Teaching Leadership to First-Year Students in a Learning Community

Afsaneh Nahavandi, Ph.D.
Professor of Management and Associate Dean of University College
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ
anahavandi@asu.edu

Abstract

This paper discusses a model for teaching leadership to first-year students as part of a learning community. It outlines the purpose and structure of the course and presents ideas for how different disciplines could be combined with leadership in learning communities. Teaching leadership to first-year students as part of a learning community instead of a stand-alone course has two distinct advantages. First, when leadership is taught at the freshman level, the early introduction of the topic allows for the possibility of repetition and reinforcements of the concepts, both of which are essential to learning. Second, by teaching leadership in a learning community, instructors and students are able to apply and integrate the concepts of leadership with other areas, thereby increasing learning and retention.

Theoretical Base

Leadership scholars and educators generally agree that leadership can be taught and learned (Doh, 2003; Nahavandi, 2006). While some traits and abilities are required for effective leadership (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991), most leadership behaviors and skills that allow leaders to be effective can be developed over time and with practice (Bass, 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 1995). As a result of this assumption, we teach leadership too many individuals at various levels of organizations and through many courses that are part of the university curricula (Pennington, 2005). Particularly, managerially and executive-oriented leadership courses, workshops, and self-help materials are abundant (e.g., Collins, 2001). A review of curriculum offered at private and state colleges and universities conducted by the author suggests that the large majority of leadership courses are aimed at junior and seniors and graduate students, most often in professional programs such as business, public administration, and education. As a matter of fact, the only discipline outside of the latter that addresses leadership consistently is Political Science where the focus appears to be more on the study of political leadership rather than on the teaching of leadership skills. As compared to upper-division curricula that may offer leadership, the lower-division curricula is filled with general studies courses; the study of leadership at that level is delegated to co-curricular activities such as student clubs and leadership and service learning

(for and excellent example of blending the teaching and practice of leadership in student organizations see Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998; for an example of service learning see Hoover & Webster, 2004). Interestingly, some small liberal arts colleges and religious-based institutions (e.g., Peace College, Austin College, Regent University, Marietta College, Williams College, Baylor University) provide leadership minors or certificates aimed at undergraduates, sometimes integrating such programs with their freshmen orientation. Otherwise, teaching leadership to undergraduate students, although often mentioned as important, is not a widely established practice.

Teaching leadership primarily at the higher levels goes against the basic principles of learning that suggest that skills should be taught as early as possible and repeated and practiced often for learning to occur (Kolb, 1984). If we want our students to understand leadership, learn the necessary skills, and become effective leaders, we should teach them leadership early and often rather than late and in a single course towards the end of their undergraduate education, or only as part of their graduate education. Additionally, as is the case with acquiring any knowledge or learning any skills, students find coherence and can learn better when topics are integrated (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). One common method used to provide such integration at the undergraduate level is First-Year Learning Communities (FLCs), some variants of which are called Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS) (for some examples see Minor, 1997; Rodriguez, Sen, & Boyette, 2003; Schroeder, Minor, & Tarkow, 1999). Typically, FLCs combine two or more courses through a variety of mechanisms such as co-taught and integrated classes, following common themes, shared assignments, or other faculty and student cooperation (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Jones, Laufgraben, & Morris, 2006; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The overall goals of FLCs are to create a structure where students can comfortably interact with faculty and with one another, provide them with integrated topics and concepts that would otherwise be perceived as unrelated, and do so in a small scale that creates a sense of community (Gabelnick, et al., 1990).

Although there are some inconsistent findings and differences in the degree of impact of FLCs on different groups of students, FLCs have been shown to increase understanding and learning (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006). Some research suggests that being part of FLCs is related to better GPAs, higher retention, higher engagement, and higher graduation rates (Baker & Pomerantz, 2001; Gammill, Hansen, & Tinkler, 1992; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2005; Zhao & Kuh, 2005). Teaching leadership in a FLC to first-year students can therefore provide several benefits. First, students experience leadership not as an independent topic, but as one that can be applied to a variety of settings and disciplines. Second, in- and out-of-class frequent interactions with faculty allow for rich discussion of concepts. Third, students are exposed to leadership early in their undergraduate education, and finally, through the integration provided by the FLC, students can better learn the concepts. Additionally, being part of a FLC provides students with many non-academic social benefits such as a sense of

belonging and the opportunity to develop friendships, topics that are beyond the scope of this paper.

