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OVERCOMING LEADERSHIP LEARNING BARRIERS:

A naturalistic examination for advancing undergraduate leader development

Abstract

The overwhelming rise of leadership learning programs and experiences within higher education merits the exploration and identification of best practices, reduction of limiting educational methodologies, and strategies for promoting efficient and effective leadership education has never been greater. This study explores the barriers inherent to leadership learning environments from the learner, environmental, and instructor perspectives. Qualitative interviews of leadership faculty members allowed for naturalistic themes to emerge. The transferable findings suggest that best teaching practices, including positive student-instructor relationships, critical reflection, adaptive leadership application within real-world settings, will have profound implications on the ever-growing field of leadership education and the development of the leadership learner.

Introduction

The role of leadership education has been incredibly transient throughout history. Many higher institutions have adopted leadership as a primary objective for their students, integrating leadership principles into their curriculum and programming (Kiersch & Peters, 2017). Because of this, it is essential to explore the role of leadership education in higher institutions, and its effectiveness in building leadership capacities in students.

There has been a wide variety of approaches to leadership learning throughout history, from a methodological standpoint. From initially believing that leadership capacity was a natural ability rather than a teachable skill, to a theoretical model of teaching leadership (Erwin & Dean, 2005), leadership learning has been continually adapting.

More recently, leadership learning has taken on a multi-disciplinary approach with an emphasis on interpersonal and adaptive leadership (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). Due to the increasing complexity of our world and the multi-dimensional challenges that face it, there is a desperate need for adaptive leaders and critical thinkers (Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005). Therefore, leadership learning environments must rise to this standard creating capacity in students to be the next-generation of problem-solvers. Learner-centered educational environments (Thompson, Licklider, Jungst, 2003), applied assessments (Bransford, 2000), critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997), and community within the classroom (Lave & Wegner, 1991) allow for the student to engage in a depth of learning that develops these capacities in students. However, alignments with these perspectives and the associated changes are not pervasive within

leadership learning. This begs the question, what is preventing leadership educators from embracing change and teaching differently?

To address this question, interdisciplinary faculty members at the University of Florida were purposefully sampled in an attempt to gain perspective on the given context. Qualitative interviews were conducted, and participants were asked to report their views of barriers in leadership learning. Faculty members reported experiencing barriers in three categories of leadership education: the learner, the environment, and the instructor. The findings lead to far-reaching implications for the field of leadership education and beyond. With a greater understanding of the barriers in leadership learning, leadership educators have the opportunity to create a classroom experience where students can develop critical thinking skills and enhance their leadership capacity in order to make a profound impact on our increasingly complex world.

Review of Literature

Leadership has become one of the most prominent objectives in higher education and is increasingly referenced in university mission statements (Kiersch & Peters, 2017). Institutions across the national landscape emphasize leadership education as a means to developing engaged community members and career-readiness. For the purposes of this study, identification of barriers to leadership learning effectiveness requires context in two major areas, 1) an understanding of teaching and learning theories and pedagogies, and 2) historical and contemporary perspectives of leadership learning environments. Through exploration of these areas, researchers gained perspective for the research protocol and ultimately provided the underpinning for the recommendations.

Teaching and Learning.

Teaching. The numerous pedagogical approaches to learning have long been debated regarding their effectiveness.

Researchers have tirelessly pursued the best teaching methodologies that will provide students with a positive learning experience. Requisite to the varying learning styles of students, singularly-focus pedagogical approaches have been deemed insufficient, favoring a combination of problem-based, case-based, discovery-based, inquiry-based, and project-based approaches that allow diverse learners to thrive in the classroom (Cattaneo, 2017). While these teaching styles are continually being evaluated, it is a generally accepted that any learner-focused teaching style yields the best results for students (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). The coupling of the individual learner with the pedagogical approach creates a dynamic environment for students to excel. The learner-focused approach established the learner as the central component in the classroom. This enforces critical thinking, encourages a deep understanding of the learner's discipline (Thompson, Licklider, Jungst, 2003), and creates an educational environment where students are well-prepared for the prospective fields.

