

TEACHING LEADERSHIP IN 'MAJOR' CONTEXTS: A 'Minor' Application

Abstract

This article describes an innovative upper-level leadership studies minor course that was created to provide a transdisciplinary-type of experience for students. Seminar and student-led in format, the general framework of the course, Leadership in 'Major' Contexts, involved students identifying topics from their own major disciplines and critically applying leadership theories, models, and concepts to them. In addition to reinforcing the idea that 'leadership is for everyone and every discipline,' students observed that, despite differences in their academic studies and intended career paths, the leadership process is actually quite similar across them. Borrowing from Super's self-concept theory of career development, the course also helped students further explore their vocational identities as they transitioned from collegiate to post-graduation careers and leadership.

Introduction

Commissioned by the Association of Leadership Educators, The National Leadership Education Research Agenda 2013-2018 (NLERA; Andenoro, Allen, Haber-Curran, Jenkins, Sowcik, Dugan, & Osteen, 2013) highlights an urgency to further develop the discipline of leadership education through both academic and co-curricular programming. To answer this call, many higher education institutions have established leadership development programs to equip students with the resources they need to become effective leaders during their collegiate and post-graduation careers (e.g., Astin & Astin, 2000; Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack, & Wagner, 2011). Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (2013) emphasize that such programs and leadership opportunities in general can and should be of interest to every student, regardless of their academic major. In considering their future careers,

Pennington (2005) echoes the criticality of promoting leadership development for all students because "every discipline, field, and profession they pursue requires effective leaders" (p. 75).

An increasing number of institutions today offer leadership curricula in the forms of academic majors and minors (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017; Dugan & Komives, 2007). The current application describes an elective that was designed to circumvent some of the common issues that often plague leadership minor courses, and more importantly, make its leadership learnings more personally relevant to students. In short, Leadership in 'Major' Contexts was an academic capstone-like experience that not only reinforced key leadership theories and models but also allowed students to cultivate their identities and self-concepts in their transition from a university domain to a vocational one.

Leadership Minors and Transdisciplinary Issues. Particularly for schools that lack resources to support a leadership major, or that simply desire to offer an academic leadership curriculum to supplement other majors, the leadership minor is a viable and valuable option. However, minor curricula are not immune to challenges, some of which are severe. With fewer course requirements than a major there is less opportunity to create interdisciplinary (Jenkins & Dugan, 2013; McKim, Sorensen, & Velez, 2015; Riggio, 2003) or transdisciplinary (Andenoro, et al., 2013) experiences that would expose students to various leadership perspectives across disciplines. Worse, minors often become a 'buffet' of isolated courses from a myriad of departments with little integration among them (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017; Pennington, 2005). Unfortunately, given that academic leadership programs are often already hampered by staffing constraints in general (Fritz, Townsend, Hoover, Weeks, Carter, & Nietfeldt, 2003; Pennington, 2005; Weeks, Weeks, Barbuto, & Langone, 2009); offering major-specific courses is usually not feasible given the lack of qualified or interested faculty members that would be required to teach them. In the absence of a transdisciplinary curriculum, it would benefit students to least take a leadership course oriented towards their own academic disciplines to examine the unique nuances of leadership inherent in them.

The Value of Personal Relevance and Development. In light of these constraints, educators must continue to pursue creative avenues in order to offer academically rigorous courses that simultaneously provide students with the transformative and developmental experiences characteristic of a purposeful leadership education program. To this end, one best practice is making course content personally relevant to students and transferable to their lives and goals (McKim et al., 2015). Creating opportunities for students to explore and forge their identities (DiPaolo, 2016; Sorensen et al., 2016) such as via the Leadership Identity Model (Komives,

Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006) is one such approach where a student ultimately aligns their leadership skills with future goals and integrates their leadership with their personal identity. The NLERA (Andenoro et al., 2013) challenges educators to draw more often upon such psychosocial, identity, and cognitive student development theories when creating leadership curricula. McKim et al. (2015) make an even more explicit call for minor curricula to directly align with students' individual personal development and to ensure that students have "... the opportunity to align experiences with their own personal situation and future orientation" (p. 61, italics added for emphasis).

