

## **Undergraduate Student Perceptions of the Pedagogy Used in a Leadership Course: A Qualitative Examination**

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### **Abstract**

This exploratory, qualitative, descriptive study examined undergraduate student perspectives of pedagogy used in an undergraduate leadership elective course to describe how students view the effectiveness and impact of pedagogies used in the course. Undergraduate students (n = 28) reflected on the effectiveness of the pedagogies and the learning environment created by the pedagogies used in the undergraduate leadership course elective. Student reflections at the end of the semester revealed student perspectives on the effectiveness of the pedagogies and were grouped into three themes: contribution to overall effectiveness, openness to different perspectives, and learning from peers. Two themes emerged for students' perceptions of the learning environment including overcoming challenges with discussion and class logistics. This study lends support for discussion as a pedagogy used by leadership instructors which can be effective for learning leadership as perceived by undergraduate students.

### **Introduction**

While debate has surfaced over the years about leadership as a discipline and whether or not leadership can be taught or learned, the more recent debate is over how best to teach leadership in the context of formal classrooms (Doh, 2003; Parks, 2005; Riggio, 2013; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). According to Wren (2001), the pedagogy used to teach leadership does make a difference. Wren contends "the unique nature of leadership requires its study to be a combination of intellectual inquiry, behavioral innovation, and practical application" (2001, p. 5). Three common elements have been associated with directly impacting student leadership development: a) opportunities for service/volunteering; b) experiential learning; and c) active learning through collaboration (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). Active and collaborative learning and the opportunity to practice leadership in real-world contexts has been found to positively affect student learning of leadership (Cress et al., 2001; Astin & Sax, 1998; Wren, 2001). While research exists on leadership development programming, few studies have focused on teaching methods, instructional approaches, or leadership studies curriculum design (Jenkins, 2012).

A comprehensive list of leadership pedagogies was created by Allen and Hartman (2008a, 2008b, & 2009). Based upon the work of Conger (1992), Allen and Hartman (2008a, 2008b, 2009) identified 40 sources of learning that are common in leadership development

programs geared for college students. Jenkins (2012) further refined the list of instructional strategies to 24 using the work of Allen and Hartman (2008a, 2008b, & 2009) as well as a panel of experts and the researcher's expertise and experience. Instructional strategies used by Jenkins (2012) include: case studies, class discussion, exams, games, group projects/presentations, guest speakers, icebreakers, in-class short writing, individual leadership development plans, interactive lecture/discussion, interview of a leader, lecture, media clips, quizzes, reflective journals, research project/presentation, role play activities, self-assessments and instruments, service learning, simulation, small group discussions, story or storytelling, student peer teaching, and teambuilding. Komives et al. (2011) reviewed seven powerful pedagogies which can be useful to leadership educators in a variety of contexts. These pedagogies include: experiential learning, team-based learning, peer education, sociocultural discussion, service-learning, mentoring and advising, and contemplative practice.

Signature pedagogies have been defined as the types of instruction and teaching that are at the forefront when we refer to preparing members of specific professions (Shulman, 2005). These pedagogies seem to define how knowledge is counted and how things become known in the field. Shulman (2005) contends that effective signature pedagogies involve active student participation, promote deep engagement of students, and encompass a learning environment where students are visible and hard to disappear and be anonymous. Signature pedagogies are generally interactive and students are accountable to their fellow students as well as the instructor. According to Marzano (2007) pedagogies that are effective are more than just strategies but encompass three critical areas: use of effective instructional strategies, use of effective management techniques by the educator, and use of effective class or program design strategies.