Forming a learner-centered classroom often requires educators to remove a traditional lecturing teaching style from their classroom. Historically educators have often failed at challenging students to think critically and systematically (Bain, 2004). Rather, memorization has been the primary evaluation of knowledge in higher education. Bransford (2000) noted, "Students often have limited opportunities to understand or make sense of topics because many curricula have emphasized memory rather than understanding" (p. 8). This has become a detriment in education preventing students from actively engaging in their own learning experience. The primary purpose of assessments is to

reveal what students have learned, not what they have memorized (Bransford, 2000). Further, the most effective form of assessment asks students to apply the knowledge gained within real life scenarios (2000). Effective assessments can provide educators with an awareness of the student's level of understanding of course material. However, the learning experience in the classroom is the primary determinant of student's level of understanding. An essential component of teaching that largely influences the educational experience is the fostering of a sense of community within the classroom. It is vital for the educator to establish and encourage a sense of community among the learners that will encourage inquiry and provide a sense of comfort in the learning environment (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Cooperative problem-solving among students enhances cognitive development (Wason, Newstead, & Evans, 1995). This collaboration among students creates an unparalleled opportunity for learning and provides learners with a sense of ownership in their educational experience.

This sense of community can be established among peers in the classroom. However, it first needs to be initiated between the teacher and student. Educators have often failed to create a learning environment replete with trust and vulnerability that allows for critical thinking and exploration. Bain (2004) notes that there are six components that distinguishing teachers in higher education from their colleagues - 1) a mastery of their subject matter, 2) taking preparation for courses very seriously, 3) setting high expectations for their students, 4) creating of a critical learning environment that challenges previous notions and beliefs, 5) treating students

fairly, emphasizing a belief that students desire to learn, and 6) checking progress of students and evaluating one's own teaching. These findings are valuable to leadership educators, because they reveal that teaching extends beyond simple knowledge of a particular topic. The content of the course is only as powerful as the relationship formed between the student and teacher. In addition, research suggests that there is a correlation between the student-professor relationships and a student's perception of success and their values/goals (Estepp & Roberts, 2013). This implies that students feel more confident and are more motivated to succeed when there is a relationship between instructor and student.

Learning. While the teaching of the instructor is a vital component to student learning, the learner also contributes monumentally to his/her educational experience. While there are many different contributors to the learning experience, the fundamental necessity of learning is understanding. In order to develop competence, students must experience understanding, rather than memorizing facts (Bransford, 2000). In order for understanding to occur, reflection and application are essential. Learning is impossible without reflection (Dewey, 1938). Delaying immediate action and allowing students to stop and think, is an essential component to increasing the mental capacity in students. In conjunction with reflection, deep learning can occur when students apply the knowledge gained to real-world contexts. "Transfer to everyday environments is the ultimate purpose of school-based learning" (Bransford, 2000, p. 78). In addition to heightened understanding, learners are more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning

and use the information in their daily lives (McCombs, 1996; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Therefore, it can be concluded that learning is most effective when students have the opportunity to reflect, practice, and apply the concepts being taught.

One form of experiential learning that has been found to be the effective in contextualizing course material is service-learning. While other forms of learning like internships, study abroad experience, and practicums also provide students with an opportunity to experience learning outside the classroom, service learning is often a more accessible opportunity. Service-learning requires the students to go into the community and practice what they are being taught in the classroom (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017). The course-relevant community service allows for students to emotionally engage with the content of the course, and provides visibility to the classroom activities (Martin, 2015). In addition to the connection to course material, students also experience an increase in critical thinking skills, civic responsibility, and personal relevancy at work (Martin, 2015).

A Historical Review of Leadership Education. Early theorists identify leadership as an innate trait, rather than learned behavior, thus rendering leadership education seemingly nonexistent. Further constructs associated with leadership were viewed as unteachable.

There is long established thinking that leadership skills and abilities are something a person is born with. This line of thinking argues that the only source of leadership skills and abilities is natural endowment (Erwin & Dean, 2005, p. 1021).

This line of thinking slowly evolved, as it became more generally accepted that leadership can be taught (Pernick, 2001; Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005). In fact, studies show that motivated students can become effective leaders within three to five years (Pernick, 2001). As this belief became accepted, there has been an exponential growth of leadership programs in higher education (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). With the increase in leadership programs, there has been a continual question as to what content should be taught in leadership education. Traditionally, leadership education has had a very singular dimension, with a theoretical and analytical approach (Erwin & Dean, 2005). These programs were primarily seen in business education, with a bent toward management training (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). With a business foundation, there was a high emphasis on organization leadership training, in conjunction with practical skills that one would face in a corporate setting.

More recently, leadership education has evolved to a much more comprehensive approach. Leadership programs are becoming interdisciplinary, incorporating all fields of study (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). The holistic approach to leadership education is expanding its reach and moving away from traditional business functions (Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005). Due to the increase in multidisciplinary programs, there has been a shift in focus to societal change. The field of leadership education has also taken a more individual approach, putting less of an emphasis on organizational leadership (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). In fact, in a review of the state leadership programs, students reported that listening and communication skills were the primary outcomes of the program (Carter & Rudd, 2000). This confirms the shift of leadership education from a historically business-focused, theoretical approach, towards a model that promotes interpersonal leadership skills in multidisciplinary contexts.