Vocational Identity Development. One salient future orientation that college students typically consider is their career. Among career development models, Super's self-concept theory has been one of the most popular and frequently cited and employed over the past fifty years (Patton & McMahon, 2014; Savickas, 2002). One of the 'Big Five' career theories according to Leung (2008), its focus on a holistic developmental approach across the lifespan markedly distinguishes it from the others (Patton & McMahon, 2014; Salomone, 1996) and what makes it most relevant to the current application. In short, Super's theory explains how individuals identify with their vocations as a function of how they define themselves.

At the core of Super's theory is the development of one's self-concept, or how they picture themselves in a particular role, situation, or position (Super, 1963). Individuals thus hold myriad of self-concepts, one of which is vocational. In essence, vocational self-concept is how well an individual envisions their abilities and interests matching with particular work roles as they understand them. Vocational self-concept, according to Super, extends far beyond vocational preference. It is fundamentally a sense of identity that one strives to strengthen through vocation, which in turn influences the type of work

one chooses (Super, 1963). To the extent that a student eventually sees themselves as competent in a particular vocation that matches their values and interests, the more strongly they identify themselves by it. Choosing majors and considering potential career paths coincide directly with Erickson's (1993) 'identity versus role confusion' stage of psychosocial development. Part of this struggle to establish identity is vocational in nature, so any effort to support students' development of it before graduation could be beneficial.

A Call for Course Innovation. Super's theory and its focus on vocational self-concept is akin to Komives et al.'s (2006) model of leadership identity, if not a nice complement. Both are developmental in nature, and both are helpful to college students who are seeking to define themselves and set the stage for their future roles in leadership and work. Having progressed through more primitive stages, most college students are entrenched in Super's exploration stage which extends into early adulthood. Here, societal expectations intensify that students, particularly after the substantial time and financial investments made in an undergraduate education, must solidify their vocational identity in order to begin their careers (Savickas, 2002). Creating an opportunity for students to further formulate their budding identities, particularly in the context of studying leadership as it applies to their specific individual intended vocations, could help them better prepare for their careers as well as the leadership roles and applications in them. Moreover, doing so within the parameters of a transdisciplinary academic leadership course might offer a creative new course in a leadership minor.

Application: "Leadership in 'Major' Contexts"

Course Rationale. The current application is an innovative elective course that was designed for a school's leadership minor. This course was primarily created from a desire to provide a transdisciplinary academic experience for all leadership minor students; and, more specifically, one in which they

could think about their leadership in the context of their own individual disciplinary and career interests. Rather than synthesizing different fields' orientations of leadership as is typically done in transdisciplinary learning approaches, students applied a common perspective of leadership to different disciplines, namely, their majors. This 'common perspective' stemmed from psychology and management orientations, which Riggio (2013) notes are usually still at the core of other disciplinary perspectives. This course would come closest to 'Context' according to Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, and Arnesdorf's (2006) course categories; however, rather than examine leadership in a particular organizational or societal context, it focused on leadership in the context of each student's major area of study and related vocations.

In line with Diallo and Gerhardt's (2017) call for more deliberate course sequencing, students were required to have successfully completed the minor's core two-course sequence: Foundations of Leadership Studies, a 200-level course that uses Komives et al.'s (2013) *Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference* as the core text and serves as a general introduction to leadership; and Psychology of Leadership, a 300-level course that uses Northouse's (2018) *Leadership: Theory and Applications* and more deeply examines leadership theories and the research methods underlying them. As such, the new course served as a capstone of sorts in that these earlier learnings were now applied to a variety of students' majors and the potential vocational settings that they would soon enter. A key assumption was that the leadership content learned in earlier courses was applicable to any major or vocational context: while the specific setting and dynamics might vary for an entry-level accountant or chemist, by and large, the process according to the Relational Model of Leadership (Komives et al., 2013) is actually quite similar across disciplines. From a staffing perspective, having one instructor with deep leadership expertise pull other academic disciplines into one course using a common leadership framework is a much more efficient and feasible option than relying on multiple

