

## **Educating Graduate Leadership Students to Become Active Participants in Their Discourse Communities**

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### **Abstract**

Leadership Studies courses often face challenges of educating students for a focused area of specialization. We challenged this by offering an innovative leadership course whose aim was to socialize graduate students into their discourse communities. In this paper, we describe a course and the study we conducted to learn from the process and reflect on the implications. During and after the course, we gathered data through interviews and document analysis. The findings indicate that students can benefit from experiential courses that expose them to their discourse communities where they explore career opportunities and engage in higher-level conversations that address contemporary leadership issues. In general, such courses present authentic opportunities where theory and practice converge.

### **Introduction**

Searching for meanings and sense making occurs in complex processes, and its implications for leadership development are extremely high. Adult learners follow a circuitous process of learning through exploration, experience, and critical reflection (Cranton, 2006; Kegan, 2000).

Graduate students striving to succeed in academia face a number of challenges, often due to inflated expectations and misperceptions about what it means to be a scholar and a practitioner. In Leadership Studies graduate programs, many students are experienced professionals who identify as practitioners, but have little experience in the study of leadership. Thus, graduate programs must provide opportunities for students to also develop their identity as leadership scholars by engaging in the analysis of the Leadership Studies literature, in addition to opportunities for students to participate in their respective communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) or discourse community (Swales, 2016). One way to do this is by providing students the opportunity to participate in leadership conferences.

This paper reports a learning journey of two leadership educators at a private university in the United States during a special topics course they co-taught. The seminar-style course was

specifically designed for graduate students enrolled in a Leadership Studies program. The course was an effort to make connections between leadership theories and organizational practices by engaging students in *exploratory forward-looking* development opportunities. One avenue for such explorations was socializing students into important professional and academic communities. While focusing on creating an exploratory developmental opportunity for our students, we also set out to study our approach as leadership educators. This paper is the result of the study that helped us reflect on our journey.

Our study was grounded in transformative learning theory (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), which posits that adults make meaning when, experiencing a disorienting dilemma, they begin a process of self-reflection and exploration, build self-confidence, and plan a course of action based on newly acquired knowledge. We used this theory to better understand our students' learning from our course. We also relied on literature related to academic socialization. Although the notion of socialization varies depending on context, there is general agreement that it is a process by which an individual or a group of individuals become familiar with the values and acquire the skills and knowledge that enable them to function in that society, group, or organization (Austin, 2002; Bragg, 1976; Merton, 1957; Tierney, 1997; Van Maanen, 1984). This idea of socialization underscored our notion of "student" during the continuous process of adoption and internalization of the course culture, as they manifested it in discourse and practice.

In this study we also looked at how our perspective changed between the time we conceived of preparing students for a conference and our current understanding of the experience, and created a narrative that reflects that process. We reflected on the potent insights we gained from the process, the interactions, and our reflections about fully engaging in an academic conference, focusing particularly on course design issues. Through the students' oral and written observations, we explored the meaning of conference participation generally, as it relates to learning more about leadership, and specifically, as it provides insights into personal identity.

## **The Organization of the Course**

Course material was organized to further several intended outcomes: discovering how to navigate academic communities and conferences, specifically the International Leadership Association (ILA) annual conference, whose mission is to engage leadership scholars and practitioners in cutting edge theory and practice. Other outcomes included: helping students develop presentation methods and skills for ILA and other academic conferences, becoming familiar with academic discourses related to leadership studies, initiating and establishing relationships with other graduate students and leadership scholars, finding out how conferences are organized and how to prepare for them, understanding how to make the best use of one's conference participation, and learning to exercise effective leadership within the related community of scholars.

The course had three phases, namely pre-conference, conference, and post-conference, in which coherence and continuity were major organizing principles.

**Pre-conference Activities.** We paid special attention to pre-conference planning. Each student was required to create an individual plan for conference participation, and they were encouraged to attend as many presentations as possible. Our goal was to help students use their own areas of interest, research, and scholarship to guide their presentation choices. In addition, practice presentations were scheduled for those presenting at ILA. Students met as a class twice before the conference. At those meetings they were exposed to the workings of ILA, shared their plans, and rehearsed presentations.