Jenkins (2012) investigates signature pedagogies for leadership education and found that class discussion was the pedagogy used most frequently in leadership education and may be the signature pedagogy for leadership education. Sociocultural discussion was highlighted as a pedagogy useful to leadership educators by Komives et al. (2011). Though not specifically applied to leadership education, DeAngelis (2009) contends participation in formal and informal issues-based discussions where students discuss controversial topics or where students who come from a variety of backgrounds discuss topics relevant to themselves provide students with tools to understand competing priorities and the ability to find links among contrasting perspectives. According to Dugan and Komives (2010) empirical research on leadership development has indicated the environment where discussions take place have been shown to be the most significant predictor of leadership outcomes. Though not specifically focused on leadership education, research on the outcomes of discussion-based pedagogy indicates that if discussion topics are ones of emotional importance, clear significance, and conducted by effective facilitators students can have a transformative learning experience even if the make-up of the students in discussion are not diverse (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

Jenkins (2012) also concludes that other pedagogies such as group and individual projects and presentations, self-assessments and instruments, small group discussion, and reflective journaling are also pedagogies used most frequently in leadership education. While the investigation by Jenkins (2012) of signature pedagogies in leadership education revealed that discussion was the pedagogy most used by leadership educators, it was recommended that future

studies “delve into the quality of their impact, effectiveness, and student learning outcomes” (p. 20). This study examines undergraduate student perspectives of pedagogy used in an undergraduate leadership elective course to describe how students view the effectiveness and impact of the use of pedagogies.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative, descriptive study was to explore undergraduate student perceptions of the pedagogy used in a leadership course. The specific objectives addressed in this study include: 1) examine student perceptions of the effectiveness of pedagogies used in a leadership course and 2) describe student perceptions of the learning environment when using certain pedagogies in a leadership course.

While Jenkins’ (2012) study reveals support for class discussion and other pedagogies as signature pedagogies in undergraduate leadership education, these pedagogies have not been investigated in terms of their quality, effectiveness, and student learning outcomes. The environment where discussion occurs has been determined to be a significant predictor of leadership outcomes; however, much of the research conducted on discussion-based pedagogy was not specifically focused on leadership education (DeAngelis , 2009; Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

### **Methodology**

This study used a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), a basic qualitative study is used when seeking understanding of how individuals make sense of their experiences. The study examined the reflections of undergraduate students in an undergraduate leadership elective course taught for the first time to understand how students perceived the effectiveness of the course including their views of the pedagogy chosen and learning environment created. This basic qualitative study can also be considered evaluation research as this study evaluated the pedagogy used in a leadership course. According to Patton (2002), “When one examines and judges accomplishments and effectiveness, one is engaged in evaluation. When this examination of effectiveness is conducted systematically and empirically through careful data collection and thoughtful analysis, one is engaged in evaluation research” (p.10). The population for this study were undergraduate students (n = 28) in a leadership course elective during a two-week mini-mester format. The undergraduate students represented a criterion-type purposive sample as only students enrolled in the leadership course during the summer 2013 semester were part of the study population (Patton, 2002). The course included males and females, traditional and non-traditional students, African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students, students majoring in a leadership degree, and students majoring in other degrees who had no prior leadership coursework.

Participants in this study were those students enrolled in the leadership elective course for the summer 2013 semester. This course, taught for the first time, served as a leadership elective for students and focused on learning leadership through the media. The course was offered face-to-face; however, it was offered in a compact 2-week mini-mester format. Instructional strategies

used during the course included current event readings, class discussion, reflection, small group discussion, presentations, field trips, and lecture.

Data used in this study consisted of reflection questions given at the end of the semester. Students had the option to complete these questions as part of an evaluation of the course. Students were told this was an experimental course and their feedback would help in determining whether this course should be taught in future semesters. There were 28 undergraduate students enrolled and all submitted reflections; therefore all were participants in this study. The prompts for the reflection questions consisted of the following:

- 1) Compare and contrast the learning you experienced in this class versus the learning you have experienced in other classes. What was better for you as a learner (student) in this environment and structure? What was a challenge for you as a learner (student) in this environment and structure? Is this type of class effective for learning leadership? Why or why not?
- 2) Discuss the leadership topic you learned the most about from this class. Explain the leadership issue and what you learned about it.

The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method in accordance with Glaser and Strauss' (1967). Trustworthiness of the study was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through peer debriefing with other leadership educators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was established through the use of purposive sampling and thick description of the participant reflections throughout the findings of the study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Dependability and confirmability were established through the use of audit trails and peer audits (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data were coded (S1-S28) before the analysis process began to ensure the confidentiality of the students and the respective data codes were included after the quotation to create an audit trail.