This paper presents a tested model for teaching leadership to first-year students as part of a first-year learning community (FLC), integrated a with general education requirement. The course has been taught and tested for two years with considerable success. The paper specifically suggests that teaching leadership in a first-year learning community has two distinct advantages over typical coverage of the topic. First, leadership is taught at the freshman level allowing for early introduction and the possibility of repetition and reinforcement, both of which are essential to understanding leadership and developing necessary skills. Second, by teaching leadership in a learning community with another course, as opposed to offering it in a stand-alone class, instructors and students are able to apply and integrate the concepts of leadership with other areas, thereby increasing understanding and retention (Komives, et al., 2005).

Intended Audience

Any instructor of leadership who has an interest in undergraduate education and is willing to experiment with new teaching structures can find a teaching partner and acquire administrative support to create a FLC. While the learning community model has been primarily used in teaching first-year classes (e.g., Dabney, Green, & Topalli, 2006), co-taught and linked classes have been used effectively in many other levels and settings (Hotchkiss, et al., 2005; James, et al., 2006). The class described in this paper is intended for first-year students. It is combined with an early American history class. Students in the class came from all colleges and majors. Whether it is offered as a pilot program or part of an on-going FLC program, combining leadership with another course is viable, practical, and beneficial to students.

Learning Objectives and Outcomes

The FLC included three separate sets of learning outcomes: outcomes for the FLC, outcomes for the leadership course, and outcomes for the history course. The first two are presented below. Specific objectives for the leadership component of the FLC were:
- Identify the key elements of leadership.
- Discuss the role of contextual, historical, and cultural factors in leadership behavior and effectiveness.
- Understand power and its role in leadership.
- Understand the processes involved in effective leadership.
- Develop self-awareness and identify personal strengths and weaknesses in regards to leadership.

The learning outcomes for the FLC included:
- Gain a better understanding of the historical, cultural, and contemporary significance of leadership.
- Learn theoretical models of leadership.
- Develop an appreciation of our own potential to use leadership to better the communities in which we find ourselves.
- Provide a supportive environment that helps new college students develop a community of fellow scholars.
- Introduce students to many of the resources available on campus.
- Develop and intellectually challenging curriculum for students and faculty, one that draws connections between varied coursework and enables students to see their education holistically rather than as a set of disparate, required courses.

The leadership class addressed typical learning outcomes of most leadership courses focusing on understanding leadership, its complexity, the processes involved in leading, and its theoretical foundations, and developing self-awareness related to leadership skills and abilities. In addition to these specific goals, the FLC allowed for application and integration of these concepts to a much higher degree than in a stand-alone class. While the FLC presented in this paper combined history and leadership, a particularly appropriate match, leadership can easily be combined with other general studies courses such as communication, psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology just to mention a few (see Table 1). By its very nature, the topic of leadership allows for application to and integration with a wide variety of other topics. Combining leadership with history allowed for an in-depth analysis of leadership in a historical context and for integration by analyzing historical leaders' styles and actions, applying leadership theory. A leadership course combined with any of the other topics would provide an equally rich, but different integration. For example, a communication-leadership FLC would focus on communication patterns of leaders. A political science-leadership FLC would consider political rather than historical leaders while an anthropology-leadership FLC would highlight the key role of culture in defining and understanding leadership. The possibilities for offering a FLC with leadership as one of its components are only limited by the instructors' creativity and ability to integrate their own discipline with another.

Table 1. Suggestions for leadership-based FLCs

FLC partners	*Possible Themes*
Leadership and history	Analysis of historical leaders and their effectiveness
Leadership and psychology	The nature-nurture debate Role of personality in leadership Leadership in small groups
Leadership and sociology	Leaders and society Role of leadership in societal structures Leadership and deviance
Leadership and political science	Political leadership Analysis of political leadership
Leadership and communication	Role of communication in leadership Key communication skills for leaders Cross-cultural communication differences Language of leadership
Leadership and criminal justice	The role of leadership in the criminal justice system Role of leadership in criminal activities
Leadership and anthropology	The role of culture in leadership Cultural differences in who is a leader and who is considered to be effective
Leadership and English literature	Leadership through literature Study of various texts and how leadership is presented and experienced
Leadership and philosophy	The existence of leadership The classical view of leadership Philosophical and ethical challenges of leadership

