

## TEACHING TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: Using Literature Circles to Enhance Learning and Create Deeper Meaning

### Abstract

Using literature as the catalyst for change is grounded in Freirean pedagogy. In the case of the Oaks Leadership Scholars, leadership educators are crafting an environment for building transformative leadership skills using texts calling for the enactment of justice and equity as a starting point for capacity building and self-reflection. Students read the texts individually, then in conjunction with workshop-style instruction, discuss the texts in formal sessions. To extend their thinking, students have the opportunity to attend optional literature circles (including a formal lesson and informal discussion) designed to enhance their critical thinking and development. Discussions in these literature circles often move in directions that allow for meaning-making beyond the narrow text focus into broader, real-world applications. Project co-directors report that the texts and subsequent discussion have energized students to act.

### Issue Statement

According to Cochran, Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, and McQuillan, (2009) a major criticism of the inclusion of social justice as a part of any curriculum is that it can be considered “undertheorized and vague” (e.g., McDonald & Zeichner 2008; North 2006; Zeichner 2006), which increases the likelihood that it exists in name only (Grant & Agosto 2008)” (pg 347-348). The authors (using teacher education as context) go on to describe indoctrination into particular ideologies, lack of focus on professional competence, and a move away from more traditional goals or practices as particular criticisms stemming from this ambiguity. However, as Cochran-Smith, et al. (2009) share, these critiques are often rooted in a false dichotomy-- that the presence of a social justice foci must mean that there is a lack of traditional knowledge and learning.

In the case of leadership education, where the notions of justice and equity are so inherently tied to the contextual grounding one cannot separate the training of someone to lead without simultaneously focusing on creating more just and equitable systems.

The Oaks Leadership Scholars is a year-long undergraduate leadership program in the College of Agriculture and Life Science at NC State University. Students in The Oaks Leadership Scholars engage purposefully in the development of transformative leadership skills in order to become leaders of systemic change in their communities. At the heart of the program lies student leadership development through the application of Furman's (2012) conceptual framework for engaging learners in developing the capacities to be transformative leaders. The three prongs of that framework

are: "Praxis, involving both reflection and action, dimensions, including the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological, and development of capacities within each dimension on the part of the leader for both reflection and action" (p. 191). Using contemporary justice and equity texts serves as a catalyst for capacity building and reflection to engage participants in their own passion and rigorous thinking toward needed change in their area of interest across dimensions.

## Literature Review

Leadership is a process among and between people working together toward common goals. Leaders then must be concerned with the formation and perpetuation of more just and equitable systems in order that all people have a way to participate in the development of and work toward those common goals. "Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise, not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others," (Shields, 2010, p. 559). Leaders who perform transformative leadership can enhance equity and justice in their communities. Shields indicates that transformative leaders work to understand themselves and others while critically examining their own practices. The overlap of leadership and social justice work, then, is natural.

The field of educational leadership addresses the importance of being socially conscious and practicing a critically reflective pedagogy. To be effective, there must be a collective effort in examining how critically reflective pedagogy can be developed and implemented within leadership preparation programs (Diem & Carpenter, 2012). Educators should adopt a constructivist lens, where the goal becomes guiding knowledge construction through inquiry-based dialogue (Koballa & Glynn,

2007; Yuen & Hau, 2006). Nurenberg (2011) encourages educators to root themselves in Freirean pedagogy, pushing themselves to be more socially conscious while providing opportunities for authentic and relevant learning using curricula that highlight issues of injustice. Harven and Soodina (2016) provide specific direction to achieve this goal, encouraging educators to engage students in deconstructing texts authored by individuals from marginalized communities that call on readers to take action against systems of oppression and inequality. As students are encouraged to take action, Diem and Carpenter (2012) write that readers must also continually confront stereotypes and misconceptions. By confronting systems of oppression via readings and reflecting individually and collectively, students can start to build capacity for leading change in today's complex society.

Daniels (2002) references literature circles as part of a cooperative learning experience. Literature circles or literature study groups, are informal groups of students, voluntarily coming together to study a chosen text. The goal, described by Eeds and Wells (1989) is to move students from reading to gain only what they could use to pass a test (efferent) to make meaning from the text, understanding what they are bringing to and taking away from a text (aesthetic). Because the goal of literature circles is to have natural and sophisticated discussions, Eeds & Wells share that circle participants demonstrate an increase in content comprehension, higher levels of thinking through the reading, and a deeper engagement with the text. The association required in literature circles leads to an increase in motivation, influences social and communication skills, and allows students to gain critical understandings (Klages, Pate, & Conforti (2007).

