Using Provocative Statement Assignments to Foster Critical Thinking in Leadership Education

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Abstract

This paper advocates for and describes the use of provocative statements as a leadership assignment to foster critical thinking. Critical thinking is an essential competency for leaders who must analyze issues and convince others of their point of view as they compete for scarce internal resources. The provocative statement assignment incorporates common elements from long-established practices of Socratic questioning, debate, argumentation analysis, and rhetoric. It challenges students to develop and advocate their point of view on the controversial issues of their field. Preliminary findings of student perceptions of the assignment in a graduate leadership class are presented which suggest the assignment can be a powerful learning tool.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The organizational context in which many graduates will find themselves is one where internal competition for scarce financial resources is intense. Where there is external competition for the organization, even greater scrutiny of internal decisions occurs because of the competitive consequences. The dynamics of organizational decision making are often played out via discussions, dialogues, and debate of pertinent ideas and issues. Relying on traditional logic to arrive at the best choice among alternatives is often not possible due to the ambiguous nature of the business context (e.g., uncertainty in the economy, competition, market, etc.). Thus decisions are often made based on who makes the most

convincing argument for or against a point of view. While there are those who tend to be naturally persuasive, for most it is a learned skill.

Toulmin (1958), whose argumentation model will be discussed later, suggests that emphasis of persuasive argumentation be shifted away from the norms and procedures of formal logic. He suggests that the credibility in an argument (i.e., persuasion) is judged in terms of practical and complex workings of everyday life within a specific field. This indicates that critical thinking plays a crucial role in being persuasive in that each scenario or field has a different set of factors that must be considered when formulating a persuasive position. Bassham, et al. (2002) describe critical thinking as dealing with a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments and truth claims. They add that individuals engaged in critical thinking discover and overcome personal prejudices and biases to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions and reasonable intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do. Furthermore, Ricketts (2005) found a small, yet significant relationship between critical thinking skills and leadership training and experience. Therefore, developing critical thinking skills should be targeted by leadership educators because critical thinking is the precursor to effective persuasion skills. Stedman (2009) poses an important question that leadership educators must consider given the increasingly diverse body of leadership students, "where do we begin with critical thinking instruction?" (p. 203). She suggests from her study that leadership educators emphasize the importance of critical thinking and help students develop their own critical thinking skills and dispositions.

This paper proposes the use of provocative statement assignments in leadership education as an effective tool for developing critical thinking and persuasive communication skills. The need for and significance of critical thinking has been documented in a variety of fields including management (Cavanaugh & Prasad, 2006; Fox, 1994; Reynolds, 1999; Thomas, 2003; Wilmott, 1994), business communications (Muir, 2001), higher education (Walker & Warhurst, 2000) and others (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). The paper begins by providing a theoretical framework for provocative statement assignments, drawing from the literature on (a) Debate, (b) Socratic questioning, (c) Argumentation, and (d)) Rhetoric. Each of these four elements has been shown to have validity in leadership education. Next, the paper specifically describes the provocative statement assignments and uses Toulmin's (1958) model of argumentation to reveal the connection to improved critical thinking and persuasive communication. The paper will then present preliminary findings from student evaluations of the provocative statement assignment in a graduate-level leadership course within a master degree program in human resources management. Lastly, implications for future research are discussed.

