Bridging Theory and Practice in the Leadership Classroom: Intentional Emergence as a Modern Pedagogy

Linnette Werner, Ph.D
Director of the Undergraduate Leadership Minor

David Hellstrom
Instructor Coordinator and Teaching Specialist

Jessica Chung
Curriculum and Instructor Coordinator

Katherine Kessenich
Program Evaluation Coordinator and Teaching Specialist

Leonard Taylor Jr., Ph.D
Research Associate and Teaching Specialist

Anna Capeder
Assistant to the Coordinator

Abstract

With leadership education expanding at an unprecedented rate, there is an acute need for an evidence-based leadership pedagogy that can bridge the gap between leadership theory and student practice both in the classroom and beyond its boundaries. This paper will give an overview of the Intentional Emergence Model as a way to teach leadership to emerging adults that specifically addresses this gap between theory and practice. It will discuss the model, research and evaluation data associated with the model, training requirements for instructors and teaching assistants, and the implications for leadership education as a result of the research on, and application of, the model.

Introduction

While many professional fields have teaching tools and experiences that explicitly bridge theory to practice, the field of leadership education continues to search for a way to best ground theory in practice for its students. This paper presents the theoretical and practical roots of a new model, Intentional Emergence, as an evidence-based pedagogy for teaching leadership in a contemporary world. By the end of this paper, participants will understand how the Intentional Emergence Model addresses the gap between theory and practice, research and evaluation data associated with the model, training requirements for instructors and teaching assistants, and the implications for leadership education.

Review of Related Scholarship

While contemporary models of leadership argue that leadership can be taught and learned, many are unable to address the gap between theory and practice in the classroom. Some appropriate models for teaching leadership to undergraduates have been explored and explicated (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). However, these models primarily identify the ways students develop in their understanding of leadership. Alternatively, particular models identify specific elements of an unidentified general pedagogy, rather than putting forth a comprehensive model. Elsewhere, models and methods for learning about leadership provide useful frameworks, but rarely specific practices for teachers that bridge the gap between learning about theory and integrating theory into practice (Astin & Astin, 1996; Komives, et al., 2011).

Sharon Daloz Parks' seminal text *Leadership* Can *Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (2005) documented an approach used at Harvard Graduate School with mid-career executives called Case-in-Point (CIP) teaching that explicitly acknowledges the need to address the gap between theory and practice. However, while CIP recognizes a need to create curriculum that engages students in developing skills and strategies for practicing leadership in a complex world, the strategies used within CIP are difficult at best to translate from its specific Harvard graduate context to more universal contexts, which require addressing several major differences in student characteristics and experience including: 1) a lack of extensive and shared lived experiences of leadership, 2) students' consumer mindset toward education, 3) often the inattention of large and/or research universities to student development, and 4) the differing places students fall along developmental trajectories.

Description of Practice (Overview of Lesson/Project Plan). The Intentional Emergence (IE) Model for Leadership Education relies on three components (intention, emerging moments, and the alignment of these two) to define the most optimal bridging moments to engage within the classroom.

Intention. The first component of the model, *intention,* may seem deceptively simple because many instructors rely heavily on planning for the class. Such intentional construction of a unit, lesson plan, or assignment is critical to the academic rigor and success of a leadership course, but it is not uncommon that intention falls along the lines of interesting activities or simulations without a deeper scaffolding process from one moment, class, and course, to the next. For example, without intentional scaffolding from one core concept or skillset to the next, students may lose the larger educational goal amidst a sea of disconnected activities. It is the planning (intention) that allows an instructor to answer the most critical question, "To what end?" To what end are we using this simulation? To what end are students conducting interviews of local leaders? To what end will this activity lead us today? Tomorrow? At the end of the experience?

As Figure 1 demonstrates, sources for intention are available to the leadership educator through many planning venues and tools, which create the foundation for intention in the classroom.

Figure 1. Examples of planning sources which create the intentional foundation

Emergence. It is often clear to see how necessary well-scaffolded lesson plans are to moving students along the continuum of development in their understanding and leadership skill-building. However, highly controlled and well-planned lessons are not enough to transform theory into lived practice. The ability to connect content to moments of consequence is where transformation is possible. Emergent moments in the classroom hold the key to this bridge from theory to practice. Jeffrey Goldstein (1999), in the inaugural issue of the Journal entitled *Emergence: Complexity and Organization*, states "Emergence...refers to the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems. Emergent phenomena are conceptualized as occurring on the macro level, in contrast to the micro-level components and processes out of which they arise," (Goldstein, 1999, p.49).

