Leadership Education and Experience in the Classroom: A Case Study

Douglas R. Lindsay, Ph. D.
Lieutenant Colonel and Assistant Professor
Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership
United States Air Force Academy, CO
douglas.lindsay@usafa.edu

Anthony M. Hassan, Ed. D.
Major and Assistant Professor
Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership
United States Air Force Academy, CO

David V. Day, Ph. D.
Woodside Professor of Leadership and Management
University of Western Australia
david.day@uwa.edu.au

Abstract

This paper examines the core academic leader development course at the United States Air Force Academy. The course serves as the foundation for individual leader development that is integrated across all four years of the student's education. The basic approach uses a self-study where the student selects a current leadership role and that role serves as a common frame of reference for the entire course. Assessment strategies such as self-study, journaling, leadership application exercises are intentionally developed to integrate the classroom education into their leadership role. Through this integration the student is able to apply the leadership education real time as they have a current, relevant context in which to apply the material. Initial response to the course has been positive from both the students and the faculty. Future data collection is planned to determine the actual impact of the experience on relevant leadership outcomes.

Introduction

Recent authors have extolled the virtues of practical application to the academic study of leadership (Blackwell, Cummins, Townsend, & Cummings, 2007; Posner, 2009). In fact, several authors assert that without practical experience to connect the education obtained from leadership courses then little may be gleaned from these programs (e.g., Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003; Day, 2000;

Roberts, 2008). Whereas leadership education is important, it is only one part of a larger, ongoing leader development process (Day, 2000; Kezar, et al., 2006). Unfortunately, in much of the extant leadership education students learn the academic material and then much later in their program they will apply the material in the form of a practicum or senior project (Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arensdorf, 2006). In terms of longer term application, it is either hoped or assumed that the lessons learned will transfer to future leadership situations (DiPaolo, 2008; Williams, Townsend, & Linder, 2005). This is understandable given the limited time frame for a leadership course, but it should not be taken as the only or best way to teach leadership. A question addressed in this article is how can leadership educators balance the academic material of a formal classroom course (i.e., theory, models, and research) needed to provide a solid foundation of leadership education for the student and the need for applied practice within the limited time frame (i.e., a semester) of a leadership course. This will be done through the examination of a core leadership course taught at the United States Air Force Academy. The paper will (a) describe the background and basic framework of the course, (b) address the balance of education versus practical application, and (c) offer preliminary results and implications for individual leader development.

Background

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is a four-year undergraduate institution established in 1954 with the mission to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character who are motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to the nation. As part of that mission all cadets are required to complete an academic course on leadership in their junior year. The focus of the course is on their personal leadership development. Within that focus, there are three primary objectives – (a) understand conceptually the behavioral science and leadership concepts that are fundamental to leadership development, (b) improve the student's interpretation and analysis of various leadership situations, and (c) improve the student's ability to facilitate their own leadership development. This is a tall task within the scope of one semester; however, the approach is not unique to this particular course. What makes this course unique is how it is delivered in terms of taking into account the personal context of each student while tailoring the learning to the needs of each respective student.

At stake here is the critical balance between the academic content of leadership and the applied nature of its actual application. If you offer one without the other then the student will get an unrealistic picture of the leadership dynamic. One way to try and balance these competing processes is along the lines of the Scientist-Practitioner model where the focus is on ensuring that there are opportunities to apply theory to practice within academic programs (e.g., Lindsay, Tate, & Jacobs,

2008; Murphy & Saal, 1990). Many leadership educators and researchers agree with this combination (e.g., Connaughton, et al.., 2003; Doh, 2003; Kayes, 2002; Van Velsor, Moxley, & Bunker, 2004). While it makes sense to use such an approach, a question to consider is what that would look like on a day-to-day basis within the context of the leadership classroom.

