

Dramaturgical Teaching in the Leadership Classroom: Taking Experiential Learning to the Next Level

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Abstract

This paper presents a pedagogical approach to leadership education that takes experiential learning to the next level of faculty-student interaction and experience. Dramaturgical teaching involves the instructor displaying the leadership style(s) in and out of the classroom so that students experience the leadership style while learning about it. Proposed course structures, special instructions for faculty using this teaching method, preliminary evaluations of the method, and implications are discussed.

Theoretical Basis for Dramaturgical Teaching

The positive impact that experiential learning has had in the leadership education field has been well documented (Guenther & Moore, 2005). Leadership education programs have been experiencing trends to move away from formal learning structures such as standard lectures and discussions; moving toward more highly interactive teaching strategies that encourage the integration of learning and experience (Finan, 2004; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

A recent approach called dramaturgy takes the basic tenets of experiential learning and extends them to a more holistic and fully encompassing faculty and student experience (Kayes, 2002; Leberman & Martin, 2005). This pedagogical method, termed dramaturgical teaching, may be perfectly suited for coursework in the leadership area.

Principles of dramaturgical teaching will be presented next, followed by a proposed course topic outline. Strategies for teaching suggested topics are explored and preliminary results of an assessment of the effectiveness of dramaturgical teaching are provided.

How Dramaturgical Teaching Works

Origins and Merits in Leadership Education

As a pedagogical approach dramaturgy has its origins in theatre and the performing arts (Orr, 2003), but it has also garnered attention in the broader conversation surrounding language and meaning making (Karreman, 2001; Schwandt, 2005). Applications of the pedagogical method have resulted from increased attention paid to experiential learning (Finan, 2004; Kayes, 2002). Dramaturgical teaching has grown to develop a stronger presence in the leadership and organizational behavior field (Boje & Rhodes, 2005; Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Dramaturgical teaching has been described as the most student-centered course design structure available in the leadership/management education field (Leberman & Martin, 2005). The strategy of developing and structuring a course specific to students learning and developmental needs has been an increasing trend in the leadership education field (Mundhenk, 2004). While the topic of dramaturgical teaching has received limited coverage in the leadership education field, its potential for connecting theory and practice for the creation of knowledge, meaning-making, and the development of critical thinking and wisdom are among its most attractive features (Schwandt, 2005; Tchaicha & Davis, 2005).

Applying a dramaturgical pedagogy to leadership education coursework involves several principles (Finan, 2004; Leberman & Martin, 2005). Dramaturgical teaching features instructors modeling the leadership style being taught as their teaching style. To achieve a dramaturgical teaching pedagogy, I recommend the following.

- Instructors should inform students that they will be adopting a dramaturgical teaching method and explain what this means.
- Topics covered should last at least two to three weeks in the course so that students can get a full appreciation for the nuances of the leadership style(s) being displayed by the instructor.
- Instructors should adopt leadership style for the duration of the topic coverage in the course.
- Instructors should structure assignments and teaching methods to be consistent with the leadership style being studied.
- That course content is consistent with teaching methods.
- Instructors stay in character during all student interactions outside of the class (i.e., office, telephone, email).
- Instructors should process the experience with students at the end of each “topic” to ascertain how modeling the leadership styles impacted learning, impressions, and experiences. Examples of processing questions include:
 - How did it feel to be led by a (style) leader?
 - What are the advantages of leading with this style?

- What is it like to work for this type of leader over an extended period of time?
- What did you learn about yourself when being led in this way?
- What aspects of this leadership style are most/least agreeable to your own leadership philosophy?
- How did this leadership style affect your mental approach and preparation for class, your performance in the class, and your attitude towards the class?

Proposed Course Structure

My dramaturgical course is an advanced undergraduate leadership course titled, “Dynamics of Leadership in Organizations.” Students enroll in this course after already completing a foundations/survey course that broadly covered the major leadership theories from the field. This course encompasses three leadership approaches: Political leadership (power and influence), Servant leadership (serving others), and Transformational leadership (visionary and motivating). Power and influence was chosen because it embodies the political dynamics that most organizations possess (Kotter, 1985). Servant leadership is characterized by service over self-interest, making it a dramatic shift from political leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Servant leadership was chosen to contrast with the self-interest focus of power and influence and to reflect the growing trend in society for less self-serving behavior and more service-oriented behavior. Transformational leadership was included because it has consistently related to the most positive employee and organizational outcomes (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Instructors may select other theories from the field to include in a leadership dynamics course. This paper focuses on the teaching of the three approaches described above.

Instructors that choose to use a dramaturgical teaching method will need to be prepared to structure and teach the class in a manner that is consistent with the leadership style being taught. This may present many challenges to instructors because it may force them to operate outside of their natural, preferred teaching styles. The object of dramaturgical teaching is to give students the experience of being led by this type of leader. Teaching political leadership, servant leadership, and transformational leadership will therefore require different mindsets and structures both in assignments, grading, interactions with students, and teaching dynamics.