There are three important aspects of this definition to consider in the context of teaching: arising patterns, self-organizing, and macro vs micro levels. The first aspect of this definition to consider is the "arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties," which is the heart of the work. In traditional CIP teaching, people call this working with "the here and now." When instructors create the holding space and set an intention, they actively create space for the work that needs to be addressed by the group. It is the intentional orchestration of these novel and coherent structures that bridges the gap between theory and practice so profoundly.

Second, is the idea that "[e]mergent phenomena are conceptualized as occurring on the macro level, in contrast to the micro-level components and processes out of which they arise," (Goldstein, 1999, p.49). In leadership terms, this would be the idea of the big picture versus the details (or the balcony and the dance floor in terms of Heifetz's (1998) Adaptive Leadership model). Instructors must be able to engage at the micro level (the dance floor) as an authentic member of the community, but our primary responsibility is to be vigilantly aware of the patterns that are emerging at the macro level (the balcony overlooking the dance floor) in order to call these out to the class.

Finally, although Goldstein posits that it is the act of self-organization in complex systems that creates emergence, within teaching, self-organizing is also a result of using what emerges. What follows after the arising and overt identification of patterns, is a process of spontaneous self-organizing around a new level of understanding--it is the bridging of theory to practice.

This spontaneous self-organizing process also surfaces a key element of the IE model and how it differs from classic CIP teaching. While the foundations of both theories are similar and vital to learning (noticing and engaging what is happening in the moment), IE focuses more on what the system *does* with the here and now through organizing, bridging and leading to the *next* moment where effective and compassionate action can be taken.

Figure 2. Examples of sources for emergent moments

Arising Teachable Moments. Instructors who are new to emergent pedagogy can sometimes err too far on the emergence side of the model which leaves students confused as to the larger point of their learning and experiences. However, it is the confluence of intention and emergence that creates the ideal teachable moments in the leadership classroom--those moments where theory and practice are most likely to support long-term changes in default leadership behaviors.
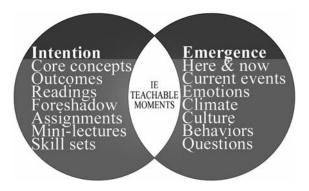

Figure 3. When intention and emergence meet, ideal teachable moments arise

However, not all emerging teachable moments can or should be engaged in the moment they arise. In an average 90 minute course period, there may be a plethora of emergent moments that overlap with the deeper intention for the course and the class period, however, only a few of these moments will be engaged during that time.
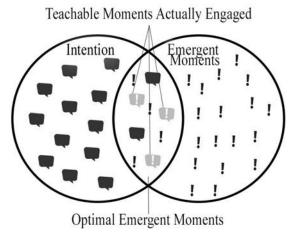
Figure 4. Teaching moments actually engaged

Engaging with these emergent and relevant moments creates a vibrant learning environment, where students are connecting what is happening with larger leadership concepts. At its best, IE helps students make rich connections between theory and practice through various inductive and deductive reasoning activities, adding connections between concepts and students' current mental schema of ideas. Deepening these connections and building them even further allows the learning to "come alive" and be taken from inside the classroom to outside of it. That is the ultimate leadership educator's goal: to take the learning into the world.
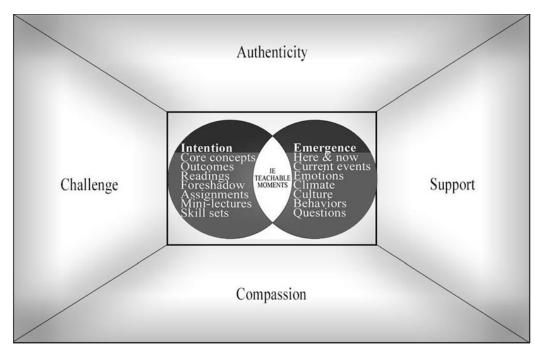