instructors from different fields to teach leadership to their own major's students. The course's transdisciplinary aspect aside, consideration of leadership's applicability to their individual fields of study and intended vocations is a timely and worthy exercise for college students as they begin to solidify their identities as both workers and leaders.

Course Format and Activities. The class consisted of fifteen upper-level students who were Leadership Studies minors and represented majors from across the university's schools of business, communications, and arts and sciences. Class meetings were in seminar format, where students primarily delivered presentations and facilitated discussions. The instructor's primary role was that of facilitator, as the objective of the course was for students to drive more personalized discussions of leadership and their disciplines and major courses they were taking. Students were given wide latitude in the topics they selected, but all included thorough reviews of the particular leadership concept or theory they used and the particular 'major' context to which they applied them. Course activities were as follows:

'Major' application presentations. Each student gave two formal 20-minute PowerPoint presentations that included, a) a brief overview of the 'major' course content to which they were applying leadership; b) an overview of the particular leadership theory, model, or topic they were applying to the 'major' context or content; and c) a diagnosis and explanation of exactly how the leadership concept(s) applied to the 'major' course content. Classmates were encouraged to ask questions, both about the 'major' course or context and the leadership element, as well as bring other related leadership concepts to the discussion. In addition to serving as moderator and facilitator, the instructor also injected additional related leadership content into discussions, offered new hypothetical situations for students to consider, and

asked the audience to how particular applications could translate to their own disciplines. These were intriguing presentations and discussions, as students increasingly began personalizing leadership applications to their disciplines and intended career paths. What also made these discussions fascinating was hearing students from different academic majors engage in collective conversations about applying a discipline and practice they all knew, leadership, to fields of study they usually knew little to nothing about. Leadership was what connected the students and discussion, and students quickly saw how leadership principles truly transcended across disciplinary and occupational boundaries. As the university promotes a liberal arts education and cross-disciplinary learning and integration, it was very fitting to see students learning content from different major fields of study. A psychology major learned a little bit about the world of a finance major, a media analytics major learned a bit about the world of a public health major, and so on. Students quickly recognized a natural camaraderie among them, that of leaders, and that they generally thought about leadership and its principles in the same way.

The presentation topics were not only innovative applications of leadership to students' majors and classes, but also extremely on point. For example, a Human Service Studies major who was taking a course titled Hip Hop Culture and intended to obtain her MSW so that she could work with urban youth; applied Fiedler's (1971) Contingency Model as a means to create positive social impact through hip hop music. In accordance with the model, she outlined the specific variables in the hip hop music industry as they applied to the model's situational favorability

variables of leader position power (e.g., an artist's wealth, visibility, and social standing), task structure (e.g., improving social justice for minority groups through particular stylistic musical techniques), and leader-member relationships (e.g., the artist's 'credibility,' the audience as a trusted ally). Next, on the bases of primary sources from popular media and academia, she discussed various artists' relative standings on Fiedler's LPC scale and explained why some were more or less successful leaders in particular communities. In addition to providing a detailed overview of Fielder's theory, she provided an informative overview of hip hop's history, culture, and past and future potential roles in creating positive change in urban communities. Another student, a communications major, was taking a course in media analytics. She applied George's (2003) and Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrang's (2005) authenticity criteria to organizations' collection and ethical management of data. After a thorough review of the nature of authentic leadership and antecedents and outcomes; the student provided an overview of how company data is typically collected and managed by current programs such as GitHub, Kaggle, and Stack Overload. She then provided specific examples of how steps throughout the process could be breached through inauthentic behavior (i.e., fabricating data, allowing biases to misinterpret data, succumbing to bribes or pressures to produce desired results, etc.) well as the resulting harmful impacts on the organization, customers, and society at large. Again, as in all presentations, the student presented their 'major's context' in a manner that was understandable and instructive to the audience; provided a complete overview of the leadership topic and its related dimensions; and spent

most of the time talking about how the latter could be applied to the former.