The Future of Leadership Education. While significant strides have been made in the field of leadership education, there is still a significant amount of improvement to be made. In a rapidly developing society and increasingly dynamic industries, there has never been a greater need for complex and adaptive leaders (Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005). In order for future leaders to be able to navigate the

ever-growing complex world, they must be trained to become responsible and abstract thinkers.

As we move into the next century and more technologically sophisticated industry and service sectors, work becomes more abstract, depending on understanding and manipulating information rather than merely acquiring it" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7).

The weight of this responsibility has largely been taken on by leadership programs in higher education institutions. In order for leaders to accomplish this, there is a significant amount of growth that needs to occur in leadership education.

An inevitable result of self-awareness is enhanced interpersonal leadership capacity. It is essential that leaders know how to communicate interpersonally and learn how to effectively work with people (Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005; Pernick, 2001). In order to be successful in professional settings, leaders must know how to work in groups and teams, be able to practice conflict resolution, and negotiate, all of which are interpersonal skills. Integrating authentic leadership into leadership learning will provide students with the competencies needed to build stronger relationships with co-workers, managers, and employers (Kiersch & Peters, 2017).

Leadership education must also advance to an applied approach of leadership (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017; Pernick, 2001). While a theoretical foundation is necessary, it is insufficient without an opportunity to contextualize the information. "Service learning is one of the most prevalent features of leadership programs today" (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003, p. 230). A connection to society, on a local and global level, allows learners to take ownership of their learning and builds leadership capacity in students (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017; Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005). Praxis allows for perspective taking that will initiate societal change as the student becomes aware of his or her role in society (Hoggan, Mälkki, & Finnegan, 2017). With the skills taught in the classroom, application and contextualization will effect change in the practices of students in their prospective fields.

Due to the increasing complexity of the world, it is essential for leadership educators to teach students ethics in leadership. If students are to be effective industry leaders, they must have a foundational understanding of ethical leadership as it applies to their given contexts (Grandy & Sliwa, 2017). Further, critical reflection (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000), authentic audience and challenge (Andenoro, Sowcik, & Balser, 2017; Balser, Andenoro, & Bigham, 2015), incisive questioning (Kline, 1999), along with countless other methodological innovations create a foundation for how leadership educators can begin to develop critical skills, capacities and dispositions in learners that will lead to the next generation of well-prepared, engaged, and effective citizens within our global communities. As organizations increase in innovation with a greater emphasis placed on knowledge, there is a greater need for leaders to be complex (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). The Complexity Leadership Theory "describes how to enable the learning, creative, and adaptive capacity of complex adaptive systems (CAS) within a context of knowledge-producing organizations" (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007, p. 300). The contemporary work environment necessitates leaders to be dynamic and adaptive in their thinking, allowing for organizational advancement. Ronald Heifetz (2009) notes that central to an organizational leader's success is the development of adaptive leadership. The ability to handle adaptive challenges exhibits an individual's capacity to lead others, particularly when they utilize critical thinking rather than seeking management for answers (2009). As this quality is increasingly necessary within industry environments, it is also essential that institutional leadership programs adequately prepare students by engaging in this teaching practice.

Methods

Context. The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers that exist in leadership educators that are preventing them from engaging students in the classroom in such a way that develops them into complex problem solvers. In an attempt to answer

this question thoroughly, the following five research objectives provided the basis for this study.

1. Examine best teaching practices of leadership educators.

2. Examine the perceived learner barriers within leadership learning environments.

3. Examine the perceived institutional barriers within leadership learning environments.

4. Examine the perceived instructor barriers within leadership learning environments.

5. Examine the perceived barriers to implementing best teaching practices.

In order to explore the teaching values of leadership educators and the barriers to implementing diverse teaching methodologies, ten interdisciplinary leadership faculty members at the University of Florida were purposively snowball sampled after speaking with gatekeepers of the research committee and contacted to participate in the study. All instructors were faculty members in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, in the department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences and Agricultural Education and Communication. The educators were 70% female and 30% male (n=10). This sample was selected from a bounded system, in order to most accurately address the research question.