## Description of Program and Methodology

As a method of developing meaning, understanding others and the systems that perpetuate oppression, The Oaks Leadership Scholars uses literature circles. These circles, which center texts focused on systems perpetuating inequality and injustice, reinforce knowledge and help participants extend thinking and reflection while engaging in the transformative leadership skills of questioning systems and making change to make change. The Oaks Leadership Scholars provides students with an extensive reading list covering the spectrum of justice and equity issues. The books provide context for the barriers to justice and equity (heterosexism, ableism, ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, ageism, faithism, and classism) studied each month.

The books used in the program are:

- Patricia H. Collins & Sirma Bilge's Intersectionality defines the concept of intersectionality and describes how it can be applicable across societal systems. Leaders must understand intersectionality in order to understand how the experiences of others are informed by the unique intersections of often complex identities.
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's We Should All Be Feminists, highlights the dangers of the single story of feminism which Adichie believes perpetuates a misleading narrative about women generally and feminism specifically. This book was adapted from her TED talk. This text, and its author, also provide a rich opportunity to discuss intersectional failure, and the ways in which all people, even and especially leaders fighting for one marginalized community, can, in turn, marginalize others if not careful.
- David Shipler's, The Working Poor, details case studies of people throughout the US specifically related to their work, and how that work is viewed within the larger society. Shipler delves into tenets of class struggles and poverty among those who work. This text provides an opportunity to discuss the ways that, particularly in a capitalistic economy, leaders can overlook issues of class or take issues of class for granted.
- Hope in the Dark: Untold Stories, Wild Possibilities, by Rebecca Solnit, is an essay-based account of working for transformative change. This book reinforces the need for hope and understanding when undertaking the work of transformative leadership.
- Michelle Alexander's, The New Jim Crow, is a foundational text in the area of racial justice. Alexander details the rise of the criminal justice and prison industrial complex from the foundation of slavery and Jim Crow laws. The author provides context for the disproportionate effect that the war on drugs has had on communities of color. This text is illustrative of the intersecting systems at play in our society-- a complex web of which transformational leaders must be aware of, able to navigate, and prepared to dismantle in order to create more just and equitable systems.
- The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America by Thomas King is an account of history and present-day interactions of whites and "natives." The author provides a personal account of

racial perceptions experienced in Canada and the US. King's book provides a unique approach to understanding racism, ethnocentrism, and acceptance. As much a history lesson as a contemporary illustration of ethnocentrism, the book provides an opportunity for leaders to examine their notions of who belongs and how governments systematically oppress indigenous people.

- The March by Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell is a remarkable pictorial account of the life of Congressman Lewis, particularly focusing on his work in civil rights and politics. The 3-book series lays a timeline for the work and motivation required to enact change. Perhaps the most illustrative in terms of transformative leadership in action, Congressman Lewis demonstrates that grit and determination lead to activism and change for civil rights.
- Joseph P. Shapiro's, No Pity, details how people with disabilities forged a movement that provided the foreground for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The book discusses the struggles and challenges that people with disabilities face as they work toward equality. Very much like class, the barrier of ableism is often overlooked when thinking about transforming systems. This text provides a rich opportunity to, in real ways, examine our environment for opportunities to grow and change.
- The Right Side of History: 100 Years of LGBTQI Activism, by Adrian Brooks provides a 100-year history of queer activism through first-person

accounts, snapshots, and close-ups with LGBT activists. Perhaps the most contemporary of the texts, this reads almost like a primer for transformative leadership in action, offering a glimpse into a community that even while in hiding, was able to effect significant, positive change.

The Oaks Leadership Scholars literature circles are informal sessions held during the lunch hour twice each week. Students are encouraged, but not required, to participate. The faculty have developed lesson plans for each text that emphasize key themes and address learning objectives that have emerged. Faculty begin the literature circle sessions with a set of discussion prompts built from direct quotes from the books and the learning objectives; however, they are committed to the belief that literature circles should be student driven. Thus, in accordance with Daniels (2002) assertion that literature circles are a cooperative learning experience, students are expected to come with their own questions and these often move the discussion in a different direction. We have provided lesson examples from two literature circles below.

#### Lesson One

As an example, the lesson plan for The Right Side of History includes three learning outcomes:

1. Students will be able to compare and contrast the activism and activists discussed in the text.
2. Students will be able to articulate tenets of Queer Theory and use them as a lens through which to analyze social issues.
3. Students will be able to critique the culture and practices of agriculture through a lens of Queer Theory.