A final example was a public health major who was taking a class titled dedicated to women's health. Interested in pursuing a career in nursing, the student discussed the overall national structure of agencies committed to women's health with a particular focus on the different leadership behaviors likely to observed at individual contributor, supervisor, manager, executive levels (Northouse, 2018). Specifically, she employed the Culturally Endorsed Leadership Behaviors (House & Javidan, 2004) as identified by the GLOBE project (see House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorman, & Gupta, 2004) and theorized how each trait would likely be manifested differently at each leadership level. In addition, the student delivered an informative presentation on some of the current trends around women's health nationally as well as globally, and referred again to how international collaboration among agencies would require adaptations to cultural differences in regard to what constitutes effective leadership.

Journal application entries. Students submitted biweekly journal entries (~750 words) which included similar information contained in the presentations but more depth on their 'major' topic as if writing for an actual audience in their field. Again, a variety of creative but realistic and appropriate applications were identified. Examples included a psychology major writing about narcissistic and anti-social personality types and relating them to the traits that consistently predict leadership effectiveness (see Judge, Ilies, Bono, & Gerhardt, 2002; Northouse, 2018). A finance major intending to work in financial consulting articulated how situational

leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969) could be applied in the context of the advisor/leader – client/follower relationship, where the former's teaching and influencing approach should be a function of the latter's commitment and competence around financial planning. A communications student interested in working in the film industry discussed how LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) could be applied to how producers managed various relationships with directors, actors, and other personnel. A political science major taking a campaign management course focused on Kotter's model of change management, and did a post-mortem analysis of the 2016 presidential candidates' campaigns using those dimensions. A management major discussed toxic leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005) and its antecedents and consequences using Uber CEO Travis Kalanick as a case study. A computer science student applied Covey's (2004) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* to the management of a large-scale data migration project, pointing out how each habit could be practiced throughout the stages as well as the potential pitfalls. A management major wrote about X-teams created to capitalize on opportunities in innovation detected in the external environment, and how they might progress through Tuckman's (1965) stages of team formation. Like the presentations, these written entries reflected critical analyses and applications of leadership to academic disciplines and vocations which were personalized to each student's individual interests.

Interviews with 'major' figures. Whereas the earlier leadership foundations course asked students to 'interview a leader in your life' as a means to show students how leaders are all among us, this

interview was decidedly more targeted to their disciplinary and vocational fields of interest. Students identified a leader in their major or intended vocation and led a semi-structured interview using a template that included questions such as: 1) how they defined leadership; 2) what they felt were the most important aspects of leadership; 3) what key developmental experiences were key to growing their leadership skills; 4) what were the most difficult situations that they faced as leaders; and 5) what they enjoyed most about leadership? In addition, students asked more job and vocational type questions such as: 1) what is different about leadership in this field than others; 2) what are the major trends in the field/organization that might influence future leadership behaviors; and 3) what sorts of leadership and professional skills are employers in that particular field looking for in new hires?

The objective here was to further explore vocational and leadership identity by having intimate conversations with a legitimate source from the student's discipline. For example, a management major interviewed a senior director of human resources, a public health major interviewed the chief of staff at a community hospital, a statistics major interviewed the director of an analytics function at a Fortune 500 corporation, and a political science major interviewed a political candidate's campaign manager. Students reported that they appreciated the enhanced credibility of responses given that their interviewee came directly from 'their' field. Also, they commented how impressed their interviewees were that they were taking such interest and care to learn about leadership in a such a localized career context.