Prince (cited in Connaughton, et al., 2003) offered a framework suggesting how this could be done, which was adopted for use at USAFA in the leadership course. He presented four criteria that leadership development programs should consider. The first is to make sure that the teaching methods line up with the desired outcomes. This implies that we have specific outcomes to which we are trying to teach. Therefore, if we are concerned with the practical application of the material, then our pedagogy ought to line up with our course objectives. Second, he suggested that we need to create opportunities that will allow the students to apply the knowledge to their lives and grasp the consequences of their actions or inaction. This means that instead of leaving students up to their own devices and experiences, that we are intentional about these experiences and how students will experience them. Therefore, more involvement by us as educators beyond the traditional classroom walls is required. The third criterion is that there must be some sort of reflection in this process that involves the faculty. This implies a partnering with the student in their developmental process. Roberts (2008) provides a description of how reflection can be added into the classroom environment. Finally, the students must have multiple learning opportunities. This means a varied approach to not only the teaching of leadership itself, but in how we assess their learning and create developmental experiences based on the assessment findings during their leadership education. These criteria help set the stage for how an academic leadership course can manage this balance between academic theory and practical application.

Implementation and Assessment

This balance between theory and application is addressed on day one of the course as part of the first class assignment. Specifically, students are required to identify a leadership position that they currently hold and use that as the referent for the rest of the course. This could be a formal leadership position or it could be a different position such as a team captain, student club, or community project. Everything that is taught subsequently and all of the assessments take into account that frame of reference. Since many students taking part in leadership education are at early stages of their respective careers, the only frame of reference that they may have is of being a student, what is provided them in our course (e.g., case studies), or from limited work experience. Ignoring this fact means missing out on an opportunity to connect with the students in their current context. By having them select a current leadership role, we help them make these connections. This

is important. As Connaughton et al. (2003) suggested, often leadership is discussed in abstract terms, when in reality, the practice of leadership occurs within a specific context. Accordingly, if we are to educate students on leadership, we must account for their current context (Conger & Toegel, 2003). In addition to this idea of context, Doh (2003) suggested that in order to effectively teach leadership, the methods and programs must be adapted to the specific needs, attitudes, and circumstances of the students. This again indicates that we need to meet the students and connect with them where they are developmentally and then provide them the education and experiences that will help them in their individual leader development. In doing so, the students will become active participants in the leadership experience. The following assessments are used to facilitate this developmental process.

Self Study

Once a leadership position is selected, the students engage in a self study process. The self study approach is used in place of typical case study analysis. Although case studies add value in encouraging students to analyze a particular scenario and diagnose what went wrong, what went right, and so forth, the potential limitation is that students are expected to put themselves into an artificial situation in which they may have little or no experience. Thus, the overarching concern is that they may not be able to relate to the actual constraints and contextual nuances of the situation (i.e., being a CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation). According to Day (2000), research shows that there is relatively weak transfer of the lessons learned from classroom development programs unless they are linked more directly to experience such as with some form of action learning. With the self study approach cadets take the leadership situation which they identify early in the course and use it in an action learning type of process. Whereas action learning typically takes place in a group format within a specific academic or organizational context, the current leadership course adopts an individual-level approach using the context of a currently held leadership position. Therefore, the learning that takes place in the classroom is applied in real time within a personally meaningful context (as with action learning) that is reflected upon through self study. Cadets work on the self study throughout the semester. At the end of the course they write a reflection paper highlighting issues such as what course content they implemented in their leadership position, reflections on what went well or not so well, and developmental experiences they encountered and used to practice their leadership skills.

Leadership Application Exercises

In addition to the self study, cadets complete several leadership application exercises that are focused at the personal and interpersonal levels. First, they do an analysis that consists of a personal reflection regarding their personality. This

assignment is referred to as – "Who are you." This process allows cadets to generate information about how they see themselves and what they bring to the particular leadership situation. This is based on the idea of who you are determines how you lead (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). They next gather 360-degree feedback from cadets who include superiors, peers, and subordinates that are directly affected by their current leadership position. They take this information and then process it in the form of a reflection paper. In addition to this reflection, they examine any differences that existed between their self assessment and the 360-degree feedback. Finally, they take the information from the self assessment and peer feedback and use it to develop an individualized leader development plan. Once this plan is developed, they implement the plan and this serves as a critical component to the self study that was referenced earlier. This framework allows the instructor to guide each cadet through the entire developmental process. The instructor therefore takes on more of a coaching role in which they provide the student feedback throughout the semester regarding their progress and development in their current leadership position. In this way the cadets do not consider leader education in isolation or in reference to someone else (i.e., case study). It is in their life, therefore they own the experience. This process of analysis models for the student how they can apply the material to future leadership positions.