**During-conference Activities.** Students were encouraged to participate in ILA conference events according to their plan. Additionally, as part of the course, they were required to attend at least one of the keynote speeches, at least one presentation by a faculty member and one by a student from our university, and several other types of presentations.

The second component of the conference participation was the special meeting we arranged for two well-known scholars to engage with our students in a private class setting. These meetings provided students an opportunity to dialogue with scholars whose scholarship we used in our programs, and the students were encouraged to come prepared with questions to enhance engagement.

The final conference component was taking initiatives for networking. Students were encouraged to participate in as many events as possible during the conference, to help them establish a network of professional colleagues. In addition, as part of the course requirement, we asked students to (a) meet at least five people they did not know and exchange business cards, and (b) make a special effort to engage with scholars (of interest to them) and whose works they were required to read in advance.

**Post-conference Activities.** Following their ILA experience, the students were given three major assignments. The first was a post-conference presentation by any student who had not delivered one at ILA. Because many students in the course did not present at the conference, we provided them an opportunity to do so in front of their peers, assuming that ILA had given them some motivation and new insights to share with the class.

The second assignment was a reflection paper describing their learning experience relative to the course in general and at the ILA conference in particular. In this paper, students reflected on the various sessions they attended; what meaning they made of the sessions and the class overall; what they learned from presenting at ILA, from class presentations and/or being a critical friend; insights they gained from the scholar they read about and talked with; the benefit they obtained from in-class discussions about the course reading assignments; and any other lessons they learned from sessions with scholars, faculty, and peers.

The final assignment was to submit a professional development plan specific to each student's professional and/or academic frame of reference. The plan listed the types of professional organizations and conferences relevant to their specific area of study, their thoughts about future conference attendance and/or presentations, and relevant journals they should explore.

The course conceptualized learning as an experiential process in which scaffolding and feedback were crucial. So we provided various group interactions and opportunities to experiment with academic presentations, both before and after the conference. Built into the academic presentation activities was the “critical friend” system, in which students were encouraged to provide feedback to each other. Faculty members were also invited to provide feedback at the pre-conference academic presentation rehearsals, and many of the students found this to be very informative and helpful.

## Methodology and Research Questions

Our research was exploratory. According to Marshall and Rossman (2010) exploratory studies focus on phenomena that are not well understood or studied, and help to generate ideas for future inquiry. Academic socialization of Leadership Studies students is an important aspect of academic life, but an inadequately understood process, in the leadership education literature. The following research questions guided our study: What does it mean to participate in a leadership conference? How did students transition from *non-experience* to *experience*? Did the process help students construct a different identity of self, particularly as it relates to being a leadership scholar and/or practitioner? What strategies did students use to make sense of academic conferences as discourse communities or communities of practice? How is the transition from pre-conference behavior to post-conference behavior manifested?

After students completed all course assignments and grades were posted, we sent each of them a request for an interview. All 12 students in the class agreed to participate, and they gave us permission to use their final reflection papers as sources of data. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour, and we used the same questions for every interview, while allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions as needed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and as a method of member checking, were sent back to each participant for changes or clarification. Both instructors coded each transcript for the first round of open coding, watching for emergent ideas and themes (Charmaz, 2014). We used our initial research questions to further inform our analysis, discussing categories in relation to the literature on adult learning and academic socialization. Following this, we worked together to organize our initial coding schemes around several tentative themes. We discussed ways to clarify themes and reviewed some of the student reflection papers to identify connections and search for confirmation of our final choices. When quoting students, pseudonyms were used. As a result of our analysis and interpretations, we agreed on the following five themes that emerged both from the interviews and reflection papers: (a) value of intentional conference planning; (b) the course, university community, and peers as a container for students’ experiences; (c) networking challenges and opportunities; (d) disorienting dilemmas as a form of learning; and (e) validation, inspiration and expanding notions of leadership.

## Findings

**Value of Intentional Conference Planning.** Many students found that the pre-conference activities and assignments provided them a sense of confidence that enabled them to take risks and engage in ways they may not have without the structured support the class provided. Students who had previously attended an academic conference had a different

preparation/conference experience from those who were attending for the first time, and the same held true for those who were presenting their work at this particular conference versus those who were simply attending.