Data Collection. Qualitative interviews with the faculty members were aimed at understanding the teaching and learning context. Semi-structured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews were conducted on the University of Florida campus by the principal investigator, which included questions regarding best teaching practices; barriers from the three given perspectives: learner, environment, and instructor; and barriers to implementing best practices. The interviewees signed consent forms and were given the option to opt out of the study at any time without penalty. Referential adequacy materials were maintained through the use of field notes, audio recordings, and transcription. This allowed for confirmability. Respondent perceptions were coded and presented in an aggregate form to ensure for confidentiality. Data was secured and only accessible to the principal investigator and advising chair.

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed via a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categories emerged demonstrating the relationship to other categories (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The responses were reviewed and categorized into reoccurring themes throughout the data. Inductive analysis led to the discovery of patterns, themes, and categories stemming from the thick rich description of the data set. After the initial analysis, the principal researcher and chair met to discuss the findings and debrief, whereby initial findings were evaluated, and further direction was provided.

Similarities emerged in respondents' shared perceptions. These data similarities produced distinguishable categories within each objective area. Codes were established based on the emergent categories and through constant comparison of the categories and their properties, the researchers developed recommendations that synthesis the findings and literature. Open and axial coding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) are a key piece of the constant comparative data analysis process and were used to explore the context for distinct concepts and categories with respect to the qualitative data. Open coding identifies, names, categorizes and describes phenomena found in the text (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and allows us to identify the predominant elements of the context. Axial coding refers to the secondary coding process allowing for secondary themes to emerge naturalistically. Trustworthiness was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process. An audit trail was maintained throughout the data analysis and member checks were conducted with the respondents to allow for verification of data. This provided respondents with the opportunity to correct or clarify any recorded statements.

Findings

For the purposes of this study, findings have been provided in terms of emergent themes stemming from the analysis of the narrative of respondents. The research objectives provided a foundation for the questions yielding analysis for the emergent themes. The narrative data collected allow for a holistic understanding from a variety of perspectives that provide a glimpse of the context. The emergent grounded theory ensures for the relevancy and transferability of the findings to other like contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The responses of participants were coded, allowing for themes to emerge naturalistically leading to grounded theory. With respect to best practices, the analysis demonstrated three primary themes – (a) Emotionally Engaged Teaching (70% of respondents); (b) Instructor/Student Relationship (60% of respondents); and (c) Self-Assurance (60% of respondents). Once participants reported their believed best teaching practices, they were asked to report on four categories of leadership learning barriers: learner barriers, environmental barriers, instructor barriers, and barriers to implementation of best practices. The themes revealed regarding learner barriers were – (a) External Involvement and Engagement (50% of participants); (b) Pressure and Stress (50% of participants); and (c) Pre-Existing Beliefs (50% of participants). In regard to environmental barriers, three themes emerged from the data – (a) Technology (70% of participants); (b) Physical Space and Place (50% of participants); and (c) The Institution (40% of participants). Respondents reported instructor barriers, including – (a) Time (50% of participants); (b) Competing Commitments (30% of participants); and (c) Department Support (30% of participants). Lastly, respondents were asked to describe barriers to implementation of best teaching practices, which revealed – (a) Time (50% of respondents) and (b) Resistance to Change (30% of respondents).

Table 1.

Frequency of Respondent Perceptions.

Category	Theme	Number of Respondents	Total Respondents	Frequency
Best Practices	Emotionally Engaged Teaching	7	10	70%
Best Practices	Instructor/Student Relationship	6	10	60%
Best Practices	Self-Assurance	6	10	60%
Learner Barriers	External Involvement and Engagement	5	10	50%
Learner Barriers	Pressure and Stress	5	10	50%
Learner Barriers	Pre-Existing Beliefs	5	10	50%
Environmental Barriers	Technology	7	10	70%
Environmental Barriers	Physical Space and Place	5	10	50%
Environmental Barriers	The Institution	4	10	40%
Instructor Barriers	Time	5	10	50%
Instructor Barriers	Competing Commitments	3	10	30%
Instructor Barriers	Department Support	3	10	30%
Barriers to Change	Time	5	10	50%
Barriers to Change	Resistance to Change	3	10	30%

Best Practices. Based on the narratives of respondents, it can be concluded that teaching is a multidimensional practice that has layers of complexity. While respondents reported a wide variety of best practices, the following emergent themes arose from the data.

Emotionally Engaged Teaching. Respondents noted that teaching must incorporate an emotional element in order for students to engage (70%). Participants stated that when students have an emotional connection to the material, their depth of understanding and learning is dramatically increased. "What drives a lot of what we do is our emotional output towards things… If a student is connected to the material emotionally, they are more likely to learn" (R1). "It has to mean something to them emotionally or else it's boring" (R6). When asked what they want students to learn from their course, another participant responded, "I think every student takes from class what they need for that time in their life" (R8). This implies that there is an emotional element to learning that is coupled with content. Respondents stated that when learning goes beyond the cognitive, into the emotional and behavioral, learning is enhanced.