Conclusion & Reflections

Transdisciplinary Leadership for Everyone. In their review of leadership minor programs, Diallo and Gerhardt (2017) omitted elective courses because they deemed them important but somewhat ancillary to the core of leadership education and development. However, one could argue that the current course is in essence a different type of course, in that allowed students to meaningfully explore the gamut of leadership topics in their own disciplinary contexts. As for traditional transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches to teaching leadership, this course is also different. While it examined leadership in the context of different academic majors and careers, the directionality is different; the focus is on starting from a core social-science based approach to leadership which is then extended to those different contexts rather than the other way around. Its application focus even made it an effective capstone-type course for the minor, as it prompted students to integrate all of their previous leadership learnings. Finally, the course solidified a core premise of leadership minor – that leadership is for everyone and every context.

Applying Leadership to ‘Major’ and Vocational Contexts. At this point in their collegiate careers, these upper-level students were near completion of their major studies and solidifying their transitions to post-graduate careers. Other authors (e.g., Jensen & Jetten, 2016; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012) have pointed out that institutions need to better facilitate the development of students’ professional identities because it is usually lacking but something that students very much desire. From a vocational identity perspective, the course activities allowed students to engage in important vocational development tasks specific to Super’s ‘exploration’ stage. First, having students apply leadership directly to content in their major content afforded the chance to integrate the two areas in a way they likely hadn’t before. Engaging specifically within the context of their majors allowed students to crystallize, or more realistically envision how they would or could operate as leaders in future vocational roles. As upper-level students close to completing their majors, there was less need to

specify or discern a major or intended career path; however, these activities could help confirm the decisions that had been made, which is also helpful to vocational identity development. However, by the sheer nature of the activities that required direct applications (presentation and journal entries) and investigation (interviews) of leadership in the context of their majors, students were required to actualize and begin transitioning from having a student to employee perspective.

From societal and employer perspectives, a study initiated by the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education revealed that employers repeatedly reported that many newly hired graduates were not appropriately prepared for their first jobs (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Clearly, direct engagement in internships and work experience are important vehicles to bridge academic study to professional competence. However, this course is at least an initial attempt to help students foster their identity as a leader within the context of their budding vocational identities as well as think about how they can address future situations they may face. This course is obviously not a substitution for content courses and internships in which students hone their discipline-specific knowledge and skills; however, it does prompt students to think about how a more universal concept, leadership, is applicable to their future careers.

Student Reactions. Based on their end-of-course evaluations, students had generally very positive reactions to the course, which can generally be summarized under two broad themes. The first could be described as making leadership ‘real’ and personally meaningful. Almost every student reported that they appreciated the chance the opportunity to direct apply leadership to settings they felt were personally important and would better prepare them for the future. Whereas assignments in earlier classes were more general in their applications of leadership, here students had a chance to study leadership in settings in which they may soon find themselves working. A number noted that this format forced them to remember that, as future leaders, it will be their

responsibility to apply leadership learnings to the situations they will face. No longer will they simply digest and master content from an instructor, but rather actively draw upon their knowledge to better situations in their work. Some students also reported that the course and assignments gave them a more mature perspective of their intended careers, one that was different from their content-laden major courses because it focused on leadership more than technical knowledge.

The second broad theme, engaging in student-driven pedagogy, addressed course format and the students' active involvement in managing and driving class content. Perhaps because as leadership minors these students were already oriented towards leading and autonomy, they reported that they very much appreciated the responsibility of 'creating' the class content. They were truly the experts in their major fields, so were entrusted to not only find ways to bring leadership to it but also communicate how they did so to the rest of the class. Students were given wide latitude to select the leadership content they felt most suited class topics, so in a sense it felt to them a bit like an independent study where they shared their work with others.