Debate

Debate is a systematic presentation of opposing arguments on a special topic (Ericson, Murphy, & Zeuschner, 2003). Roy and Macchiette (2005) suggest that as a pedagogical tool it breathes life into the process of critical thinking. Vo and Morris (2006) also provide support that debating has been found to improve critical thinking in sociology (Crone, 1997; Huryn, 1986), writing classes (Green & Klug, 1990), science (Moody-Corbett, 1996), and economics (Pernecky, 1997). Moreover, Keller, Whittaker, and Burke (2001) found that debate generated greater student interest in the course and that students found debating exercises intellectually stimulating. Musselman (2004) stated that watching students' debate was "like watching students spread their intellectual wings" (p. 347). Debate first examines facts and information to find out what makes an issue unintelligible or controversial. It then attempts to pull together ideas and third, offers evaluations and recommendations (Vo & Morris, 2006). Roy and Macchiette (2005) explain how debate fosters critical thinking via seven learning outcomes. The first is the ability to identify, organize, and prioritize pertinent ideas and factors, which plays a vital role in debate as one determines the most relevant and compelling information. Successful debate also involves being able to recognize credibility when evaluating research and other evidence. The third learning outcome addresses one's ability to reason, or use logical connectors (Paul, 1990). More specifically, one should be able to "analyze cause-and-effect relationships, logical vulnerabilities, and recognize inconsistencies of truth" (Roy & Macchiette, 2005, p. 265). A fourth competency in successful debate is to recognize values, beliefs, and influences of others and strive to eliminate bias, prejudice, and ethnocentrism. The fifth, and arguably most critical, outcome, is communicating with impact. Though especially true to in debate, determining not only *what* to say but also *how* to say it is an attribute that is beneficial professionally and personally. One must choose the most effective format for communicating a point of view by using a creative, cohesive, and consistent communication strategy, which influences how effective one is at informing, persuading, and ultimately convincing an audience. Other skills developed by debate that have a holistic effect are the ability use words effectively and listen attentively.

Socratic Questioning

Socratic dialogue/questioning originated with the Greek philosopher, Socrates, and has been used in classrooms to promote higher-order thinking since his teachings. It can be used to foster critical thinking in students (Maiorana, 1990-91; Paul, 1993). The Socratic questioning approach stimulates students' minds by continually probing into the subject with thought-stimulating questions, rather than providing direct answers (Paul, 1993). Bolten (2001) suggests that there is a substantial difference between a discussion and Socratic-type dialogue. He states

that the fundamental desire of discussants is to convince, while the fundamental desire of dialogue participants is to investigate. He goes on to describe some of the characteristics of Socratic-type dialogue, which are giving each other room to speak, posing questions in order to understand each other, saying only what one really means, striving for mutual understanding, and investigating differences of opinion. Open conversation/questioning such as this allow positive environments for dealing with ethical issues and moral accountability, too (Bolten, 2001). Elder and Paul (1998) contend that every field stays alive to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. Additionally, they state that deep questions drive our thought underneath the surface of things, which forces one to deal with complexity. Vo and Morris (2006) point out that Dewey (1939) and Baker (1955) suggested that "active student engagement with a subject provides an effective venue for starting to learn how to think" (p. 316). Interestingly, Stedman, Rutherford, and Roberts (2006) found in their study that weekly feedback from instructors was not associated with leadership development of leadership interns. However, Socratic questioning in the provocative statement assignment involves the feedback not only from the instructor but also from fellow students and the feedback provided is predominantly in the form of questions as opposed to general feedback. Thus, the investigative nature of Socratic dialogue coupled with its emphasis on stimulating critical thinking may prove more effective than traditional feedback from an instructor. This suggests that Socratic questioning could play an important role in the continued improvement of leadership education.

Argumentation Analysis

The use of argumentation and/or debate seeks to address certain elements of critical thinking (McPeck, 1990; Mezirow, 1990; Paul, 1993; Vo & Morris, 2006). Using argumentation or analyzing other arguments promotes the four elements of critical thinking that Mingers (2000) described in a review of critical thinking literature (Gold, Holman, & Thorpe, 2002). Argumentation and its analysis enables the credibility of an argument to be assessed (Toulmin, 1988; Gold, Holman, & Thorpe, 2002), scrutinizes common sense understandings, habits (Bakhtin, 1981), and common practice in a social context, examines and tests beliefs, practices and arguments of those in power (Ehninger & Brockeriede, 1963), and questions an individual's epistemological understanding (McPeck, 1990). Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2000) posit that intellectual conflict provides the foundation for effective teaching because it engages and involves the students. Gold and Holman (2001) used a professional development module designed to promote self-reflection and critical thinking by asking leaders to tell stories about their practices and then examine the arguments present within the stories. This approach was used based on the notion that argument analysis would enable managers to develop more critical forms of thinking and that telling stories would help managers to locate arguments within their stories. They believed that