Figure 5. The Intentional Emergence Model

Discussion of Outcomes/Results

Proof of the effectiveness of the IE model comes from an ongoing program evaluation and research initiative. The IE model has nearly a decade of evaluation behind it, through which we have established a culture of curiosity, exploration and ongoing improvement. Through complex survey techniques that embed demographic data into student responses, we are able to identify, better understand and adapt to students' unique needs as well as recognize the nuances across course sections and instructors. We found instructors employing the IE model consistently receive 30% higher student satisfaction ratings over their counterparts. After standardizing the IE model across sections, the gap dissipated, increasing the average course recommendation rate by 10% and the overall course experience by 23%. With 40% of students enrolling in our courses through peer recommendation, the rapid enrollment growth of 15% each year also demonstrates increase in student experience.

Moving beyond student self-report, we adopted a research agenda to better assess the impact of the IE Model on its students. The initial research findings on the IE model also indicate that the model is highly effective in retaining students, persistence toward graduation, and campus engagement when compared to matched samples of peers. For example, students who took even one course using this model of teaching, were six times more likely to be retained their first and second years of college than students who were not exposed to this model ($n=528$, $e^\beta = 6.692$, $B = 1.901$, $p < .001$). A comprehensive analysis of SERU (Student Experience in the Research University) data corroborated these findings. Students who participated in one course using the IE had significantly greater academic engagement ($\beta = .211$, $p < .001$), more engagement in advanced scholarship ($\beta = .129$, $p < .05$), and greater development of an understanding of diversity over their peers ($\beta = .200$, $p < .05$).
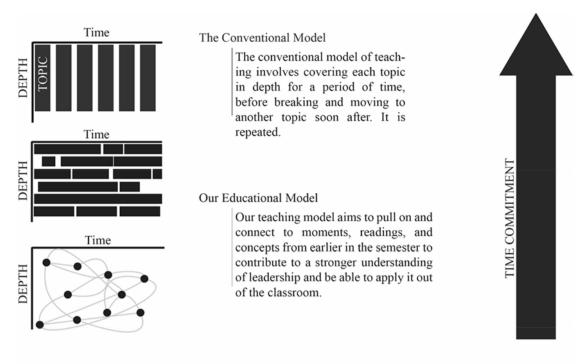
Reflections of the Practitioner

The success of this way of teaching and learning hinges on the quality and ownership of the instructor base. The foundations of IE requires that instructors hold several core practices and assumptions, most of which are opposed to those of the classical education model. As such, instructors must do a lot of unlearning of core assumptions, for example: the expectations we have of the role of a formal authority in facilitating and decision-making, stepping outside of competency and giving control to the students and the moments that emerge, using the class as a metaphor for real moments in the world, and allowing for students to be teachers as well.

As part of this unlearning, a cohort of new instructors proceed through a rigorous nine-month on-boarding process (see Figure 6). For one semester, instructors observe at least 10 class sessions while engaging in monthly trainings that discuss core assumptions like the foundations of students learning, the assumptions we bring about power and authority into the classroom, weaning off our need for complete control and appearance of competency. After a successful teaching demonstration, instructors are placed with a mentor instructor to co-teach for a semester. This immersive training experience allows for new instructors to practice these core tenets and assumptions every day, and how to merge the intention of the curriculum with the daily execution. Here, instructors learn how to make questions about assignment deadlines or attendance policies into leadership lessons and give the work back to the students.

01	Attend a new instructor informational meeting	
	Express Interest in Training (Post-Informational Meeting)	02
03	Purchase and read Leadership Can Be Taught by Sharon Parks	
	Complete Moodle training (lessons, quizzes, and EYL Readings)	04
05	Complete 10 class observations of our 1000 level course	
	Attend 3 Observer Class Trainings throughout the semester	06
07	Apply for the position (U of M system)	
	Complete a successful teaching demonstration and interview for co-teaching position	08
09	Co-teach with 1000 level mentoring instructor	
	Receive observation feedback from Leadership Minor Staff, co-instructor, and evaluations to determine fit with program position.	10
11	Teach a semester without a co-instructor	
	Receive observation feedback from Leadership Minor staff AND evaluations to determine longer term fit with program	12

Summer
Semester 1
End of Semester 1
Semester 2
Semester 3

Figure 6. Instructor Training Process

Even when instructors move into teaching independently, they are invited to continued training sessions with the program. These trainings focus on developing "Instructor Artistry," continuing to develop instructor knowledge about topics like cognitive learning theory, creating strategies to connect concepts and current events, and exploring the impact of instructor identity on authority and power in the classroom. These training opportunities are not only great professional development experiences, but they also aid in creating a robust instructor community. As leadership is a practice, teaching is also a practice, and these trainings offer new ways instructors can keep practicing (see Figure 7 for an example of concepts covered).

