Interviews: Linking Leadership Theory to Practice

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Abstract

Leadership educators use various tools to enable their students to learn about leadership. This article describes the assignment *Interview with a Leader* which the authors have incorporated into several different leadership courses. Grounded in constructivist and social learning theories, the authors have found this assignment to be particularly effective as a strategy for helping students make meaning of the complexities and application of leadership. Furthermore, students found the assignment to be especially helpful for connecting leadership theory to practice.

Introduction

The academic study of leadership swings like a pendulum from debates regarding whether leadership can even be taught (Doh, 2003; Parks, 2005) to how best to teach leadership (Danzig, 1999; Getz, 2009; Wisniewski, 2010). Examples of curricular and co-curricular college student leadership development fill the literature (Day, 2000; Eich, 2008; Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003; Rost & Barker, 2000). Often comprehensive descriptions of these examples focus on

program outcomes and assessment (Black & Earnest, 2009; Eich, 2008). While such a focus helps formulate big picture thinking about teaching leadership, what appears to be lacking in the literature are descriptions of assignments and activities comprising the day-to-day teaching of leadership. This article describes the technique *Interviews with a Leader* which the authors have found to be an effective tool for helping students connect leadership theory to practice. Student feedback and learning outcomes of these assignments are also examined.

General Description of Assignments

The authors have used the *Interview with a Leader* assignment every semester from 2008-2010 at a large, public, masters level, Southeastern university in the following leadership courses: (a) an undergraduate foundations course centered around theories and models of leadership, (b) an undergraduate course focusing on global and cultural contexts of leadership, and (c) a graduate course emphasizing women's leadership. In each of these courses, the authors grounded the interview assignment in constructivist (Bush, 2006) and social learning (Bandura, 1977) theories. As such, the assignments guided students to reflect upon how they constructed, defined, and made meaning (constructivism) of the practice of leadership by learning from the experiences of others (social learning).

Students selected the leaders they wanted to interview. Selections ranged from former teachers, coaches, bosses, work colleagues, community leaders, and pastors. The students used the following interview guide to facilitate their dialogue with their chosen leaders in interviews that lasted from one to four hours.

After completing thank you letters, students wrote reflective papers addressing the various aspects of leadership relevant to their course. In all three courses students considered how the leadership theories and models they were learning connected to the actual practice of leadership. The professors evaluated the papers utilizing the criteria set in the guide.

Student Feedback

To ensure this assignment was meaningful for students, we asked for their feedback. On the end of term course evaluations, students responded to both numerical and open-ended questions. On the numerical questions, students answered questions using a five-point scale with 5 being strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree, and 1 strongly disagree. When students were asked to rate if this assignment was relevant to their learning, 95% of the students responded 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree). In addition, students often

mentioned this particular assignment in the open-ended comments with statements indicating that the leader interview assignment helped them relate to the course materials and also gave them an opportunity to apply their learning.

Another source of feedback came from the actual written reports the students submitted regarding their interviews. When asked to critique the assignment, students perceived this assignment increased their learning; some went so far as to express thanks for the assignment. They shared they would not have had the courage to conduct such an interview without the motivation of a grade.

Interview with a Leader Guide

General information on each of the course assignments is located below. Assignment specifics can be obtained by contacting the authors. Following their interviews, students write a reflective paper. Students lose points for grammatical and mechanical errors, as well as lacking depth and reflection in their responses. Depending on the course, the papers are worth 16-26% of the overall grade.

Foundations of Leadership Undergraduate Course

The following questions serve as the framework for the reflective paper:
1. Why did you select the person you chose to interview?
2. What is your leader's…
   - position and how did he or she obtain it?
   - self-description of his or her leadership style?
   - personal philosophy or view of leadership and how did he or she develop it?
   - opinion as to whether or not his or her own gender, culture, and/or ethnicity impacted this personal philosophy/view of leadership or how he or she leads others?
   - views on followership and group process?
   - thoughts on ethical responsibilities, leading through change, and personal or group renewal strategies?
   - suggestions for you, a student of leadership?
3. What did you learn from this interview that made the most impact on you and why?
4. How does what you learned in the interview validate, refute, or reinforce what you have learned about leadership in this class?

Leadership in a Global Society Undergraduate Course

Students engage in an intercultural experience by participating in an event sponsored by a culture with which they do not normally identify. Students interview the leader of the event and focus on the following details:
   - The history of the event they attended.
   - How the leader came to be involved with this event.
   - How the leader obtained this position of leadership.
   - How the leader interacts with followers and to what extent the cultural norms of the group he or she leads affect this process.