stories contained arguments for or against something because stories usually contain claims, propositions, assertions, and justifications (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 1997). Evaluation of the professional development found that this type of story telling proved to be a useful way of helping leaders to articulate accounts of their work experience, which in turn helped leaders develop new understandings and insights, new perspectives, and new ways of thinking. It also found analyzing arguments in their stories allowed for greater recognition of the views of their colleagues. Although the study had several positive findings, the leaders tended only to present the claim and were not adept at providing evidence or warrants for the claims they made. The authors point out that the articulation of arguments did not occur without a structure being offered, which suggests that leadership education may be able to bridge the gap by offering structure in the form of classroom activities that involve analyzing arguments while persuasively using evidence to support one's claims for or against an issue.

Toulmin's Model of Argumentation

Conley (1990) suggests that Toulmin's model has come to dominate the argumentation literature "almost completely" (p. 295). Toulmin's model also established the first steps within the argumentation field of aiding the shift away from viewing argument as formal logic to an interactional view treating argument as a linguistic activity (van Eemeron, 1997). Hamilton (1999) states that the starting point of Toulmin's work is his concern to extend the rigor of formal logic to areas commonly believed to contain arguments of an uncertain kind, such as law and ethics. The layout of the model consists of six parts, three of which are always present and three of which that act as modifiers. The ever-present elements are the claim or conclusion that is being established, the grounds or data on which the claim is based, and the warrant, which enable the step to be made from the grounds to the claim. Toulmin developed the model to resemble deductive inference yet with more flexibility. The model allows for varying degrees of support of claim, which develops the skill of argumentation as students strive to provide the most convincing and compelling evidence available. In addition to assisting one formulate an argument with available evidence, it also provides a guideline for analyzing an argument. The first step is to locate a claim and then find the data that were used to the support it. The key to analyzing an argument is the warrant because it dictates the choice of data as well as the credibility of the argument. Ehninger and Brockeriede (1963) also suggest that examination of the warrant can shed light on how things relate to one another; a person's desires, values, and emotions; the reliability of the sources of data used; and the authority of the speaker. As can be seen, Toulmin's model is a powerful tool for argumentation skill development as well as peeling back the layers of an argument to determine its strength and validity.

Rhetoric

Another principle that has its roots in Ancient Greece, rhetoric has no clear-cut definition (Skerlep, 2001). The Greeks believed rhetoric to be the knowledge of how to produce and deliver an eloquent speech, but Cicero (1988), to whom broad definitions of rhetoric can traced, defined it as the art of speaking well. Rhetoric is a type a discourse used to persuade audiences, reach reliable judgments or decisions, and coordinate social action (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Gill & Whedbee, 1997; Herrick, 2001). Skerlep (2001) states that classical rhetoric is dealing with the question of how to develop effective arguments. He continues by suggesting that rhetoric is not only concerned with communication from a linguistic standpoint, but it also shapes thinking on how to present a case and justify a position. Furthermore, rhetoric presents a tool for developing strategies of corporate discourse that justify leadership decisions. The rhetorical perspective suggests that leaders play an active role in the diffusion process because what leaders say and how they say it matter a great deal (Eccles, Nohria, Berkley, 1992; Elsbach, 1994; Pfeffer, 1981). Mintzberg (1973) points out that managers and leaders are essentially discursive beings, spending two-thirds to three-fourths of their time engaged in verbal activity. Green (2004) states that managers and leaders use constant verbal activity to gather information, develop shared understandings of the world, and persuade individuals to contribute to collective purposes. Eccles et al. (1992) posits that most managers and leaders are unaware of the ways in which their language influences social action. It should be noted that rhetoric is closely linked to Toulmin's model of argumentation in that it serves a crucial role in the model in that making the connections between grounds and claims does little good unless it is developed and communicated in a way that persuades others decision making.

Provocative Statement Assignments

Provocative statement assignments incorporate all of the principles described above, which challenge students to think critically and communicate persuasively. Figure 1 depicts each of the integrated principles of provocative statement assignments in a visual model to demonstrate how each principle relates to the assignments, all of which are encompassed by critical thinking. What follows is a description of how the provocative statement assignments were and can be used in the classroom.