In the case of the history-leadership FLC presented here, the leadership instructor relied heavily on examples of historical leaders discussed in the history class, while the history instructor shifted the focus of the history course towards an analysis of leaders in addition to consideration of social, cultural, and contextual factors. Students learned about how definitions of effective leadership depend on the context, particularly the followers. They became aware of the impact of culture, social, and environmental factors in determining leader behaviors. They also gleaned knowledge about what may be considered universal leadership concepts, for example attention to followers and to accomplishing the task. The study of history along with leadership allowed concepts such as this to be discussed through examples and situations with which students were already familiar. Other learning communities would allow a different focus. Regardless of which combinations of classes are used to create a leadership FLC, the goal of

presenting and discussing leadership in context, rather in a vacuum can be achieved.

Preparation and Materials

One of the keys to the success of any FLC is how the instructors prepare for the course and the degree to which they become familiar with the material from their partner's course. Shapiro and Levine (1999) suggest that faculty must invest time and commit to plan and prepare their courses together to achieve the appropriate level of integration. In the case presented here, the leadership instructor completed all the readings for the history course, with particular focus on the biography of leaders prior to developing her own syllabus. Similarly, the history instructor reviewed the leadership material assigned to students. This preparation led the instructors to be fully aware of the goals, concepts, and contents of their partner's course and integrate the two topics in a seamless way. Both instructors used materials that they would have used in stand-alone classes adjusting them to reflect the learning outcomes of the FLC. For instance, the leadership instructor included readings and topics that were broader than a typical business curriculum leadership course. To that end, specific readings from philosophy, sociology, and political science were added to the "pure" business and managerially-oriented readings. For example, students read essays by Plato, Aristotle, and Tolstoy in addition to articles by McGregor Burns and Bass (see Table 2). The materials used for the leadership course included:

- Wren, J. T. (1995). *The Leader's Companion: Insights on Leadership through the Ages*. New York: The Free Press. This book consists of series of relatively brief readings from management, social sciences, and the humanities.
- *Life Style Inventory (LSI) Booklet* by Human Synergistics International. This on-line leadership style assessment survey is engaging and thorough enough to let students gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses as leaders.
- Additional readings from academic journals and the popular press with a focus on *The New York Times* for current events and examples provided further opportunity for application of concepts.

Table 2. Leadership Course Outline

PART I: LEADERSHIP BASICS

What is leadership	The cry for leadership (W: Gardner)
	The crisis of leadership (W: MacGregor Burns)
	Lead softly, but carry a big baton (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/48/baton.html)
Images of leadership exercise	The historical and contemporary context of leadership (W: Wren & Swatez)
	Leadership and democracy (W: Cronin)
Definition of	Servant leadership (W: Greenleaf)

leadership	Thinking and learning about leadership (W: Cronin)
	The meaning of leadership (W: Bass)
	Natural leader;
	(http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/41/sharpnack.html)
	Current events in NYT
Culture and Leadership	Cultural constraints in management theory (W: Hofstede)
	News analysis: It's the culture
	(http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/73/nyt.html)
	Current events in NYT
Historical views of leadership	Concepts of leadership: The beginnings (W: Bass)
	Rulers and generals are "History's slaves" (W: Tolstoy)
	The Republic (W: Plato)
	Current events in NYT
	Politics (W: Aristotle)
	How princes should keep faith (W: Machiavelli)
	Tao Te Ching (W: Lao-tzu)
	Current events in NYT

PART II: ELEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP - The Leader and the Situation

Understanding the leader: Individual characteristics and self-awareness	LSI booklet
	Are you marked for greatness?
	(http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/41/greatness.html)
Self-awareness	LSI booklet
	Leadership: Do traits really matter (W: Kirkpatrick & Locke)
	Current events in NYT
Leadership skills	The art form of leadership (W: Bennis)
	#49: What it means to think critically (W: Brookfield)
	Leadership lessons from a rock climber
	(http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/77/rockclimber.html)
	Current events in NYT
Power	Power, influence, and influence tactics (W: Hughes et. al.)
	The five most powerful ways to annoy others
	(http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/68/hrubin.html)
	What if Carly were a man?
	(http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/57/ganders.html)
	Current events in NYT
Followers	Leaders and followers (W: Gardner)
	In praise of followers (W: Kelley)
	Superleadership (W: Manz and Sims)
	Current events in NYT
The task	Leading in hard times
	(http://pf.inc.com/articles/2001/11/23643.html)
	Low cost ways to build employee commitment