Students were explicit about what lack of experience entailed for them, and they mentioned fear, uncertainty, being overwhelmed, in part because there were many processes and expectations that were previously unknown to them, especially for those who had never attended an academic conference. Learning to realize such a phenomenon, and making a commitment to have the experience and then share their learning, was something the course helped the students to do. Overall, students were aware of the extent of their prior experiences, and were able to articulate this in various ways.

For example, Mandy said:

I think the pre-conference plan took away some of the wonder and potential un-sureness and fear that precedes. So I think that conference plan, to see those things tangible, and to give it a schedule probably promoted some purpose. And some clear intent, which you wouldn't have, probably, gotten clear on, prior to going.

Arnie shared a similar response, as a first-time conference attendee:

I really liked the conference plan because I think as someone who has not gone to a conference—definitely not a conference that was that big, where there were so many different presentations, and so many options that you could go to—I thought doing the conference plan was very, very helpful, in that it forced me to basically read through all of the presentations, and then to make choices as to which sections would be most useful to me.

For those who did conference presentations, there was a heightened anxiety about *doing it right*, especially if this was their first academic conference. Doing a *practice* presentation beforehand was helpful for some, but others found that it created additional anxiety, either because the practice presentation format differed from their expectations or because they didn't receive the type of feedback they anticipated. For instance, Mandy, a PhD student, shared her frustration that the presentation assignment in general did not match her assumptions:

I am not very proud of the work that I did for that. I felt that it was a good exercise. My particular participation in that, I felt that maybe I was ill-prepared because the practice I was anticipating to be practice for a roundtable. And my practice was actually a presentation. And I did not scope my presentation well enough for my particular study area. So it got a lot of bad feedback. So it was actually counter-productive for my confidence level.

Contrary to Mandy, Melinda was extremely well prepared for the same presentation, yet she mentioned that for her,

laudatory feedback is not as important as critical feedback. And I don't think we had done enough presenting in the class to get to the point where we were getting critical feedback, so I got a lot of "great job, well done."

What is interesting to note about this example is that the student experience of the same event was varied, which is an important reminder to allow students the flexibility to engage in ways that are consistent with their learning styles and personality.

For PhD students who were presenting at the conference, especially for the first time, this

presentation seemed like an important step toward finding their academic voice, and could potentially give them a boost toward an academic career. So even thinking about what to present was important. As Jahan noted, “The overarching thing is developing your academic voice, so in the pre it was about what work do I have, or am I a part of that I can present to an academic community, and how?”

The totality of the experience could overwhelm, as for some, the process included submitting a proposal the previous spring, waiting for it to be accepted—or not, and then preparing for the conference presentation.

Melinda shared:

I was fearful that submitting a proposal would somehow put me under the microscope, and propel or destroy my academic career. That's just completely irrational. Once we were accepted, I was then fearful that presenting at the conference would propel or destroy my academic career. But after it was over, I thought now the expectation is set, I should be able to do this for other conferences. Now I'm submitting and volunteering for other conferences, and I would have never, ever done that if not for the class.

These preparations helped students in major ways. First, students had only minimal adjustment anxiety because of their pre-conference activity, which helped them create their *imagined community* or *community of interest*. It was evident to us afterwards that the more students engage in the anticipatory process, the better they learn about a community which they have never joined before. Once they joined the community, the excitement superseded the anxiety.

Student comments illustrate the way some students tried to prepare for the conference. For instance, Nancy,

So because I have not been part of the academic setting before, or not read a lot of materials or know the authors, I spent a little time looking up the key presenters, keynote speakers, authors that I knew would be there.

Students also learned to be intentional in their desire to network at the conference, an attitude due partly to the pre-conference awareness raising and planning. Allison talked about the importance of just diving in. She said,

Part of what really helped was building my own agenda. I had never been to a conference quite that large. So many options going through, and *being intentional* about seeing faculty and students from [our university], and also showing that [the schedule] was gonna change was also really helpful. But it really gave me . . . forced me to dive into it.