Figure 1
Principles of Provocative Statements
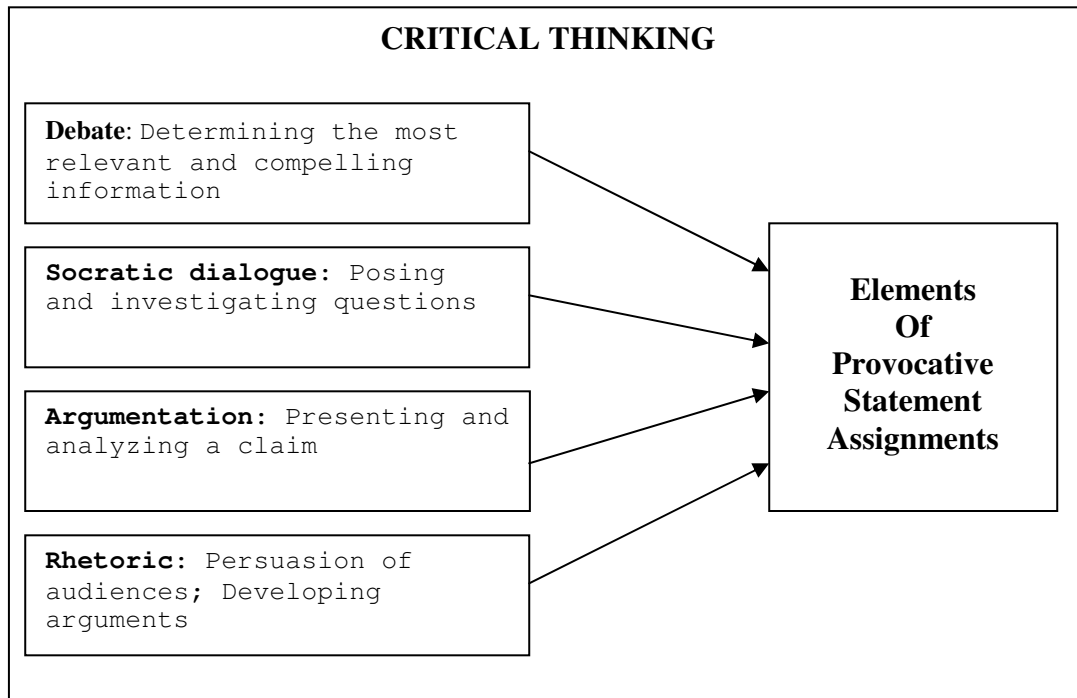
Methods

The provocative statement assignments were used as a small group assignment in a graduate-level leadership course in a masters program in human resources development. Each small group in the course was assigned a statement (i.e., a claim) about leadership that has no right or wrong answer. The statements present the students with a leadership issue/concept to which the groups have the freedom to agree or disagree, based on their interpretation of the course materials, supporting evidence, previous research, and the issue at hand (i.e., grounds). Following a deliberation period, groups are asked to present their thesis and supporting information using Microsoft Powerpoint® and facilitate a class dialogue regarding their project and its thesis (i.e., warrant). Due to the high volume of organizational presentations using Microsoft Powerpoint®, students are also challenged to consider how best to present their position on the statements in regards to the use of Microsoft Powerpoint®. The most heavily-weighted component on the grading rubric is the groups' ability to respond to questions. Other considerations in grading the projects are how clearly and

persuasively the thesis is presented followed by how well it is supported with scholarly and practitioner literature and experience.

As noted earlier, students are given a claim or proposition to which they must take a stance. In addition to gathering and prioritizing all relevant information, students must assess the credibility of the evidence. In essence, students must think critically about the evidence before they can go onto to thinking critically about their claim in light of the supporting materials. Further still, students must carefully scrutinize their common sense understandings, examine common practice in social context, and evaluate the arguments and practices of those in power. When each student reaches a personal decision, the small group setting allows for a first Socratic dialogue to take place. Typically, students will meet to discuss their materials and challenge each other with difficult questions so that all sides of the claim are not only addressed but carefully pondered. It is then the challenge of the group to reach a position on the issue to present in class, which involves personal rhetoric and persuasive communication. Each group must then present the class with what is essentially a framework as provided by Toulmin's model of argumentation. Figure 2 offers a brief, simple example of the framework that is representative of those presented in class, and Table 1 presents all of the provocative leadership statements. Elements of debate, argumentation, Socratic dialogue, and rhetoric are all present during the class presentation in that the groups' classmates have also familiarized themselves with each topic and what they believe to be appropriate support (i.e., warrants).