The Conventional Model

The conventional model of teaching involves covering each topic in depth for a period of time, before breaking and moving to another topic soon after. It is repeated.

Our Educational Model

Our teaching model aims to pull on and connect to moments, readings, and concepts from earlier in the semester to contribute to a stronger understanding of leadership and be able to apply it out of the classroom.

Connecting Concepts

Through these methods, instructors can choose how much focus and discussion occur around class concepts, current events, and external topics.

In cognitive psychology and studies on learning, connecting new ideas to old ones is critical to having a deep understanding of the concept. The more we can connect between ideas, experiences, examples, the more likely we can take learning from inside the classroom to outside. To do this, instructors have to make many choices about what examples to connect, when, and for how long. In an intentional emergent context classroom, instructors bring in many possibilities and strategies to capitalize on these moments in a variety of ways.

The Slow Burn: The longest and most intentional strategy may last several weeks or the whole semester. Instructors can pull on robust examples throughout, adding new nuances as more leadership concepts are introduced. This adds a contextual and temporal vantage to the discussion which helps students see the longer view and more complex view of an issue.

The Spotlight: There are so many current events to choose from, but perhaps there's a rich example you can ask the class to examine and identify what leadership concepts are present within the issue. For example, what are the different leadership connections we can make to the Flint Water Crisis? This is inductive reasoning, or "bottom up" reasoning, where you take one example and connect to abstract concepts.

The Debrief: Adding a few minutes to a debrief or discussion, instructors may ask students a question to connect what this particular concept "looks like" in different contexts like student organizations, politics, at work. This is deductive reasoning, or "top down" reasoning, taking an abstract concept and making it more concrete.

The Name Drop: the quickest of the four, the instructor may be elaborating on a topic and mention several examples of the concept ranging from moments in class, current events, or other class concepts.

Figure 7. Making it Real: Finding Moments of Connection

In addition to these artistry trainings, the program holds an annual training for all instructors to further cultivate a culture of community, create more consistency by conveying curriculum changes, program updates, and hold specific training sessions on topics like responding to student writing, student mental health, pedagogical training, and more.

In the IE approach, the teaching team often times includes at least one teaching assistant. Teaching assistants are upper-level students who have previously taken the course, and are ready to explore the dimensions of authority, positional power, and facilitation in a classroom setting. As teaching assistants are students currently enrolled in the program, they are familiar with IE, meaning they have already endured the "unlearning" process associated with this model. Even so, teaching assistants benefit greatly from training and planning. The teaching assistant program utilizes a three-pronged training approach, combining the following: program-provided trainings, instructor-provided trainings, and knowledge learned from previous academic and non-academic experiences.

Once a teaching assistant has been placed in the program, training begins. Prior to their appointment, teaching assistants create an individualized Learning Plan, identifying which skills they hope to develop as a result of the experience. In addition, teaching assistants attend an orientation training. Here, teaching assistants are provided basic technical information to reduce the high level of ambiguity, and are encouraged to discuss their concerns, excitement, and questions surrounding the teaching assistant experience.

In contrast to instructors, the majority of teaching assistant training happens on-the-job. For many teaching assistants, this is their first opportunity to be on the "other side" of the classroom. While spending the majority of their time at the macro/balcony level, opportunities for teaching assistant development emerge throughout the semester. As a result, rich conversation topics emerge and the instructor and teaching assistant have the opportunity to identify and develop additional skills as the semester progresses.

Lastly, teaching assistants are encouraged to bring their previous experience into the classroom. As teaching assistants are students in the program, they are familiar with the IE model and teachings of the class. This means teaching assistants are able to challenge and support students as students explore the course content. Additionally, teaching assistants are encouraged to incorporate learnings they've received from other areas of their lives, as this enriches the classroom environment and deepens students' connections.