In qualitative research, one characteristic is that the "researcher is typically the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). The instructor served as the researcher and thus, primary instrument for data collection in this study. While this should be acknowledged as a potential source of bias in the study, careful attention was made to monitor the bias by giving students the option to respond to the reflection and it not affect their grade in the course. Students were encouraged to be honest with their responses and reassured that their responses would only be used as a means to determine if the course should be taught again in the future. As another way to limit bias, reflections were coded by someone other than the instructor before analysis was conducted. Peshkin (1988) noted researchers' subjectivities can be the underlying factor for distinctiveness of the research and "one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (p. 18).

### **Context for the Study**

The researcher believes it is important to understand more of the context for this study, specifically the leadership course for which the study was based upon. This course was a three-

credit hour undergraduate leadership elective course and taught in a 2-week format; it was offered between the normal spring and summer full semesters. The course in this study was primarily taught using class discussion as the pedagogy. There were only three lectures, which consisted of about 50 minutes each given during the 45-hours of instruction time. The other hours of class time were spent engaging in class discussion, guest speakers, field trips, and student-led class discussions. The final project in the course was the student-led discussion of a current leadership event. Content for these student-led discussions was obtained from the New York Times in Leadership project. The instructor used a scaffolding approach for guiding students into leading their own discussion. Students started out with small tasks when speaking to the entire class and by the end of the semester were able to engage their fellow classmates in a discussion about leadership issues using current events. The instructor also modeled several class discussions about leadership current events for students before they engaged in their discussion.

Students were assembled into pairs to lead their discussion after three days into the course. To assemble students into teams of two for their student-led discussion, students were asked to list two students in the course they would prefer to work with and two students who they would prefer not to work with on a team. Only the instructor was privy to the information provided by the students. From this information, the instructor chose the pairs who would work together. The instructor believes this method worked well with this class size and the duration of the course. Students felt like they had buy-in into their class partner, but also were not just allowed to pair up with a friend. In their team, students led a discussion using a New York Times in Leadership article assigned to them. As part of this discussion, students prepared discussion questions of which two needed to address the top levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Students individually answered their own developed questions using complete references and citations. The student team also developed a brief "check for understanding" of other students in the course to ensure they had read the article. Students then led a 45 minute or longer discussion in class using the questions they had generated. They were also encouraged to bring in other information to be used in the discussion such as video clips and other content-related articles pertaining to the topic. A few leadership topics outlined in the New York Times article and discussed by students included gender and leadership, authenticity and leadership, race and leadership, role of values, vision, and mission in leadership, negotiation and leadership, communication and leadership, effect of leadership styles, entrepreneurial leadership, gaining credibility as a leader, role of culture in leading others, establishing trust as a leader, and effect of experience or pedigree on leadership ability and context.

Other assignments in the course included participation points, a reflection comparing and contrasting leadership from each of the three field trips that were a part of the course, a reflection on one of the leadership discussions, a quiz on evaluating information in the news, and the creation of a guide for a leadership discussion by generating six questions about a video clip, article, or news segment. Students observed three different media outlets including a newspaper organization, a television organization, and a sports web forum organization.

## **Findings**

Student perceptions of pedagogies used in a leadership course were investigated using student reflections of the course. Students seemed impacted by the discussion-based structure of

the course. Objective one of this study sought to examine student perceptions of the effectiveness of pedagogies used in a leadership course. Even though the instructor did focus on using discussion as the primary pedagogy for the course, students were not directed to reflect specifically about the discussion-based pedagogy used in the course. Student perspectives were grouped into three themes for this objective: contribution to overall effectiveness, openness to different perspectives, and learning from peers.