Figure 2
Example of Toulmin's Argumentation Diagram Using the Provocative Statement Assignment
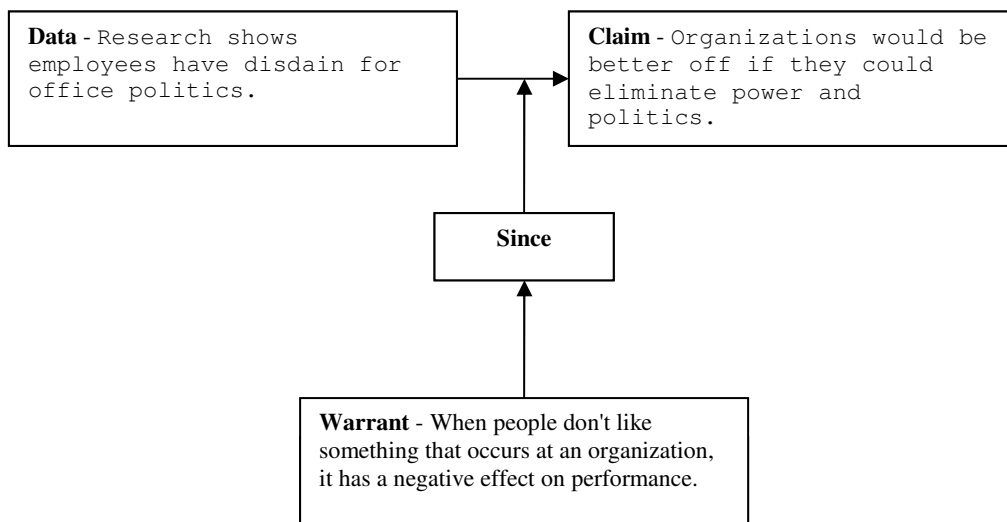
Table 1
Provocative statements used in the leadership course assignment

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"Leadership is leadership; the competencies required to lead are basically the same across organization size, type (i.e., military, government, corporate, education, etc.), geographic scope (domestic/global), and culture."

"Organizations would be a whole lot more effective if they could eliminate the use of power and politics by their leaders."

"Leadership is about influencing others to achieve something, so while some may dislike Hitler, Hussein, and Castro (for the purposes of the discussion, you may substitute anyone who has been "disliked" by significant portions of society), they should nevertheless be considered effective leaders."

"Charisma, while not the only important leadership quality, is the distinctive quality that sets truly effective leaders apart from the rest of the crowd."

"The impact of a 'leader' is an illusion; people want to feel someone is in control, so they attribute impact (positive or negative) to the leader."

"In a capitalistic economy where only results count and it's a dog-eat-dog competitive environment, 'ethical leadership' has a different meaning than it does in government, education, or the nonprofit sectors."

Results

Student-level data were collected at the end of the course to assess the perceived value and effectiveness of the provocative statement assignment. Results from the provocative statement assignments can be seen in Table 2. Due to the small sample size, the results are considered preliminary, but they are indicative of very positive student perceptions in terms of developing aspects of critical thinking and persuasive communication, effectively learning the course materials, and developing skills that will help them in other areas of life. Additional data collection is currently underway.