And Meredith talked about intentionality as well:

I think a conference itself is an enormous undertaking. There are lots of moving parts. There a lot of opportunities. But this class really . . . grounded me in this notion that this is an *intentional* process; a voluntary process. Participating is essential. So making a plan, following through with your plan, making adjustments to your plan are all necessary behaviors. And ultimately made for a very comfortable and productive use of my time.

In our pre-conference activities, we engaged students in various activities which we

thought would help them understand the ILA culture, the diversity of participants, the unique interactions that prevail at the conference, and the challenges of coping with the intense and fast-paced sessions.

### **The Course, University Community, and Peers as a Container for Students'**

**Experience.** Attending professional conferences can be intimidating for graduate students who already have high expectations for themselves. The students shared with us that being part of a larger community of peers and familiar faculty helped them to take more risks and eventually branch out and meet new people. They noted the importance of a home base, and of the course acting as a holding environment that gave them some incentive, and courage, to expand their interactions beyond those that were familiar to them. Karen spoke about how this worked for her, "I also became more conversational, and I branched out a little more. People I just didn't know, getting coffee, casually introducing myself, talking about the conference."

And Melinda noted the importance of space and grounding. She said:

I like to establish a home base, so once we got the table up and running, that [hotel room with peers] was a space where I could kind of ground myself. Then we were able to connect with other students, and eventually the faculty.

And Azal noted that he chose not to separate himself right away on the first day of the conference, as he stayed within the community that he knew best, but eventually felt comfortable to step away:

Second day was a little bit different in that I was breaking away, and I was attending sessions where they had no [our university] students in them. And that was even more enriching because when I ran into them afterwards, we would sit down and talk about "What happened in your session?"

Confidence is a key motivational factor for a graduate student. Our initial feedback focused on building the students' confidence. Pre-course activities of proposal submission and conversations about the conference proposal/presentation process were very helpful to those students—mostly PhD—who saw this as an opportunity for confidence development to present at a professional conference. Melinda explained:

I think the proposal process, which did begin long before the class—that kept me logging onto the website, checking in for answers, checking in for more data, has my proposal been accepted—I believe that for me, that was the carrot throughout the entire process. It was important to have this holding environment, but having been an active participant in the conference as a presenter was really, really exciting.

Developing a sense of professional identity within an academic community is an important aspect of graduate school, especially for those anticipating academic careers. Leadership Studies programs are unique in that they generally include an interdisciplinary focus, bringing students and faculty together to examine issues from a variety of perspectives. Many programs include students (practitioners and academics) from several professional areas: K-12 education, higher education, nonprofit leadership, organizational consulting, to name a few. Interacting with peers whose frame of reference is informed by different professional and personal experiences can enhance the overall learning and engagement level. For example, Allison discussed the importance of developing relationships with her peers as an important step

toward future scholarly engagements:

In spending time with [names of five graduate student peers], I got to hear a lot of their stories, as well as their reflections on the conference, on past conferences, on personal experiences, both good and bad. I found myself drawn to their successes and failures in the program, with other people, with each other . . . . These interactions are the same activities and environments that are necessary for me to have with scholars and other students, to find opportunities to research and write.

Building community within departments and schools is challenging, given the ways academic institutions are traditionally structured. More permeable boundaries within departments and across academic conferences might allow students, especially those from underrepresented groups, to feel supported and encouraged. This was poignantly stated by Azal in his post-conference reflection paper, "Being at the ILA allowed for a unique space to emerge, through which I managed to connect with most of my classmates and faculty members on a 'human' level; not only on an academic one."

**Networking Challenges and Opportunities.** Networking at scientific and professional gatherings requires both affective and cognitive preparedness. Our pre-conference planning activities provided the extended preparations necessary for first-time conference participants, whether graduate students or faculty. Students were encouraged to put thought into their potential network, engaging deliberately and purposefully towards its realization by outlining their networking plan, identifying the kinds of conference participants they would like to network with, and planning ways to make that happen. For some students, networking is a demanding process because the way they interact and communicate does not fit a conference context where formality matters. To address this issue we required that students exchange at least five business cards with people they did not know at the conference. This activity taught them that while it is important to have a purpose for networking, it could be difficult to identify that purpose. Following the conference, some students continued interacting with contacts they had connected with at ILA. Others for the first time wanted to continue with relationships they developed at ILA, such as Melinda who explained how she used this process (course) to her advantage:

At this conference, I was entirely invested and incentivized to continue on with those relationships, shore up those early introductions, follow-up thank-you with the scholars and the researchers who were so kind to share their time with us. And I really went through those materials and reflected upon my experience. I've never done that with any other conference.