Instructor/Student Relationship. In order to be effective in the classroom, respondents felt they must establish trust and connection with students (60%). "The classroom is a shared space between student and teacher, they mutually benefit and learn" (R7). This sense of community within the classroom between instructor and student was a pervasive theme throughout the narratives of participants when asked about best practices. Several participants reported that instructor vulnerability was a key component to student learning, for when the instructor expresses vulnerability, students feel safe to be the same. "I cannot ask my students to be vulnerable if I don't show them first" (R5). Similarly, another participant found that one on one relationships with students were necessary to student success in the classroom. Learning names, meeting with students outside the classroom, and emotional connection within the classroom were all found to be the most effective in students' learning experience.

Self-Assurance. For the practical purposes of this study, self-assurance can be defined as the belief that you are able to take risks, meet new challenges, state claims, and deliver, having confidence in your abilities and your judgment (Gallup, 2017). As faculty members thought about best practices in education, a common narrative involved the necessity of having self-assurance (60%). Respondents noted that it was critical to maintaining a vision of student-learning, having confidence in their abilities, and not seeking the approval of others in order to avoid burnout in the field of leadership education. While participants often experienced supportive administration in academia, many noted that it was challenging to work within the confines of the education system. In order to be an effective educator, participants continually shared that one must not concern themselves with the approval of others but press on toward the ultimate goal of developing better leaders. "You have to figure out your love, not what's important or valuable to anyone else" (R3). This best practice is something that they experienced outside of the classroom but felt that it had a radical impact on their experience and their students' experience inside the classroom.

Learner Barriers. Respondents were asked to report on barriers from the learner's perspective

that are experienced in the classroom. From the data, three themes emerged.

External Involvement and Engagement. Participants have experienced that one of the greatest barriers in education from the learner perspective is outside involvement and engagement (50%). With the exceedingly high expectations, students are competing against one another and fighting for resume boosters. Participants found that this was an inhibiting barrier in the classroom because students were not there to simply learn. Their time in the classroom is a mere fraction of their time spent in college, while their external activities often take priority. Some participants also mentioned working as an outside activity that is a barrier to student learning. When students are working part or full time while in school, their attention is split.

Distractions encompass physical distractions, such as technology, all the way up to mental distractions of too much on their plate, thinking through the day, having multiple levels of expectations for things that they need to be doing. Those kinds of variables pull on them. It could be the student who is super involved and always on top of things, who is doing super well but is also involved with five other organizations and knows that they have a day that is going to run from 9 am to 11 pm. Or it could be the student who doesn't always come to class because they are having to work full time or multiple jobs so they are pulled or distracted by work circumstances. (R3)

There is a false interpretation that leadership means perfection. If you are seen as a leader, pegged as a leader, or are part of a leadership minor or any sort of program like that, you have to perform at a level of perfection. Of course, this level of perfection is not set internally, but there is some internal rule of regulation that the students feel like they have to perform not only academically, but also be involved in everything. Being involved in volunteer things, doing undergraduate research, and having internships. And then that also just leads to being overwhelmed. (R7).

Pressure and Stress. Due to the increase in expectations on students, participants commented that pressure and stress were higher than they have ever been (50%). Mental health has become a growing concern in higher education environments due to the increase of anxiety in students. Faculty members stated that they have seen this become a barrier, as students struggle to actively engage in their learning experience. Stress becomes a blinding factor that distracts students in and out of the classroom. In addition to the stress of non-academic activities, there is also pressure to academically perform in regards to Grade Point Average. "Students feel like high achievement means getting A's only" (R7). Participants stated that letter grading can become a barrier in education, because the focal point of the course is not to learn, but rather to get a particular grade. Because of the increase in pressure to get a high GPA, students will engage just enough to accomplish their desired grade. The mental well-being of students is becoming significantly more concerning as it becomes harder and harder to land a job after graduation. Also, being stable is very challenging for college students. (R5)

Pre-existing Beliefs. A final learner barrier that participants noted is the saturation of leadership education available (50%). Because material on leadership theories and practices is so readily available, students enter academic contexts with

pre-existing beliefs about what they think leadership is. In the classroom, this is a barrier because it prevents students from seeing new perspectives. "Every learner comes in with an idea of what they think leadership is" (R8).   Educators feel as if the opinion, beliefs, and feelings of students are valuable contributions to the classroom.   However, they can be difficult to manage when these perspectives are not flexible.