Table 2
Student Responses to Provocative Statement Assignment on Course Evaluations

Statement	Strongly Agree / Agree	Strongly Disagree / Disagree	Neutral / Missing
The statements used in the group's projects were provocative and challenged my thinking about leaders.	75.0%	6.3%	18.8%
The statements used in the group projects helped me to recognize contradictions in my own thoughts and work through them.	81.3%	6.3%	12.5%
The statements used in the group projects facilitated a learning experience that would be difficult to duplicate in a different assignment format.	68.8%	18.8%	12.5%
The project using provocative statements improved my ability to be persuasive in communicating my point of view.	75.0%	6.3%	18.8%
The experience gained through provocative statement project will benefit me in other areas of my life.	81.3%	6.3%	12..5%

N=14

Discussion

While this paper acknowledges the limitations of the small sample size used in the evaluation of the provocative statement assignment, the review of the literature in this paper suggests there is strong face validity for provocative statements fostering critical thinking.

Students overwhelmingly agreed (68.8%) that the provocative statement assignment produced a learning experience that was unique. While writing

assignments and other group presentation projects can certainly foster critical thinking, the provocative statement assignment does so in a powerful way because of the way it incorporates debate, Socratic dialogue, argumentation, and rhetoric. In regard to the element of debate, it is important to note that a traditional debate format was not in this assignment by design. Efforts were made in structuring this assignment to replicate real-world organizational conditions where an organizational member or team analyzes an issue, develops a point of view, and then advocates that view publicly often using Microsoft Powerpoint®. The "debate" aspect of the presentation is an informal one that typically occurs during the question-and-answer session. This use of technology (i.e., Microsoft Powerpoint®) in organizational presentations has implications for the informal debate among organizational leaders that typically follows. Chesebro (2000) suggests that digital networks and computing devices as vehicles of interaction have produced significant changes in the sociotechnical context for organizational communication. Barry and Fulmer (2004) state that intersection between influence and media has received little attention from organizational scientists. Thus, determining the impact of computer media on effective delivery of a persuasive argument like the provocative statement assignment is an area for further exploration. It would be interesting to include in such research a closer examination of how the actual classroom presentation slides were constructed (i.e. message point language, multi-media).

 Seventy-five percent of the respondents indicated that the provocative statement assignment did help them developing their skills in being persuasive. One interesting implication of this finding concerns the use emotional persuasion. While the provocative statement assignment had a primary focus on rational persuasion, emotional persuasion is also relevant because emotional appeals are often used to promote significant changes in the organizational context (Fox & Amichia-Hamburger, 2001). In the leadership class in which the provocative statements were assigned, some students choose to share personal stories of family members who had died in the Holocaust as part of their "evidence" to support their claim that Hitler's actions were not those of an effective leader. Thus, emotional persuasion tactics were present and would be an interesting area for additional investigation.

Leadership educators should strive to have students question their own assumptions about leadership issues. Seventy-five percent of respondents in this study felt their thinking about leadership was challenged by the provocative statement assignment, and 81% felt the assignment helped them work through contradictions in their thinking. These results point to the importance of developing statements that are truly provocative. For example, the statement used in the assignment that asserted that charisma is the distinctive quality of effective leaders challenges students to reflect on what really makes a leader effective and the importance of the elusive characteristic of charisma. Several students in the

class commented anecdotally that they began their thinking through this statement with one position but that the position began to shift the more they reflected upon it.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the outcomes identified, what follows are recommendations for future research.

- Additional studies with larger samples to collect more evidence related to students' perceived effectiveness of the assignment.
- Pre- and post-assignment data related to one's leadership development and/or experiences could be collected and compared to determine the impact the assignment has on development.
- The study may be replicated assigning provocative statements to students on an individual basis to mitigate any intervening group dynamic issues.

Conclusion

Stedman (2009) asserts that fostering critical thinking in the leadership classroom is "not only pertinent to the student experience in the course, but in their lives as leaders after the course" (p. 215). Further, Samuelson (2006) recommends that educators should challenge students to "practice making decisions where the 'right' answers cannot be derived from a spreadsheet" (p. 364). The provocative statement assignment described in this paper is responsive to both of these comments by challenging students to critically evaluate multiple perspectives related to leadership where there is no one best answer. Leadership educators are encouraged to tailor this assignment to their specific course learning objectives by crafting provocative statements closely related to their course content. The preliminary findings of this study suggest that the assignment has the potential to be a powerful learning tool in the leadership classroom, and we encourage additional classroom research using the assignment so that its full potential can be realized.

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