Arnie also reflected on the challenges of networking with a purpose. He said,

I'm not somebody who likes to carry around my business card. That's definitely something that I got familiar with: being able to introduce yourself, and to talk about your work. And to do it fairly quickly, and then say, "here's my card."

Arnie continued,

I did establish contacts with people that I would consider to be reliable thought partners. I do have their business cards, and some of them are actually great authors. I bought some of their books and they signed them, and it was great.



Yet, despite their preparedness level, and their efforts to purposefully identify, meet, and establish contacts with scholars, practitioners, and graduate students, students still faced challenges. The major difficulties were related to the students' personality, communication skills, uncertainty about a career path, and ILA conference size and dynamics.

To begin with, the personality type of the students, as revealed during the interviews, operated in many ways. The more introverted benefitted less from networking in bigger sessions. Their personality type was comfortable in a slow, more intimate process, and the conference context was different from what they were accustomed to. It required them to be proactive, bold, and fast, which was difficult for them. For example, one of the students, Meredith, repeatedly mentioned that she doesn't get to know people quickly. For her, connecting to someone is a slow process that seldom happens in a public space.

I am sure there are probably lots of people who felt out of their element at the conference. So probably it was more than less people, but I didn't make connections happen in a natural way. I don't get to know people quickly or easily so these people either through the conference roundtable, or the conversation we had at the beer tour opened up the door for me to exchange information with them. But I am not very good at walking up to a person out of the blue and saying here is my business card and I want to talk to you. You would think it would be easy it is not that difficult.

It appeared that the less extroverted benefitted from the two sessions arranged with Leadership Scholars, Edgar Schein and Jean Lipman-Blumen, which again indicates the importance of implementing pedagogy that caters to diverse needs and learning styles. Students who were too timid to introduce themselves and engage in dyad side-talk were courageous enough to do so at smaller gatherings. Although all students were able to engage in some conversations with scholars who they knew only through the literature, there were at least three students who had more productive conversations with the two people selected for these sessions. These students had the opportunity to engage in a more extended conversation without feeling intimidated, which was useful in their subsequent reading and research.

Meredith described this best:

I didn't get to know anybody at the conference. There were too many people. I don't really operate that way. It may take me some time to get to know someone. But I met a lot of people through Jean Blumen, Edgar Schein. I talked to professors and I have gotten to know them over the years because I have gotten to know their personal research interest better because I went to the different sessions.

Other students echoed the challenge an introvert faces when attempting to make a networking contact. For example, Karen said being awkward and soft-spoken heavily stood in her way to seizing networking opportunities. Understandably, the dissonance between the conference dynamics and one's personality, i.e., the way one presents himself/herself, has implications for networking. Karen said, "I always have to battle, because being soft-spoken, the biggest challenge for me, first day, was probably asking questions when it came to me. It got a lot easier as things went on. That wasn't surprising. That's my own battle." Then she told us that on the second day she was "more conversational; branched out a little more, people I just didn't know; getting coffee, casually introducing myself, talking about the conference."

Identifying a conference participant who could be *worthwhile* to network with, presented another major challenge to a student with limited capability in that area. This might be due to a certain degree of anxiety or being unsure about what they imagined was a worthwhile professional or practitioner. Or it might relate to what some students mentioned about other conference participants being too busy to talk.

Ultimately, networking involves both initiating and sustaining a professional connection. Beginning a conversation is the first step, but as some students discovered, if meaningful conversational topics are lacking, ongoing communication cannot be maintained.

**Disorienting Dilemmas as a Form of Learning.** Learning often occurs as a result of experiences that challenge students' thinking or that provides a disorienting dilemma (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), an experience that often causes some type of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). For example, the challenges of networking outlined above could be considered disorienting to some students who found it difficult, for a variety of reasons, to connect with people they did not know. As previously noted, we attempted to provide as much scaffolding as possible to set students up for success, especially those who had never attended an academic conference. Yet some students reported challenges related to initial confusion about determining where to go and what sessions to attend, and difficulties with the pre-conference class presentations and the final professional development assignment.