(http://pf.inc.com/articles/1999/12/16412.html)
Current events in NYT

PART III: CONTEMPORARY THEORIES

Contingency models   Contemporary leadership theory (W: Chemers)
                       Current events in NYT
Charismatic and   Transactional and transforming leadership (W: MacGregor
transformational   Burns)
leadership   Beyond the charismatic leader (W: Nadler and Tushman)
                       Attention class
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/53/teaching.html)
                       Visionary leadership (W: Sashkin)
                       Feedback: Things leaders do
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/83/open_thingsleader
                       sdo.html)
                       Current events in NYT

PART IV: DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

Leadership in action   Leadership jazz (W: DePree)
                       Redefining leadership (W: McFarland et. al)
                       A visionary and his limits
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/78/edlet.html)
                       Current events in NYT
Ethics and   Moral leadership (W: MacGregor Burns)
leadership   Moral development (W: Prince)
                       Ethics: Ask a first-grader
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/83/dispatch.html)
                       Current events in NYT
Ethics and   Messages from the environment (W: Ciulla)
leadership   Ethical common ground (W: Kidder)
                       Five ways to jump start your company's ethics
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/75/5ways.html)
                       Current events in NYT
LSI: Revisited   Leap of faith
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/57/skydiving.html)
                       Grassroots leadership
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/47/militaryacademy.
                       html)
                       Rule #3: Leadership is confusing as hell
                       (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/44/rules.html)

PART V: COURSE INTEGRATION AND PRESENTATIONS
Poster presentations

In addition to business and political current examples, the leadership instructor consistently referred to leaders that students were discussing in their history course. For example, John Winthrop the early American colonist and Massachusetts' first governor and Anne Hutchinson, the banished religious leader, both presented excellent examples of task-oriented leaders whose single-minded focus on their goal often overshadowed consideration of their followers' needs and desires. Similarly, examples of transformational leaders such as John Proctor (so aptly portrayed by Daniel Day Lewis in the film version of the Crucible which was shown in the history course) were also easy to find and could be used to integrate the two courses.

Course Outline and Assignments

The leadership course in the FLC was divided into five parts detailed in Table 2. Students had a midterm and final examination in both courses and while the dates for the exams were coordinated, each instructor tested students on the materials presented in her class. The research paper and presentation for the two courses were fully integrated (see Table 3). The research paper for the history (HIS) course centered on a biography of a leader from early American history. Once the biography was developed, students analyzed the same leader's style for their paper in the leadership course. Both instructors received both parts of the paper; each graded the assignment for her course. The last few sessions of the class were jointly held for students to make one poster presentation that integrated their knowledge from both courses (see Table 3).

Table 3. Course Assignments

LEADER ANALYSIS PAPER

The leadership analysis constitutes your research paper for the semester. It should be between five to seven pages long (you may have additional appendices and exhibits as needed.)

Your leader analysis is based on the leader biography that you will develop for the HIS class. Once you have completed your biography, you are to analyze the leader's style based on the concepts you have learned in this leadership class. To conduct and write your leader analysis, you <u>must </u>rely on <u>leadership theories and concepts. </u>This is your chance to apply the theories you have learned about how a leader functions. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate your understanding of the leadership theories and your ability to apply them. The information you have collected for the biography should be used in your analysis.

Your paper is due on the day of your poster presentation.

POSTER PRESENTATION

At the end of the semester, you will prepare a poster presentation of your analysis. We will have joint classes with the HIS class and each of you will only present one poster. Therefore, the poster will present information from <u>both</u> your management and your history course: the biography of the leader you have selected and the analysis of his/her leadership style. http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters/index.html has information regarding preparation of effective poster presentations.