### **Contribution to Overall Effectiveness**

Out of the 28 students surveyed, 26 of them made reference to the discussions in class. Overall, all 26 students had positive things to say about the group discussions. Student 14 simply stated “I believe that this class was very effective for learning leadership because of the discussion. You not only hear what the professor has to say, but also what everyone else has to say.” Yet another commented about the structure of the discussions, “I believe this class is an effective way to learn about leadership because, as our instructor, you never told us what to think merely what to think about and allowed us to be the leaders in generating discussions” (S8). Student 28 also remarked about the structure of the class through their reflection:

The environment of the class to provide open discussions, that really had some depth was a huge difference compared to any class I have had before. People in the class weren't afraid to voice their ideas or thoughts, which added a great benefit to our discussions.

Students 14 and 19 reflected generally on the concept of discussion used in class:

The open discussion in this class really gave me a more open mind to the material that was being taught. This class really put us on the spot and set a standard of expectation for all students to understand what was being taught about leadership traits, but it gave an opportunity for students to explain what it meant to them and how their life experiences brought them to that point. (S14)

This was my first ever class based heavily on discussion and I really loved it. I learned more about topics when I was being asked questions about how I felt and how they played into my own life. I also learned more from my fellow students than I have in any other class. I feel like it made me learn more talking about the situations and applying them to articles or my own situations than just being talked at and then asked to regurgitate it on an exam. (S19)

### **Openness to Different Perspectives**

Students remarked that the discussion opened their minds to new perspectives, as well as challenged them to think critically and evaluate information. S24 said, “The discussion in this class also changed some of my viewpoints and opened my eyes to perceive some issues in a totally different light” and furthermore “The challenge for me as a student in this class was the absolute necessity of thinking critically and evaluating your logic before presenting it to a group of intelligent people.” Student 17 commented “Being actively involved helped challenge my own thinking and opened my mind to other possibilities and conclusions I would not have reached on my own.” Yet another student commented “By this class focused mainly on discussion, it forced

you to come to class prepared so you could participate in the discussions” (S27). S24 also reflected:

Students wanted to get involved, and before they would speak in class they would be challenged to truly think critically and make sure they understand the information and have developed solid logic before bringing their opinion to the attention of the class.

S20 commented about the importance of being open to other views. “Normally, we as humans see things completely one sided, but here I was able to see several different angles on a topic. It really taught me how to respect and take into consideration other people's views and beliefs.” Another student reflected on how the course challenged them to be open-minded. “Being actively involved helped challenge my own thinking and opened my mind to other possibilities and conclusions I would not have reached on my own” (S17).

### **Learning from Others**

Students reflected on how they learned more from hearing others’ perspectives in the course because of the discussions. One student compared their learning from others in the course to other types of learning, “I learned more from other students than I ever could have from a textbook or vocabulary words” (S14). Student 21 also reflected:

I believe that this class was very effective for learning leadership because of the discussion. You not only hear what the professor has to say, but also what everyone else has to say. This gives you many points of view on each topic and helps it to go more in depth than most classes.

S24 reflected on the power of having different viewpoints, “It was very powerful to have different viewpoints from different life experiences speaking up on ethically challenging issues and seeing the opposite side of the spectrum from myself displayed through a person with different life experiences.” Student 8 reflected on how they benefitted more from the interaction of their peers:

...about 80% percent of classes are not even worth showing up for when all the information is strictly for the test. I really enjoy discussing more and feel I get more out of it when I can learn from peers. I felt that our group got along well and encouraged discussion from everyone. It was great to know we could respectfully challenge views, and I feel as if I gained a new perspective on certain issues.

Objective two sought to describe student perceptions of the learning environment when using certain pedagogies in a leadership course. Student reflections revealed students were able to 1) overcome challenges with discussion because of the environment of the course and 2) class logistics contributed to the effectiveness of pedagogies used in the course. These two themes emerged from the data and seemed to contribute to how students perceived the effective use of pedagogy in the leadership course.

## Overcoming Challenges with Discussion

While there was no negative feedback to the group discussions, something to note is that 17 of that 26 said that the group discussions were a challenge for them because of various reasons. The students that saw the group discussions as a challenge felt that the environment of the class helped them to overcome any issues with the discussions. Student 21 reflected on overcoming the challenge of talking in front of the class:

My main challenge was the first day of discussion and forcing myself to talk in front of everyone, but once I did it went great. I believe that this class was very effective for learning leadership because of the discussion. You not only hear what the professor has to say, but also what everyone else has to say. This gives you many points of view on each topic and helps it to go more in depth than most classes.