Arnie initially struggled while preparing his pre-conference class presentation. But because he was familiar with the work of Mezirow, he was able to use adult learning theory to articulate his own learning:

I want to say that I progressed through this experience, and that this experience did transform me. And I researched Mezirow and I know there was definitely a situation in this class where I was definitely disoriented. And that was when I gave a presentation and I didn't feel very good after it. That was definitely disorienting. So before the conference there was definitely that disorienting dilemma, during the conference I reacted to it, and then after the conference I reflected and I grew from it. I was able to make connections to my own professional life, and my own academic life.

Other students were less familiar with this type of learning, but they understood the importance of conference participation and wanted to benefit from the opportunity for socialization into an academic community. Azal said, "This was a very clear and open invitation to wrestle with the notion of liminality as a transformational experience, where disorientation in one's identity is likely to occur but openness to new ideas and possibilities can transpire."

Doctoral students usually set high expectations with regards to participating in conferences and scholarly communities. We found this to be true among our students who enrolled in the course with a high expectation to benefit from participating in ILA. Despite such a positive sentiment from the beginning, they differed in styles.

Maria shared her experience as an extrovert, and her perceptions of how others took in the experience a bit differently than she did:

I knew I was going to an environment I had never been before. So the learning curve was going to be really high. I also knew that I was going to pay close attention to how people

presented and how they got where they were. I think a lot of people were going hoping to do a lot of networking, but that is usually very organic. It happens on its own. I tend to be [a] very extroverted social person. I just wanted to learn a lot, and I did. I felt like most people by the end of the day I mean they kind of have a glazed look on their face. It was a lot of talking at you.

Others also noticed the *glazed look* that Maria mentioned, but for some it was characterized as bewilderment or struggle with one of the written assignments or work they needed to do at the conference. For example, Jahan told us that creating her professional development plan “drove her crazy.”

She expanded on this:

The plan drove me crazy. It was a great assignment, it really, really was, but it drove me perfectly nutty. Cause I was like, oh my gosh, now I have to integrate everything I just learned and make a plan of where I’m going to be in five years. It was good for me to think about it . . . it needs to mean something, you’ve invested time, energy and money. So I think the assignment drove me crazy while I was doing it, but it was really helpful. And in going forward, I’m thinking about work that I’m doing, and how can this integrate into the other conferences.

For some, the *dilemma* was familiar, as in the case of those who find it difficult to directly meet new people, and therefore find comfort among strangers, especially in an academic setting. For others, the specific assignments provided opportunities to give and receive feedback, but at the same time they caused some anxiety. However, the students all shared how they navigated through these situations and ultimately learned something important about entering a leadership discourse community.

**Validation, Inspiration, and Expanding Notions of Leadership.** In most Leadership Studies graduate programs, students are expected to search continuously for the meaning of leadership, and classrooms are where that search most commonly occurs. When opportunities to expand the search arise outside the classroom setting, the impact can be far-reaching. The course emphasis on intentionality and presence taught the students to be more effortful and conscious about their intentions, and this contributed to their understanding of leadership. This could be seen as a rare, but an important, avenue to learn leadership outside the classroom. The course’s interdisciplinary thrust, its intent to integrate multiple intentions provided opportunities, as well as challenges, to learn about leadership.

Although networking and the conference experience was course participants’ primary engagements, the study of leadership, at both the personal and social levels, was central to their journey toward socialization into the leadership discourse community. The students tried to understand leadership by gathering new insights into topics that personally appealed to them, or by finding professional communities in their field of interest. They learned from others as they engaged in discussions, Arnie stated:

There’s definitely a lot of connections that can be made between the creative arts and leadership and human development. And how art facilitates interaction with people. And how art allows people to see things different, and to reframe their perspectives.