The learner comes in with a set of experiences and an idea of where they are at in their own leadership. I feel like the best leadership learners are the ones that are open, open to ideas, open to suggestions about what leadership is all about. I think the biggest barrier to the learner, is the learner themselves depending on where they are at. (R8)

I have to work with students to encourage them to give context or background to how you feel and why you feel that way and open an environmental dialogue where people can learn to discuss things in respectful ways even if they don't agree. (R6)

Environmental Barriers. Respondents were asked to state barriers they have experienced from the environmental perspective. A wide range of responses were discussed, including societal and cultural impacts, to the impact of the weather. However, three themes were most commonly reported.

Technology.   Due to the increase in technology   usage   in   the   classroom, participants   found   that   out   of   date technology   is   an   unnecessary   barrier that is often faced by educators (70%). It is becoming more and more challenging to gain the attention of students with the increase in technology; therefore, it is essential that technology is utilized in the classroom in order to stay relevant. "We

must make sure technology and tools are up to date so learning can be facilitated inside the classroom; we still use a chalk board" (R6).   Without access to new forms of technology, educators struggle to engage the attention of students. Therefore, inadequate resources in the classroom is a potential barrier to the learning environment.

I think technology is the biggest barrier. We could all leave our cell phones at the door so we can focus and not be distracted. Instructors have really come a long way in utilizing technology within the classroom. (R8)

The key to overcoming technology as a barrier is learning to not compete with it, but use it and integrate tools in the classroom. You have to stay relevant in what is going on with your students. (R5)

Physical Space and Place.   While the institutional   environment   is   a   broad barrier,   the   physical   classroom   setting is also seen as a barrier for participants (50%). One participant noted that large lecture   halls   were   not   conducive   to creating a safe and welcoming learning environment. In an effort to create a flexible learning community, rows of chairs are stiff and often uninviting. Practically speaking, participants also noted that sometimes the classroom breakdown was not conducive to discussion, activities, or collaboration. While the room and structure were potential barriers, class sizes were concerning. Participants have found that bigger classes can be a barrier to creating a community within the classroom that students feel comfortable expressing themselves in. The type of environments we have get in the way of student learning. At least what you see more in organizations is they are creating spaces that are flexible and relaxed and

present an emotionally connected place where students can be at their best to learn. The classrooms we currently have are open, empty spaces with rows that are not flexible, often not emotionally appealing from a visual perspective. We don't present space to be welcome, inviting, and engaging. I think that's really important to learn and grow. (R1)

I think there's actual physical limitations to what I can do in the classroom sometimes that I have to learn how to negotiate. I know when I'm in an actual physical environment where I don't have a lot of flexibility with space, that's not conducive to a lot of the activities that I like to do. (R3)

I think class size is important and an environment that allows for the instructor to be close to the students, more interactive with the students rather than in a big auditorium. Where that environment is just so big it feels impersonal. So, I think that personal interaction is important and there must be an environment that is conducive to that. (R6)

The Institution. Another commonly discussed environmental barrier was the role of the institution in learning (40%). Participants reported frustration working within the confines of the system and experienced a significant number of obstacles when trying to implement new programs or ideas. Respondents commented that they often felt limited by the administration and the politics of academia. Participants stated that without someone on the administration to support the cause, educators will experience extreme pushback for establishing anything innovative. In addition to administrative barriers, participants also found that the tenure process was often a barrier to effective teaching. Because of its emphasis on research, funding, and

publications, tenure often allows effective teaching methodologies to be overlooked. Therefore, those educators who are on a tenure track, often do not put the necessary effort into their classroom experience because it is not as highly valued in a packet review as other factors.

There are barriers in the way of red tape. Your ideas have to be championed by someone on the inside. It's become less about educating the common man, and more about large numbers and bureaucracy." (R5)

In university structures, there's an expectation of this is how you do things so if you perform as an outlier, it's very touchy. You have to decide if you want to be on that island. (R7)

Instructor Barriers. Respondents were then asked to report on barriers that instructors face in establishing a leadership learning environment. The data revealed three primary themes.

Time. By far, the largest reported instructor barrier was a lack of time (50%). All participants stated this as a barrier that affects them to some degree. One participant also noted that there is a need for more staff in leadership programs in order to provide some relief. Faculty members are overworked and need more faculty members to share the load. Another participant noted that limited time in the classroom is also a barrier.

