intrigued them about change, what questions they would like to have answered during the course.

Ownership of the Learning Guided Reflection ▶

This provided some relief, and they all began to write in their notebooks. After a while, we asked them to share their questions and filled the board with their input.

Not surprisingly, when we asked what they expected from us, and what type of approach or roles they wanted, there was another puzzled and nervous silence. We repeated that they were our clients who paid our salaries, and it was not unreasonable to ask what they expected from us so that we could better serve them. They thought this was very comic, and the room exploded in laughter, which helped relieve the tension our unusual approach was creating.

Finally, some students spoke up and said things like "not pure lectures," "real cases," "discussions, not monologues by you," "connecting it with our work," "something useful," "hearing your experience with real situations." We took notes and agreed to those expectations. We were somewhat surprised by how quickly a traditional educational setting and stance could turn around, with the students going from a passive to an active, participative mode.

We ended the first session by asking them to collectively set the norms for working together during the semester. At that point, the energy was high, and everyone was enjoying the strange experience, wondering, "What's next?" With less resistance than we'd experienced with the previous requests, we were able to jointly identify our rules of the game. The students indicated that we, the teachers, should come well prepared, be on time, and end the class on time. We should be willing to provide support and feedback. They offered to arrive on time, read what was required for each session, and participate in the class discussions.

Safe Environment

A Few Weeks Later

We organized the course around change initiatives that they, the students, identified for us to work on. Students each found an organizational challenge from their work settings, where they had the opportunity to analyze and implement a change. For our part, we organized the readings around those real challenges. During each class, we discussed readings about one topic related to the course and explored how the concepts applied to their individual cases; they then incorporated their reflections into their papers for the next class. We agreed on three intermediate submissions of their papers, so that they could get our more detailed feedback and correct and modify their work for their final submissions.

The plan was that, at the end of the semester, they would have final papers incorporating lessons applied along the way. The theory was good, but a few weeks into the semester we had our first difficulties. Some students began to miss class, and those who attended were hiding behind one another to avoid participation.

Ownership of the Learning ▶

They weren't reading the assigned texts, and when I asked for questions the readings had generated there was an uncomfortable silence and tension in the room. I shared my perception that they were not reading the assignments, based on the guilt I saw on their faces.

I explained that we had collectively agreed upon this process—using the classes for discussion—but if they didn't do the reading, there would not be much to discuss. One student spoke up and explained that the other teachers were much stricter and were asking for papers along with the reading, so the students were electing to complete assignments for teachers who were giving bad grades for not doing the assigned reading. I replied that this was all right and that although we had jointly agreed on this methodology, it often happens that we don't know if a process will work until we try it. Since this approach didn't seem to be working for them, we could modify it. Without resorting to disciplinary action or grades, we teachers were willing to adopt a lecturing approach if that would work better.

I will never forget the silence in the room. The students were absorbed in themselves, reflecting on what was going on, trying to make sense of it. Finally, one student said, "Professor, I don't think we should change the method we agreed upon. I think we just didn't live up to the norms. I think this is very strange, because we have had seventeen years of schooling under a different system. We learned to behave differently as students; all our lives we were rewarded for memorizing, for taking notes, for listening in silence without questioning expert teachers. I think we are just not used to this! But I think it's worth trying. Could you give us another chance, to see if we can do this? Because, after all, we asked for it."

The whole group burst out with comments of approval and support for his suggestions. We, as teachers, felt happy with this turn of events. We also were happy not to have to lecture, but most of all we thought that something important had just happened. Indeed, attendance was almost perfect for the rest of the se-

mester; the students were enthusiastic and worked on their cases, using the readings as a supplement to their thinking; participation in class was very high; and students appreciated the feedback they received on their papers. Their final product was something useful, and they felt proud of it. We jointly set the criteria for grading and invited them to self-grade their papers, reserving our right to disagree. We were surprised to notice that they all graded themselves lower than what we thought they deserved. Their standards seemed to be higher than ours in the end.

Summary

I selected this story because I thought it was a good example of how the traditional educational system shapes our behaviors. These students were in their mid-thirties; as college graduates, they had an average of eight to ten years of work experience. They held junior management positions. They were used to being proactive in their working roles, but somehow, the moment they stepped into the classroom, they left their proactive behavior outside. They went back to their familiar "student" role, in which knowledge comes from the teacher and they take notes and absorb the instructor's expertise. Yet, when we pushed them to express their hopes, they mentioned participation, discussion, and real cases rather than lectures and theories.

This learning intervention was designed using the ARL elements: We intentionally pushed the students to accept ownership for their actions and learning; we used questions and their own answers as part of the course materials; we contributed our expertise and resources just in time, following the dynamics of both the discussions and their projects; we promoted exchange of lessons; we created a very unfamiliar yet safe environment; we introduced reflection and respected the diversity of learning styles. In terms of what Ron Heifetz calls "adaptive leadership," we used the crisis in the classroom as an example in order to learn about change.[7] I never mentioned ARL. We just tried it, and it made sense.