And Azal talked about gaining new insights related to an area he was very interested in,

but had limited exposure to in the past:

So one of the things that I was drawn into was just multiculturalism in leadership. What does that look like? So that was something I never really hear at all. Or the idea of the Arab Spring, or Islam and its relationship to leadership. And there were sessions on that. So in many ways that was something that I definitely started thinking about . . . What does this relationship look like and how can we really apply that in practice? So it was almost like an invitation to start thinking about insights I'm going to be developing in the future.

We learned it is important that faculty provide support, encouragement, and challenging feedback, especially to students whose main identity is that of practitioner, and to those who are new to academia. So as the course progressed, we provided encouragement and gained new insights, and new questions and frustrations about leadership came in a variety of ways that we had not anticipated. For example, several students mentioned feelings of validation when they heard something from a well-known leadership scholar that aligned with what they were studying or learning in their various programs.

Allison stated the following about one of the conference keynote speakers:  
I believe ambassador Joseph was on the first day. He was one of my favorites of the day. I thought he spoke to the things I was passionate about. It validated my career path, and the way I interacted with the world through leadership was really validating.

Allison found resonance in the talk by Ambassador Joseph because he spoke to ideas that she understood, and that were familiar to her. Karen shared a similar experience:

He was talking about leadership, he was mentioning Mandela, his philosophy of leadership . . . that was actually what shaped—a kind of thing showing up in my classes shaped what I wanted to do for my international requirements . . . and just going and seeing the mass amount of people interested in this topic and in this way was also really neat to see. I come from where—hearing about leadership in terms of management, business, and that didn't really ever click for me. Seeing it talked about in many different ways is really interesting.

Similarly, Melinda talked about meeting with a small group of higher education professionals. She felt more comfortable discussing her research within this like-minded community of scholars.

But Melinda also talked about eventually moving outside of her comfort zone of higher education. She said:

It was interesting because there were other presentations that I attended that kind of permeated the boundaries, that permeated my own scholarly research, but touched me on a different level and inspired me—work that's been done in other areas—to really just keep going, keep us balanced, keep us present in the practice.

Still others expressed frustration trying to understand where they fit as scholars, practitioners, or both.

In his final reflection paper Azal pointed out the challenges of finding one's community, either as a scholar, practitioner, or both:

Even on a practical level, the division between academics and practitioners during

sessions or networking events was another clear indicator of the many divides that were present and yet never openly acknowledged at the conference. I was always left wondering: How do we even begin to address such a gap when all ILA members walk around with “starred” name tags to indicate who has more experience before you can even make out their names?

Jahan also shared her frustration with finding her place, as she thinks aloud about where she fits in with the *leadership* community. Seeing others at the conference who had a variety of views and practices of leadership contributed to a somewhat ambiguous response about her learning:

There were people *saying* leadership, or *doing* leadership in various capacities. And it was nice, and something I wasn't expecting. Then you get to see how when people say leadership in their field, that means something different. And in their work that means something different . . . . I don't think that's new but I think that's something that becomes really apparent when you are at a leadership conference that is for all kinds of leaders. I think that in some ways that's really, really helpful and cool. And in other ways, it's like, okay, how do I fit in with this and how do I become a leader in this?

Like any social science discipline, the study of leadership requires complementary and intense engagements outside the classroom. For most of the students, preparation for the ILA conference was both intellectual and practical. They didn't just engage with fellow leadership scholars and practitioners; they also committed themselves to be fully present at the conference as aspiring leadership scholars and practitioners.

Melinda spoke about this:

I think I was finally able to test the boundaries of my experience of leadership, and my personal ownership of my leadership because of this experience and the way my confidence and my capacity and just realization of my own work, developed over time. Students showed a commitment by carefully selecting their areas of interest and preparing to be active participants. Such preparation had both psychological and intellectual elements, and the result could be best expressed as *conscious presence*. By going to the ILA conference, students realized how leadership was embraced and expressed in multiple ways. For most, conference participation meant multiple things: managing anxiety, seeing others manage their anxiety, communication, dealing with physiological and psychological needs, witnessing differences, seeking validation and gaining inspiration.

## Discussion and Implications

Preparing students for conference participation is one area where theory and practice both collide and harmonize. For example, the discourse and practice of networking, presenting, and participating were in some cases contradictory and in other cases compatible. For some students, what we told them about networking was true, while for others it wasn't. Some students benefitted from prior planning, while others got overwhelmed when they tried to implement their plan. Some students found opportunities to make connections between leadership theory and leadership practice, while others were overwhelmed by the inability to make such connections. We learned that to support the socialization of students into discourse

communities required flexibility and allowing for individual differences in learning styles.