Students also ask specifically about (a) conflict resolution and decision-making processes and (b) what the leader would like the majority culture to know about the culture/group he or she represents.

Interview with a Leader Guide (continued)

***Women's Leadership Lab* Graduate Course**

Students ask interviewees to rate what skills or behaviors (e.g., negotiating, answering e-mail, etc.) they most utilize during the day. The following questions shape the subsequent interview.
1. How did you first get involved in leadership?
2. What is your personal philosophy/definition of leadership?
3. Who is your leadership role-model/mentor?
4. What impact do you perceive women have made in your particular area or discipline?
5. What are the outstanding skills or abilities of effective female leaders you have known?
6. Have you observed differences in the way men and women lead? If yes, what differences have you noted? If no, why do you think this is?
7. What are the major reasons female leaders fail in positions like yours?
8. If you had to train someone to replace you in your current job, what key abilities would you focus on?
9. What have been your biggest leadership challenges and celebrations?
   What are some resources that every leader should know about?
10. What are some words of advice that you would give to a new leader?

Learning Outcomes

From this student feedback, we perceive our students learned four lessons, which include: (a) *a deeper understanding of leadership,* as evidenced by such comments as, "Mr. Bell really helped validate leadership as a whole for me, and showed me that leadership is a process and is something that comes in many different forms; (b) *a linkage of leadership theory to practice*, as noted by remarks like, "After this interview, I realized that a lot of what Danielle was saying we had learned in class and in the book, for example Leader-Member Exchange theory….it was refreshing to see that a lot of what happens in the real world can actually be learned in school;" (c) *a change in how students thought about practicing leadership*, supported by statements like " I also thought that using political power and coercion methods, in certain situations, would be the best way to accomplish the task, but after talking to Elise, I no longer believe that either of those two methods works effectively;" and (d) *a desire to learn more about being an effective leader*, corroborated by such comments as, "He has opened my eyes to things I know I can accomplish. I have now set my standards higher to reach the goals and aspirations that will make me a great leader."

Discussion

As shared above, we believe our students began to develop a deeper understanding of leadership, an outcome which aligns with constructivist theory (Bush, 2006). The assignments challenged the students' old views of leadership, and they wrote about new, more complex views of leadership. For example, many students said they had begun to think of leadership as something more than a title or position. They realized leadership was something they could learn. This finding supports Wisniewski's (2010) assertion that personal theories of leadership can be modified through active learning in real-world settings.

The second learning outcome, linking leadership theory to practice, is congruent with Danzig's (1997) research. Danzig indicated that experiences and stories shared in interviews provide "a way for novices to move from the superficial to deeper issues embedded in their studies. Stories lead to new understandings of how expertise is gained in the real world by linking the study of leadership to professional practice" (p. 123). As evidenced by their in-depth responses, students clearly demonstrated an understanding of how specific leadership theories and models were either intentionally or unintentionally applied in their interviewees' daily leadership practices.

The third learning outcome, a change in how students thought about practicing leadership, aligned with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory suggests that errors are reduced or eliminated when we observe others, reflect on their actions, and then use their experiences to make decisions about our own responses. Students often wrote that they began thinking about their own leadership actions in light of the insights and experiences imparted by their interviewees.

The final learning outcome, a desire to learn more about being a better leader, was evident in that many students went beyond the assignment requirements and visited with their interviewees more than once. Typically this occurred with the students who were interested in working in the same field as their interviewee.

Conclusion

We created these assignments to help our students learn about the complexities of leadership and connect theory to practice. In agreement with Moore, Boyd, and Dooley's (2010) findings, the reflective writing piece of our assignment provided evidence that our students did indeed make that connection. The students wrote

about retaining and internalizing leadership concepts, as well as transforming their notions of leadership.

Furthermore, conducting interviews with leaders meets several of the attributes Eich (2008) noted comprise a high-quality leadership program – connection, reflection, discussion, and encountering episodes of difference. The assignment asked students to connect with leaders, it allowed them to reflect upon their experience, and then required them to discuss those experiences with others. Students in the "Leadership in a Global Society" class, in particular, encountered episodes of difference because they were interviewing leaders from a culture with which they normally do not identify. We believe the words of our students provide the best evidence of the value of using interviews to connect leadership theory and application. As one student wrote "In my role in HR, I can use the learning I gained from this interview on a daily basis. From facilitating meetings to leading projects, my success will come from effective communication and preparation. Both of which are key skills that Joann has shared as important to leadership." A final student comment reads, "I enjoyed the interview process for this assignment. I believe the best way to gain insight from a leader is to have a conversation; and this assignment was the spark that made that conversation happen."

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