Student 14 also reflected on the challenge of speaking up in front of others, “I admit, yes, it was a challenge to get in front of class and speak or answer questions, but the environment that [instructor] set up really made it easy for conversation flow” while Student 1 commented:

I think a challenge for me was actually speaking up in class, there were times that I really wanted to put what I had to say out there, but I was nervous about getting negative feedback or getting into arguments with other students.

## Logistics of the Course

Twelve of the 28 students surveyed mentioned the class logistics as a factor in why the course was effective for them. Specific characteristics included number of students in the course, size of classroom, and length and duration of time each day spent on the course. A reemerging theme was that students saw the small class size as an asset that played a role in bonding the students together making it easier to participate in group discussions. Two of the 12 students did not like the course being during a trimester for personal reasons (not being able to work). One specific characteristic noted in regard to logistics of the course was the size of the classroom. Student 1 commented specifically about the actual classroom being smaller:

What was better for me was the smaller class size and even the fact that the classroom was smaller. I have been in a few smaller populated classes, but the rooms would still be big and everyone would be spread out from one another not making it easy for everyone to be heard or even engaged in conversation together.

Another characteristic that was mentioned by students as contributing to the effectiveness of the course is the number of students in the course. Several students noted the degree of comfortability in the course, “Comfortability would usually not happen in a class that is bigger than this and only 50 minutes, 2 times a week” (S14) and “I enjoyed the smaller classroom size because even though the class was only two weeks, everyone seemed to get to know one another and be comfortable in a short period of time” (S22). Student 11 also made reference to size contributing to comfort, “The size of the class and the amount of time we got to spend together made us a tight knit group that was comfortable talking and learning from one another as well as the instructor” (S11). Another student also reflected on how the size of the class contributed to their comfort level,



I enjoyed the size of the class. It was small which I prefer in a class, we were all able to interact with one another and got to know each other well and I think that is a big key is getting comfortable around your classmates. (S16)

Length of time spent in class each day was noted by students as contributing to their perceptions on effectiveness. One student simply noted “Comfortability would usually not happen in a class that is bigger than this and only 50 minutes, 2 times a week” (S14). Specifically, Student7 reflected:

I think that the setting of everyday for long periods of time was necessary for us to build up the comfort level necessary to freely express how we feel on individual topics. I think that this class being taught in a mini-mester is a much better design than if it were a full semester course.

Student 18 reflected on how their attitude changed about the duration of the course:

...obviously it was shorter than my other classes, which at first coming into class the first day, I had a bad attitude, thinking oh god I have to be at school for 5 hours, but then as I started to get acquainted with everyone and saw some familiar faces, it wasn't that bad and I really started to enjoy it. The short duration of the class was good because I got to know everyone's name by the end of the semester, which in most other classes I'm lucky to know a few people's names by the end.

Student 2 reflected on how the duration of the course contributed to the facilitation of discussions, “I do believe that I benefited greatly from the two-week, five-hour-a-day approach to this class. As a body of students, we were forced to bond quickly which helped facilitate our discussions as we became comfortable with each other.” Student 21 reflected on the length of the course by noting “I loved that it was only a two week course and was very small. I was able to not only learn a lot about leadership, but a lot about my classmates and how other people may think as well.” Yet another student reflected on how the duration of the course impacted their interactions with students, “I think the learning experienced in this class was very effective, more so than any of my other classes because of the interaction with students was so frequent and up close and personal” (S12).

## **Discussion & Conclusions**

In this study, the class discussions were referenced in student reflections quite frequently as a leadership pedagogy that was effective for students in learning leadership. Even though students were not prompted to specifically reflect on discussion as a pedagogy used in the course, 26 of the 28 students did point out how their learning was affected because of the class discussions. Other pedagogies or instructional strategies employed in the course could have been referenced such as the class field trips, reflections, and other class activities. Discussion was determined to be the pedagogy used most frequently by undergraduate leadership education instructors and could be considered the signature pedagogy for undergraduate leadership education (Jenkins, 2012). This study lends support for discussion as not only a pedagogy used by leadership instructors, but one that can be effective for learning leadership as perceived by undergraduate students.