This research showed how both course facilitators and graduate students can create intense learning experiences through conscious engagement with others. While our research was grounded in adult and transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), and academic socialization (Austin, 2002; Tierney, 1997), the course can also be seen in terms of experiential learning. Many scholars (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010) emphasize that students learn well when learning is anchored in practical experiences. They emphasize the need to anchor students' experience in the learning process, allow them to reflect on the process, and make meaning of what is possible. Our findings taught us to take individual students into account while creating an interaction that allowed them to engage with themselves and others. We also learned to pay attention to the unique nature of each student's project, interests, and styles of engagement.

Clearly, socialization is imperative to a successful graduate school experience (Clark & Corcoran, 1986). Unlike other models of professional socialization, however, graduate student socialization is unique in that the student is becoming socialized not only to the graduate school environment but simultaneously to a professional role (Austin, 2002; Golde, 1998; Rosen & Bates, 1967). "The socialization that occurs is also specific to the discipline in which the student is located" (Golde, 2005, cited in Gardner, 2010, p. 40). In this course, we generally aimed at the intersection of knowledge about leadership and application of the knowledge in students' efforts to acquire a distinct identity as leadership scholars or practitioners. According to Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), graduate student socialization is specifically mechanized through three core elements: (a) knowledge acquisition—the learning and skills needed for the profession; (b) investment—a commitment of time, energy, or status to the profession; and (c) involvement—including interaction with more advanced professionals.

Like our students, we had our own discernment dilemmas and contradictions. When we were fortunate to offer the same course again, we used the opportunity to rethink our approach, paying attention to our dilemmas and contradictions that surfaced in our initial course. We adjusted our expectations and re-planned activities and time schedules.

By adopting socialization as well as adult and experiential learning perspectives we could create a solid base for integrating theory and practice, for the next time we offered the course. Thus our course moved from in-class activities to field activities, and then back to class activities. The latter then focused on theories of networking, presenting, and engagement with the field activities that translated these theories into practice. The perspective we gained from our research and the literature on socialization guided the field activities, and this became instrumental in systematizing the process of entering one's professional community.

Our journey was partly consistent with what Seemiller and Priest (2015) articulated about the professional identity development of leadership educators that consists of *exploration*, *experimentation*, *validation*, and *confirmation*. As leadership educators we made connections between theory and practice by engaging in this *exploration* about students' conference engagement and socialization. Leadership educators need to engage (and *experiment*) in the scholarship of learning and teaching to enhance the rigor of our work. In this case, *validations*

came from our observations and evaluation of the students' learning, and direct feedback (positive and negative) from students. We then took this feedback to improve the course the following year. Future empirical work could provide *confirmatory* data (or not), perhaps in several years we reach out to the same students to explore the impact of their engagement. In addition, future studies with students from other universities using a similar model could render interesting insights.

We understand that all human/social actions are complex endeavors, with both challenges and opportunities for change and development. Leadership education is no different. The more learning experiences are removed from the classroom, the more students are able to explore ways of merging theory and practice; but without a rigorous pedagogical approach, some students' frustration level may prevent them from acquiring the ability to accomplish the merge. A good pedagogy is one that pushes students to the edge, keeping them moving and overcoming internal forces that frustrate them.

Therefore, we had to learn from the risk of universalizing and generalizing behaviors, processes, and change. The first time we taught the course, our approach was somewhat prescriptive in the sense that we focused on the *dos* and *don'ts*. Although we were cognizant of the need for diversity in approaches, we didn't clearly demarcate our loose-design and tight-design areas. The lesson we drew from that experience was to modify our syllabus for the second class we taught, and accommodate both loose-design and tight-design so that students were not limited by a focus on compliance and procedure. Because we understand that educating for leadership requires exposing students to the possibility of learning in a variety of ways, including by experiencing disorientation, in this course we aspire to manifest our educational vision by guiding students, their peers and faculty, through one professional leadership conference experience.

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