Dramaturgically Teaching Political Leadership (Power and Influence)

Teaching political leadership requires the instructor to be authoritative, planned, and structured. During this topic you will cover concepts like power, influence, tactics, authority, managing upward, social networking, naivety, cynicism, diversity, interdependence, and developing power at different career stages (Kotter, 1985). Instructors will need to create a competitive structured

environment in the classroom because during this topic it is every student for him- or herself.

I usually prepare students with the following statement, “Beginning next class, I will be incorporating dramaturgical teaching. This means that I will be teaching you using the leadership style that we are learning. I will continue using this style inside and outside of the classroom for the next five weeks, until we begin our second topic. Here are a few rules for next class. No newspapers, baseball caps, cell phones, or gym clothes in the classroom. You will come to class well-rested sit up straight in your seat and be ready to begin class at (class start time) sharp. At the beginning of class I will close the door. If you aren’t in class before the door is closed then you may not come to class (i.e., don’t open the door).”

During the first five weeks I address students as Mr. or Ms. (LAST NAME), accordingly. They address me as Dr. (NAME). During each class the top performing students (discussions and/or assignments) have reserved seats waiting for them to indicate that they are in the upper echelon of the class. Each class I introduce something unexpected (assignments, course structures, deadlines) to them to reinforce the changing political dynamics in organizations and the need to meet my expectations. For example, I enter the class early in the semester and ask, “How many of you have read the first three chapters of the text, as was assigned?” Most students raise their hand implying that they have. I then proceed to announce that I was caught up in some urgent meetings and have not had the opportunity to read them, thus, “I will need a two-page briefing from students on the first three chapters, on my desk, by 10 a.m. tomorrow morning. Class dismissed.”

This causes great anxiety and time pressure and it alerts students that demands will be made of them with little notice requiring them to juggle priorities to meet my expectations. Other activities with similar unpredictability highlight the coverage of the power and influence topic. During the semester students generally have 100% attendance, come prepared for class, meet all deadlines, and they fight for opportunities to participate during discussions. They inevitably strive to get in the reserved seats during class and be among my favored group. The student morale is sometimes lower during this topic because the competitive environment can wear on some students, but the student performance usually exceeds that of any other topic.

Dramaturgically Teaching Servant Leadership (Service over Self-Interest)

Teaching servant leadership requires instructors to act caring, open-minded, and unstructured (student-driven). Instructors will have to alter their teaching paradigm and give up control by making students’ needs the sole mission. The traditional curriculum planning and syllabus construction process that instructors use is inherently incompatible with servant leadership, so instructors will need to start over at this point in the course and facilitate the construction of the syllabus

for this topic. This is a challenge for both students and instructors because both are accustomed to the instructor making these types of course planning and curriculum decisions. Questions that have to be addressed with the group include:

- What do students want to learn or gain from this topic?
- How do students want to structure their (student-centered) coursework to optimize outcomes?
- What assignments will help students achieve their goals?
- How will students' learning and development be assessed for a topic grade?

Instructors may find it difficult to succumb to the communicated needs of the students, but to demonstrate servant leadership they must. In five iterations of the course using dramaturgical instruction I have seen five different syllabi.

Instructors should prepare themselves for the unexpected, but also be ready to answer basic questions about servant leadership (this process often lasts two full class periods). Remember, the goal of this topic is to experience what it is like to be led by a servant leader, whose sole purpose is to help others reach their developmental and learning goals (as great or small as they may be).

Dramaturgically Teaching Transformational Leadership (Inspirational, Visionary)

Teaching transformational leadership requires the instructor to be inspirational and lead with contagious energy. Transformational leadership encompasses four dimensions, which instructors need to model throughout the topic. The four "I's" of transformational leadership include (a) individualized consideration (treating followers as individuals and helping them develop), (b) intellectual stimulation (challenging followers to think outside of the box and solve problems in creative ways), (c) inspirational motivation (articulating a compelling vision for the future, framing issues consistent with the vision), and (d) idealized influence (developing trust and emulation from followers) (Lowe, et al., 1996).

Instructors will need to structure the transformational leadership topic to demonstrate these dimensions. This is challenging because it requires instructors to focus on exciting students using visioning and providing compelling articulations of what is possible for students. Instructors will have to balance being inspirational with challenging students to question assumptions and thinking outside of the box. I teach this topic like a leadership development workshop, with high energy activities, dynamic multi-media lectures, frequent interaction, and creative experiential activities focused on practicing the 4 I's of transformational leadership.