Honestly, it would have to be time. I do a lot of prep work, but I have to balance the things that I have. I find that I tend to put in an activity, discussion, and content so I know I'm mixing it up, but then I only have 50 minutes. Do I have time to actually get the level of engagement that I want and still cover what I need? I'm constantly battling it. (R3)

It just comes down to time. I love to teach and my happy place is doing a two-hour leadership program, but I realize that I will dust off an old power point or use an old assessment. I got it done, but I didn't do it to my 100% ability as an educator because of a lack of time. (R8)

Time demands. We are spread so thin. I want to have time to read, to really be able to take more into the classroom environment but we are just so strapped for time. (R6)

Competing Commitments. When considering time, it is also important to note that many participants commented that they were often using their time on competing commitments (30%). With research demands, grant writing, advising, and more, teaching often gets less attention. One participant reflected that they had a hard time saying no, and often find themselves over-committed. Because of the countless other responsibilities, participants reported using old power point slides and not spending a significant amount of time preparing for class. A barrier to their effective teaching included the many competing commitments that demand attention.

I've got a three-way split. I'm supposed to be 65% teaching, but it's really 150% on my grant and then 100% on research. That three-way split is really tough. With the university's focus now on research I feel like the demands are so high and the hurdles are at 8 feet. We are expected to jump those hurdles all the time. (R6)

There are so many demands and pulls that it is nearly impossible to avoid burnout. When focusing on publications and funding, it becomes so much easier to use an old PowerPoint and the same material year after year. (R5)

Department Support. When asked about

instructor barriers, many participants commented on having a lack of department support (30%). Participants felt that not having support from within their work environment was a barrier to them operating as successful educators. While this was also discussed as an environmental barrier, faculty members also felt as though it was an individual barrier. "All the power lies in administration, not in the educator" (R5).

"It is essential to have a supportive department chair" (R6).

If they are uncomfortable with the topic you are teaching, it is often not easy. You don't get that support. One of my best practices is just doing it, even though I might not be supported initially. (R7)

Barriers to Implementation. Lastly, respondents were asked about barriers they see to implementing best practices in leadership learning environments. The data provided two primary themes that emerged naturalistically.

Time. A theme that emerged when discussing barriers to implementation was a lack of time (50%). Faculty members felt as though implementing these practices would take too much time. As established above, this is already a problem for educators. Although participants did report feeling a desire to implement new and diverse teaching methodologies, they felt as though time was their greatest barrier to initiating change. "Honestly, it all comes down to time and having the ability to say no to other things" (R6). "It takes so much time to make change" (R5).

Resistance to Change. Many participants made comments regarding being resistant to change (30%). Interviewees honestly confessed that they utilize the same content continually for lack of desire to change. The ease of using the same

material is more comfortable than being innovative inside the classroom.

We, educators, are creatures of habit. Once that habit is set, it's so hard to break it. It's so much easier to just do what I do, instead of look outside the box (R3).

Am I giving students the best leadership learning experience? There is so much information available and if I can't be up to date and relevant in that, then I'm not giving you the best experience. My lack of learning and growing is a barrier to your learning. (R8)

Discussions & Conclusions

Several things stemmed from the analysis regarding the role of leadership learning in higher education. Leadership educators reported a need for creating an experience in the classroom that engages students' emotions, as well as ensuring a positive instructor-student relationship. These findings align with research regarding the formation of community within the classroom (Lave & Wegner, 1991). This component of education provides students with the ability to feel safe throughout the learning process, which encourages engagement.

The findings also revealed that instructors felt that barriers to leadership learning include external influences such as campus involvement, stress, and pre-existing beliefs regarding leadership. While these barriers can inhibit the learning process, critical reflection is considered a best teaching practice that allows students to think though their preconceived notions and challenge their existing beliefs (Mezirow, 1997). Similarly, application to real-world contexts has been identified as an essential component of true learning (McCombs, 1996; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This component alleviates the barrier of external distractions, as faculty members link course concepts to students' organizational or community involvement. Through the utilization of examples that align with student experiences, students can develop higher levels of thinking (Anderson, et al., 2001; Forehand, 2010),

increased levels engagement (Andenoro, Sowcik, & Balser, 2017), and leadership educators can reduce external barriers that inhibit learning.

Additional barriers that instructors reported include a lack of time, resistance to change, and competing commitments. These findings support Heifetz's (2009) research regarding adaptive leadership. In order to be effective leadership educators, faculty members must themselves practice adaptive leadership. Implementation of this practice would allow for instructors to adjust to the needs of students, in order to provide them with the best learning experience possible.

Instructors also noted a lack of department support. These findings are not surprising, as the research has shown that the field of leadership education is rapidly progressing (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). Due to the continual evolution of leadership programs, it is understandable that there is resistance departmentally to continual change. In order to overcome this barrier, departments must begin to practice adaptive leadership in order to keep up with the rising demands of the field.