Recommendations

As leadership education continues to grow in higher education, the next phase is to explore how to effectively scale these courses in a way that maintains the integrity and intention of the curriculum and allows for instructors' authenticity and unique gifts. The work of Rhoads and Tierney (1992) speaks to the necessity of strategic implementation of curriculum on a classroom, instructor, and organizational level. Patterson (2013) offers an updated approach to Rhoads and Tierrney (1992), including an assertion of the need for critical paradigms in leadership development programs. Both of these perspectives are necessary for the effective refinement and expansion of leadership education curriculum. Supporting this teaching method on a large scale should include intentional alignment of content and pedagogy for the classroom

(various support materials in synchronous and asynchronous ways, introduction videos, etc.), commensurate training and support for instructors (using learning management systems, on-going instructor check-ins, etc.) and thoughtful changes to the structures and policies of departments and units where programs are situated.

In future research and investigation, it will be beneficial to continue emphasizing the importance of creating curriculum and teaching practices that focus on student readiness and development. In addition, research on leadership education can do more to engage critical perspectives to explore how issued power and privilege show up in leadership, and how to engage these concepts in leadership education spaces. "A critical stance frames this discussion by outlining clearly the need for professors to retool their teaching and courses to address issues of power and privilege - to weave social justice into the fabric of educational leadership curriculum, pedagogy, programs, and policies" (Brown, 2004, p. 78). It is not enough to meet the need for offering "sexy" leadership courses in traditional formats of lecture and case studies. Rather, leadership educators should be working to introduce diverse and critical perspectives to balance the skills of challenge and support in IE.

Beyond the scope of this single University, an area to explore would be partnering with other institutions and programs with similar aims and principles to expand this foundation-shifting leadership education work. As the world, specifically the United States, is increasingly divisive and ambiguous, it is also imperative that this framework of leadership with compassion, community, cultural inquiry, and adaptability at its center becomes more prevalent.

References

Astin, H., & Astin, A. (1996). *A social change model of leadership development: Guidebook.* Los Angeles: University of California Education Research Institute.

Goldstein, J. (1999). Emergence as a construct: History and issues. Emergence: Complexity and Organization, 1(1), 49–72.

Heifetz, R. (1998). Leadership without easy answers (1st ed.). Boston: Harvard University Press.

Komives, S.R., Dugan, J.P., Owen, J.E., Slack, C., Wagner, W., & National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs (2011). *The handbook of student leadership development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Komives, S.R., Longerbeam, S.D., Owen, J.E., Mainella, F.C., & Osteen, L. (2006). A leadership identity development model: Applications from a grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(4), 401-418.

Parks, S.D. (2005). *Leadership* can *be taught: A bold approach for a complex world.* Boston: Harvard Business School.

Wheatley, M. (2006). Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Author Biographies

Linnette Werner started working with the Leadership Minor in 2001, when she was asked to join the teaching staff of the newly created program. Dr. Werner has a background in Educational Policy and Administration, research and evaluation, teaching, the arts, and leadership.

David Hellstrom works as a Teaching Specialist in the Leadership Minor at the University of Minnesota. In addition to teaching, David focuses on curriculum development and instructor training. David's work with Dr. Linnette Werner helped create the Engaging Young Leader's training that highlights the Intentional Emergence Model developed at Minnesota.

Jessica Chung was first connected with the Leadership Minor in 2011 and now develops robust instructor training and curriculum to help create an ever-evolving, experiential leadership education classroom for students in the Leadership Minor.

Kate Kessenich leads the department's program evaluation efforts to inform data-driven decision-making, strategic planning and the development of its programs. Additionally, she teaches both the Introductory and the Social Enterprise course. Passionate about systems-thinking and community and economic development, Kate strives to strengthen cross-sector collaboration to solve complex social issues.

Leonard Taylor's work with the Leadership Minor is focused on developing enhanced approaches to addressing issues of power, privilege, and systems of oppression in leadership education curriculum. He is particularly focused on how to strategically and sustainably institute curricular changes. He is dedicated to creating change on individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Anna Capeder, an alumna of the Leadership Minor, joined the University of Minnesota's Undergraduate Leadership Minor staff in 2015. In the Assistant to the Coordinator role, Anna oversees the Teaching Assistant process, course scheduling process, office/administrative projects, events and Leadership Minor Associates.