Results

Assessments were used to evaluate the impact of dramaturgical teaching on student learning and attitudes. Open-ended responses to the following questions

were asked of students enrolled in class at the completion of each subtopic. Responses were collected anonymously and participants were not required to complete the evaluations if they chose not to. Comments were typed in cumulative form by a graduate research assistant before the faculty member saw the comments. Representative responses included:

- **“In what ways did the instructor’s modeling of (political, servant, transformational) leadership styles in his/her teaching help you learn?”**
 - “I like seeing each one. I’ve been in many classes where the instructors only talked about it, but no one understood how difficult political leadership was to deal with as few in this class experienced or how slow and aggravating the servant leadership process can be if done a lot. Plus the energy level created by a transformational leader really impacted how I may want to lead when I have the opportunity in my career”
 - “I enjoyed that the instructor got into character for each topic because it helped us conceptualize that leadership topic even more.”
 - “We felt things that we wouldn’t have if teaching in a regular way. For example, I’ve never had such a competitive atmosphere in class, but I think it will prepare me for the dog eat dog world that we live in today. Plus I have never had the level of autonomy that we had during the second topic (servant leadership). The third topic was the most dynamic experience I’ve had in college!”
 - “It helped me to discover which style I enjoy most and which ones I disliked. But it also gave me an appreciation of the emotional wear and tear that certain styles of leadership can cause.”
 - “It was very effective. I don’t think that without him actually demonstrating the style for the entire five weeks we wouldn’t have learned as much. We would have known the words...but we wouldn’t know what these styles were like (to experience them).”
 - “I realized that I am more effective a worker under certain styles of leadership and so I will have to really look at my potential bosses in the future to assess what style of leadership they use.”
 - “I realize how each type effects those who serve under them.”
 - “Long after I forget what certain styles and theories were called I will never forget the impact of taking this course and experiencing the dramatic changes in teaching styles that (instructor) displayed. It was the most impactful experience of my college career.”
 - “The dramaturgical approach helped me to experience the leadership styles. The way in which the material was presented and the instructor’s attitude/behavior in class really reinforced it and made it real for me.”
 - “The learning was more vivid using this teaching approach than it would have been otherwise.”

- “It was crucial to my learning. Without experiencing the three styles as I did, I would not have learned most of what I did.”
- **“In what ways did modeling (political, servant, transformational) leadership styles hinder your learning?”** Out of 168 responses to this question, 128 responded by reinforcing the value of the teaching approach, implying that it didn’t hinder learning.
 - “I learned better under some styles than others so I guess I would have learned more if all three were like the last one.”
 - “I was intimidated during the first topic. I’m not very competitive so I know that that one is not right for me. I was really quiet in class because I was afraid to speak up...but I guess now I know how I’d respond in a more political environment.”
 - “I thought the second topic (servant leadership) was too disorganized and open. Students didn’t really have to work hard unless they wanted to and the instructor seemed like he/she was taken advantage.”
 - “Although I like the servant leadership teaching style the best and I also liked the third style (transformational leadership), what I will never forget is how the first five weeks made me discover some of my serious weaknesses.”
 - “I didn’t understand how the instructor could let us do whatever we decided during the second five weeks and didn’t hold the students accountable if they missed class or assignments.”
 - “I wish more courses were taught this way.”
- **“What advice would you give your instructor about the approach to teaching (political, servant, transformational) leadership styles the next time he teaches this topic?”** Many students responded with “Don’t change anything” or “None” (112 out of 168 respondents).
 - “Don’t ever stop teaching the course this way. It’s the best course at the University.”
 - “This was the best class I’ve ever had. Even though I didn’t like the way one of the topics was taught, I will never forget how I felt being led by the three different approaches.”
 - “Nothing. I really enjoyed the class and that out of all the courses I have taken at the University that this was by far the most interesting and that I will take more from this class than I will from any other class. Thank you!”
 - “Maybe put more structure and focus into the second topic (servant leadership).”
 - “Remind the students halfway through the first topic that you are ‘in character’...you had people convinced that that was the way you were.”

Conclusions

Dramaturgical teaching is an innovative pedagogical method for use in the leadership education classroom. In this paper I have described the principles of dramaturgical teaching and outlined a possible structure for implementing this style of teaching in the classroom. Student comments indicate that the teaching method contributes to student learning in positive ways and students were positively impacted from taking the course. Instructors may consider developing a course or structuring an existing course using dramaturgical teaching to accelerate student learning.

There has been an influx of experiential learning activities utilized nation-wide in leadership courses over the past twenty years (Guenther & Moore, 2005). Many instructors have longed for creative and interactive activities to engage students using practice-oriented teaching methods (Finan, 2004; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Dramaturgical teaching offers instructors the deepest form of student experience – they live the leadership style while they are learning (Kayes, 2002; Leberman & Martin, 2005). Evidence suggests that this approach to teaching leadership can have a powerful impact on the student experience. It is my hope that more faculty members will challenge themselves and consider adopting a dramaturgical teaching approach in the leadership classroom.

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Biography

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