The environmental barrier of technology was a growing concern of faculty members. The role of technology contributes to the increasing complexity of our industries, requiring more abstract thinkers (Mezirow, 1997). The findings confirm prior research that technology will continue to impact the classroom and must be incorporated into the teaching process in order to prepare leaders for the industries they are entering into. Rather than seeing technology as a barrier, educators must utilize technology in such a way that will lay the foundation for the content being presented. Understanding that students will be using technology in their industries, educators must then be the models of healthy, productive, and effective technology usage within the classroom.

In conjunction with technology, educators also reported the environmental barrier of physical classroom space and place. As noted by Lave and Wegner (1991), the development of community within the classroom is a vital component to learning.

Understanding this, the findings of this barrier align with the research discussed. Facilitating community in spaces that are not conducive to discussion hinders the learning process.

Based on a synthesis of the literature and the findings discussed, the author suggests a combination of relationship development, critical reflection, and adaptive leadership will be discussed, each contributing to leadership learning in unique and diverse ways. The interplay of these three teaching practices will provide students with an environment in which learning is most impactful. First, the instructor-student relationship must be developed, as it is the primary influencer of leadership learning environments. Understanding that the reciprocal relationship between the learner and instructor is paramount to student engagement, educators must participate in this practice in order to facilitate an effective learning environment. This practice will contribute to overcoming environmental barriers, as the development of relationship will encourage community development within the classroom and minimize the distraction of technology.

The second recommendation is that critical reflection is the second primary input for effective leadership learning. Faculty members must exercise critical reflection and self-awareness, giving them the opportunity to better understand themselves as an individual, which will inevitably develop self-assurance. Self-assurance provides educators with the confidence to implement diverse teaching methodologies, such as critical reflection within the classroom and real-world application. Self-assurance must be coupled with humility and the ability to listen in order to establish trust between the instructor and student, and in turn, be effective within the classroom. Real-world application is a sub component of critical reflection as it often occurs naturalistically within the classroom. The practice of critical reflection and real-world application within the classroom will also, in turn, overcome the learner barriers found in the data. Critical reflection will provide students with the opportunity to challenge their pre-existing beliefs and address their own personal biases. Simultaneously, real-world application will integrate the external involvement of students into the classroom, providing students with a holistic learning experience. Therefore, the barrier of external involvement will actually be utilized to enhance the learning environment.

Finally, the practice of adaptive learning is the final recommendation for instructors. In order for instructors to maintain this relationship and meet the needs of students within the classroom, it is imperative that the instructor exemplify and teach adaptive learning. Being able to adapt within the classroom provides the students with a comfortable and safe environment to explore and engage in learning. Adaptive learning is a vital component to overcoming instructor barriers, as they are constantly required to adapt when faced with limited time, competing commitments, and a lack of department support. Having the ability to adapt as these demands rise will lay the foundation for developing sensational educators that are equipped to train and develop future industry leaders.

The following provides a model depicting the recommendations based on the findings and a synthesis of the literature.

Figure 1. Complex Problem Conceptual Learning Framework.

If implemented in educational environments, these practices would have a dramatic impact on the field of leadership education. The transferable findings of this research are extendable to like contexts, providing profound implications for the direction of leadership education. Leadership programs are unique in that they generally consist of students from varying disciplines, in majors across the entire campus. This necessitates leadership programs to be exceptional, as they are affecting a multitude of disciplines, advancing leadership capacity within the context of a vast number of industries. Therefore, the effects of these best practices are far reaching. As leadership programs on college campuses implement these practices, students across the entire campus will be better equipped and prepared for their future industries.

The impact of this study for the field of leadership education is noteworthy. Understanding barriers to leadership learning creates the foundation for constructively maximizing the development of undergraduate leadership learners. Building upon past research, this study provides leadership educators with empirical evidence to support enhancing current pedagogical practices and advancing the field. Through the integration of the proposed recommendations, the community experienced within the classroom will provide students with a model for healthy relationships, empathy, and interpersonal leadership. Further, the role modeling the noted critical behaviors will extend beyond the classroom, affecting the lives of students post-graduation. With enhanced leadership capacity, students possess the increased potential to experience stronger relationships and increased effectiveness in their professional environments. Furthermore, the development of strategic leadership learning experiences grounded in these recommendations will also encourage students to be more effective citizens, colleagues, and community members. As leaders are prepared within the classroom to expand their critical thinking capacity, they will be more adept at addressing the complex leadership of the day. Ultimately, the knowledge gained will lead to innovation, invention, and advancements for the world.

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