The poster will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Appearance

1. Display attracts viewer's attention.

2. Words are easy to read from an appropriate distance (3-5 feet).

3. Poster is well organized and easy to follow.

4. Graphics and other visuals enhance presentation.

5. The poster is neat and appealing to look at.

Content

6. Content is clear and easy to understand.

7. Leadership theory is clearly presented.

8. Leadership style is clear.

9. Evidence is presented on poster.

10. Poster is free of unnecessary detail.

11. There is a good balance between history and leadership

Presentation

12. Presenter is well prepared.

13. Presenter's response to questions demonstrated knowledge of subject matter and project.

14. Presenter is able to explain leadership model and provide evidence for style.

15. Overall, this was a good poster presentation.

Results

The history-leadership FLC has been offered twice with considerable success. The teaching evaluations and written and informal student comments strongly indicate that students enjoy not only each class separately, but clearly "get" the point of integrating the two topics. Combining the courses make leadership concepts approachable and understandable as well as relates history to contemporary and current issues. One student stated that he wished he could take more of his courses in a learning community because it allowed him to really grasp the material. During an informal dinner at the end of each semester, students expressed similar ideas. They were able to relate the leadership concepts to current political leaders and apply both their new-found historical and leadership knowledge. One student stated that she felt she could understand current leaders better since she was able to analyze the leadership style of historical figures. These comments suggest that the FLC achieved its goal of integrating the two topics and provided students with a solid understanding of leadership.

As is the case with any learning community, this FLC required added preparation from both instructors and active cooperation for adjusting assignments and visiting each other's classes on a regular basis. Instructors also discussed teaching philosophies and expectations. The added preparation was most noticeable the first time the course was taught. However, balancing the added preparation was the many benefits of having a teaching partner. The two instructors were able to discuss and brainstorm concepts, topics, and methods, or flag problems to each other, whether it was students being confused or poor performance. They also were able to cover for each other when one was absent for personal or professional reasons. Overall, while the teaching partnership took some investment, the instructors found it highly rewarding.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Two years of working with first-year students in a leadership-history FLC show that 18 and 19 year old students are able to grasp and apply the concepts of leadership theory. While many of the concepts are abstract, and much of the traditional management and psychology-based research in leadership is somewhat esoteric and may be hard for students who have had neither research methods nor statistics courses to fully comprehend, a simple presentation of such concepts when done in context is fully within their grasp. The integration with a history course – it can be any number of other topics – allows leadership to be taught in a context and offers accessible examples and application that make the abstract leadership concepts understandable. While based on review of declared majors, other data collected regarding career interests and discussions during the first day of class, few of our first-year students state a strong interest in leadership or in history either as a topic or as a major. Their comments in formal student evaluations and informal discussions at the end of the semester indicate an increased interest in both topics. Making the link between the two disciplines

makes each more meaningful and discussing leadership and history becomes part of their regular communication.

Since leadership is introduced in a freshman course, it is important to provide students who have an interest in the topic with curricular and co-curricular options to continue developing their skills and interests. In our case, the business school offers a four-course concentration in leadership. Leadership courses are also offered as part of the recreation and tourism program and are a component of organizational studies minor in psychology. Students therefore have several avenues for continuing their leadership education. As has been noted by several researchers (e.g., Pennington, 2005), most colleges and universities offer a broad selection of leadership courses in many different disciplines. Students should be reminded that an early leadership course is only the first step in their development of leadership knowledge and skills and they should be encouraged to continue their studies through coursework and practical applications.

The research on learning communities suggests that they are excellent learning environments for many students. In addition to the integration of knowledge, students develop a sense of community and friendship, both of which are college success factors beyond the scope of this paper. The focus of this paper is on how to teach leadership better and more often. The FLC presents a viable and effective method to introduce leadership concepts early within a context that encourages students to apply those concepts in a structured environment. Future research could compare student learning outcomes for stand-alone leadership classes and leadership taught in a FLC; compare such learning outcomes for leadership when combined with a variety of other topics in FLCs; and, track interest in the topic of leadership by considering other courses students take during their undergraduate education after participating in FLC.

Leadership does not suddenly develop when our students reach middle management. The complex set of traits, skills, and behaviors required for effective leadership demand early development and practice; the earlier the better, so let us teach them leadership early and often.

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Biography

Afsaneh Nahavandi is a professor of management at Arizona State University's School of Global Management and Leadership. She is currently associate dean of the University College at ASU.   Her areas of teaching and research are leadership, teams, and culture. She has published numerous articles in those areas and is the author of several books, including a best selling leadership textbook now in 4th edition.