Journaling

Another technique used in the classroom to help apply the material is through a process of reflection and journaling in hopes of shifting mental models about leadership and its relevance to personal development. This has the advantage of having the student think about the material in a deeper way than is possible within the relatively sterile classroom context. This is an important skill to develop in that reflection is thought to be a key competency needed for leaders to be effective, especially in more complex and multicultural settings (Roberts, 2008). The primary challenge is for the instructor to create appropriate reflection questions that not only address the course content, but also tie into the application exercises and personal experiences of the student. Cadets participate in a journaling process throughout the entire semester with the hope of it continuing beyond the end of the term.

Results

The results from the course have been mainly qualitative to date. The feedback from instructors has been overwhelmingly positive. They feel that they are making meaningful breakthroughs with the students and that the classroom discussions are richer and more varied due to the students' application of the material outside the classroom. Instructors also feel that the classroom dynamic

has pushed them both personally and professionally to be more engaging and to sharpen skills such as facilitation and feedback giving. Since students bring their personal experiences into the classroom, this allows for a different type and deeper level of processing of the material. This process has also had a similar effect on the instructors. Many have reported an increase in their own development as instructors and leaders.

From the students' perspectives the results have been equally as compelling. End of course critiques show that students found it easier to apply the material outside of the classroom since the focal experiences were personalized in the course. In addition, they state that they see clearer connections between the material and its future application to their lives. They also report a greater value of a reflective assessment strategy rather than one based on more objective means (i.e., tests of knowledge on leadership content).

Conclusion

In summary, the leadership course at the United States Air Force Academy uses an individualized form of self study as a means to balance the academic and applied nature of leadership education. In addition, by using the criteria presented by Prince (2001), personalized developmental experiences are used that enable the cadets to apply the material real-time and be able to see results of their efforts over the course of a single semester. Cadets are not only growing in their knowledge of leadership, they are growing personally as they take the information from the classroom and apply it to their own personal leadership experiences. While additional quantitative assessment of the course is needed and planned for to determine the long-term effects of such an education experience, based on the qualitative information reported to date, the experience has been both educational as well as developmental for students and instructors.

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Biographies

Douglas R. Lindsay, Ph. D., is a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force and an Assistant Professor at the United States Air Force Academy. He is currently the Deputy Department Head for Research and the Course Director for the Leadership Core Course focused on the academic study of and application of leader development to future military officers. He received his doctoral degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Pennsylvania State University with a focus on leader follower interaction and the subsequent impact on performance. His interests are in the areas of leader and leadership development and he has conducted and published research in these areas. Currently, he is working to align the formal study of leadership and leader development with practical application that creates synergy between these two critical processes.

Anthony M. Hassan, Ed. D., is a Major in the United States Air Force (USAF). He is currently serving as the Deputy Department Head, Leadership Directorate and the Director of the Air Officer Commanding Master's Program in Counseling and Leadership at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He received his doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration and Leadership from the University of South Florida. In addition to his higher education administrative duties, he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in leadership and behavioral sciences. He has 24 years of military leadership experience and 17 years of clinical experience as a licensed clinical social worker. His areas of specialization in social work and leadership evolved from creating change in patients to facilitating change in leaders and organizations. He will retire from the USAF and join the University of Southern California in September 2009.

David V. Day, Ph. D., is the inaugural Woodside Professor of Leadership and Management at the University of Western Australia Business School. He received his doctoral degree from the University of Akron in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. He has published widely on the topics of leadership and leadership development, and is the lead author on the recently published book, *An Integrative Approach to Leader Development: Connecting Adult Development, Identity, and Expertise*). Dr. Day serves on several editorial boards and is an Associate Editor of *Leadership Quarterly* and the *Journal of Applied Psychology.*