Research points to the environment where discussion takes place as being a significant predictor of leadership outcomes (Dugan & Komives, 2011). In this study, students made reference to the environment of the course and how it affected their comfortability and thus learning effectiveness. Students specifically noted class logistics including the interactions with students being more personal, the smaller size of the class (room size and number of students), and the shorter duration (minimester) of the course as contributing to the effectiveness of the course. Therefore, it is recommended that leadership educators consider the environment for discussion if they want discussion to be an effective pedagogy for teaching leadership. If a small class size is not practical, perhaps an instructor could invoke smaller groups within a larger class that might have similar effects.

Pedagogies are more than just instructional strategies, but also encompass use of effective management techniques by the instructor, and effective class or program design strategies (Marzano, 2007). Based on the findings in this study, the class discussions had positive effects on students when they were coupled with the short duration of the course, small class size and meeting location, and purposeful interactions with their classmates. Students believed these factors impacted their ability to be comfortable with their classmates and be open to discussions that helped them learn about leadership. While not mentioned by students as contributing to the effectiveness of the course, the “behind the scenes” management and design strategies used by the instructor could have contributed to the effectiveness of class discussion. Some design and management strategies used in the course included the scaffolding approach to leading a discussion, allowing students to participate in shorter duration presentations and discussion prior to their final discussion and the method for choosing their partner for the final class discussion assignment. Therefore, it is recommended that leadership education instructors consider not just the instructional strategy to employ when teaching leadership, but also consider other management and design strategies such as class size, location of meeting, how groups are formed, and, if using discussion, how you as the instructor can make students feel comfortable in the classroom.

To be effective, discussion topics should be of emotional importance, have clear significance, and be conducted by effective facilitators (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Though the make-up of this course allowed for the sharing of diverse perspectives, according to Dessel and Rogge (2008) and Schoem and Hurtado (2001), discussion can be a transformative learning experience for students even if the make-up of students is not diverse. It is unclear from this study whether the diverse make-up of the course contributed to student perceptions of the effectiveness of discussion for learning leadership. Some students noted they learned from diverse points of view in the course and it made them more open-minded (S8, S14, S17, S20, S24). The findings did indicate the impact of the facilitator as two students did make specific reference to the instructor or facilitator impacting the effectiveness of discussion: “I believe this class is an effective way to learn about leadership because, as our instructor, you never told us what to think merely what to think about and allowed us to be the leaders in generating discussions” (S8) while Student 14 stated “the environment that [instructor] set up really made it easy for conversation flow.”

## Recommendations for Research

This study examined students' perspectives of pedagogy used in a leadership course; however, there was no measure to control for student learning in this study. Future studies should account for some measure of what students learned to determine if the learning acquired by students is affected by the pedagogy used to teach the course. Discussion-based pedagogy may be perceived by students to be effective, but does it actually effect how and what they learn?

The leadership course examined in this study was unique in that it was taught in a short timeframe (two weeks). The course also had a small number of students and was designed for students to lead and participate in discussions. Future studies should examine other settings and environments to determine whether or not discussion can be effective in learning leadership in these settings and environments.

Leadership pedagogy is more than just instructional strategy (Marzano, 2007). Future studies should specifically be designed to account for the variables of effective management techniques by the educator and use of effective class or program design strategies. Effective management techniques and class or program design strategies which surfaced in this study included class logistics (time for class, size of classroom, number of students), activities designed by the instructor, and the environment created by the instructor. More research should be employed to assess other specific management techniques and program design strategies which impact the pedagogy being used to teach a leadership course.

This study evaluated one leadership course and included a small group of students. This study should be replicated in other settings where a primary pedagogy is used by leadership educators. As Jenkins (2012) also recommended, future studies should assess pedagogies used to evaluate their quality, effectiveness and achievement of student learning outcomes.

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