In order to meet these objectives, the lesson plan establishes the following questions:

- a. Provide the group with a definition of Queer Theory on a large sheet of paper. Ask students to discuss the definition and similarities and differences with Critical Social Theory (from a previous lesson).
- b. Ask, "What kinds of activism did you see in the pieces included in the text?" Were any of the events discussed familiar to you? Which ones? Which were unfamiliar? Why might you be unfamiliar with some of this activism?
- c. Ask, "Which of these activists included in the text were you familiar with?" Where any of the people discussed familiar to you? Which ones? Which were unfamiliar? Why might you be unfamiliar with some of these activists?
- d. Ask, "What messages does society send about LGBTQ individuals? In general? In agriculture? How do those messages impact us?"
- e. Ask, "What are the messages you took away from the examples of activism in the text? What can be done in agricultural contexts?"

## Lesson Two

As an example, the lesson plan for *We Should All Be Feminists* includes two learning objectives:

1. Students will be able to compare and contrast themselves with the definition of feminism established in the text.
2. Students will be able to critique the culture and practices of agriculture through a lens of feminism.

In order to meet these objectives, the lesson plan establishes the following steps:

- a. Provide the group with Adichie's definition of feminism on a large sheet

of paper. Provide students with post-its and have them edit the definition. Discuss changes.

- b. Ask, "Do you identify as a feminist? How has that changed over time for you? What does it mean to you? How does it relate to our definition of transformative leadership?"

- c. Ask, "What messages does society send about how women should be? In general? In agriculture? How do those messages impact us?"

- d. Ask, "What does Adichie suggest feminists can do? What can be done in agricultural contexts?"

- e. Discuss Intersectional Failure by beginning with the idea that no one's social justice work is perfect and it is essential that we learn to recognize problematic pieces (intersectional failure) and address them. What can you find in Adichie's work that is problematic? Where does it come from? What should be said/done?

## Current Results

Overall the students have responded well to the texts in the literature circles. The size of the cohort (5-15) lends itself to greater accountability for completing readings and preparation for discussions. The Oaks Literature circles are regularly attended and provide an opportunity for students to follow the formal lesson extending their thinking, but also a time to engage in discussions about the texts with their peers. These discussions allow students to take the often heavy content and break it into more easily accessible pieces as they create meaning among and between one another. Students have become more engaged in the breakdown of the barriers to justice and equity

because of their readings and they have used the readings as a sort of springboard into greater action. Some of the feedback from the students are included here:

- Literature circles are a time to unpack the often heavy content that we've covered in our readings. I find them helpful because of the reflection that is encouraged and the conversation that takes place.
- Literature circles allow for us to reflect on and unpack what is learned in a one-on-one setting that allows for greater in-depth exploration of the material and our preconceived notions of the social justice issue.
- Literature circles spark something within me to change the world in which we live. Be it through frustration or excitement, I often leave literature circles wanting to take action to change the oppressive systems we just discussed.
- I always leave literature circles wanting to immediately go out and change the world. I am often both angered and energized by what I learn, and it leaves me wanting to go out and make a difference.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Readings have become an integral piece of the Oaks Leadership Scholars. Program faculty intend to continue the circles planning both formal lessons, and allowing for informal discussions to take place organically in directions that make sense for the students in attendance. Following the paradigm of transformative leadership which begins with questioning, students will continue to use the books

to craft reflective and critical thinking questions about their communities and the world at large. These questions become the catalyst for action as the students embrace their roles as positive agents for change.

Program directors recommend that faculty follow some specific practices for the use of non-fiction to teach at the apex of leadership and social justice.

1. Spend significant time preparing students for the texts. This should be done in a formal way during class and in writing in the syllabus. While in this case, the program is co-curricular, program directors still provide a syllabus that sets the students up for success. The syllabus provides direction for readings and a small introduction. Greater introductions are done during formal sessions. These introductions discuss the content of the book, walk through the theoretical foundations or premises, and in cases where the content might need a trigger warning, provides one.
2. Be prepared to debrief, not just at the end of the text reading but throughout. This can be done formally in class, and informally in literature circles or small group sessions. For this program, the small group, informal literature circles have been a successful addition to our instruction that has allowed students to dig into the texts and have an opportunity to reflect and talk through them throughout their reading.
3. Help students see how the authors have missed some intersectional issues and how they addressed others. Ask students to examine the author's identities and how they have shaped the way the author sees and represents issues and stories.

4. Help students find supplemental readings by authors with different identities than the assigned authors. Have them examine how these authors represent issues differently.

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