As a bonus, each student learned material from different disciplines that they ordinarily would not have exposure to. Particularly as this knowledge was coming directly from their from peers, students expressed a degree of satisfaction with shared learning as well as a sense of camaraderie among the group. Students noted that they enjoyed sharing and learning from each other, and frequently asked each other well-thought out follow up questions about their topic and 'major' area as well as proposed hypothetical situations to discuss. The seminar format helped achieve this, as students quickly gained the confidence to 'lead' class discussions and share perspectives while the instructor increasingly played a smaller facilitator role. Finally, an additional observation was that, despite differences among majors and vocation-specific content, students saw first-hand close how the principles and applications of leadership were remarkably similar.

Student Learning Outcomes. A key learning outcome was students' ability to appropriately and convincingly apply theoretically sound leadership principles to contexts that were relevant and meaningful to them. The leadership content in journal entries and class presentations was evaluated on the quality and depth of its completeness, which included criteria such as providing definitions and explanations of key terms and theories, making connections to related leadership learnings, providing supporting empirical findings, and providing everyday examples to increase audience understanding. Another outcome was students' ability to introduce their 'major' topic in a professional and understandable way to an audience which had no background on it; and from there, articulate clear applications of leadership to that particular context. Journal entries and presentations became increasingly more sophisticated and developed as students became more familiar with the format, and were overall of very high quality.

Related learning outcomes were the diligence and creativity with which students identified potential applications. Sometimes opportunities to infuse leadership are less obvious, even though they are important. Students were encouraged to dig deeper into both their course and leadership content to identify places where only someone intimate with the field or vocation might find. From the innovative topics described earlier, this was certainly achieved.

Finally, outcomes related to students' identification with their majors and vocations appeared to be achieved. Students not only appeared quite motivated to focus on 'their' personal majors, but demonstrated a professionalism and confidence that made them appear more as adults at work than students in a classroom. In the presentations in particular, they were very engaged facilitators who appeared inspired to teach others about leadership in their domains. Also, the interviews with 'major' figures helped students connect to their fields in a different way, namely, leadership.

Success Factors. An advantage of the course's transdisciplinary-type of approach is that it only required one instructor with expertise in leadership. For maximum effectiveness, the course requires an instructor who not only possesses deep expertise in leadership but is comfortable facilitating and guiding discussions, as well as quickly learning, applying, and building on the 'other' major content as it relates to leadership. At times, leadership applications to the 'major' course required additional critical thinking and creativity on the student's part. As such, an instructor should be comfortable playing the role of facilitator and prompting and helping students establish potential connections and solutions for which clear answers might not exist.

The course could easily be adapted to meet the requirements of a variety of different credit hours, simply by increasing or decreasing the number of class meetings and or assignments. The approach is the same, and as there are possibly an infinite number of potential applications of leadership to any field, there is no fear of running out of content. Students were given freedom to select the leadership topics of their choice; as it turned out, there was minimal overlap. To minimize potential duplication and maximize coverage of leadership topics (or as a means to ensure certain 'core' leadership topics were covered); an instructor could either assign or have students sign-up for set topics to create a degree of control of what would be covered.

Finally, it would best to keep course enrollment to no more than fifteen. This number, or, ideally, perhaps even ten, allows for a diversity of ideas and applications but ensures sufficient intimacy for active discussion and participation of all members.

Suggestions for Improvement. Despite the instructor's and students' overall positive reactions, there are aspects that could be improved. Adding more initial structure and guidance around students' selection of leadership topics would minimize the chance for topic redundancy. This almost happened a couple of times, particularly with more popular topics (e.g., transformational leadership, organizational

change). Related, the instructor offered students free reign to select their topics, which resulted on heavier coverage of certain leadership areas than others. Establishing more control over topic selection, or perhaps having students choose from a list of previously identified (by the instructor) topics would ensure balanced coverage of leadership content.

The initial presentations and journal entries varied in terms of length and content. In the future, more specific guidelines and examples of the appropriate depth of topic coverage would ensure greater consistency. Having the instructor deliver the first presentation and sharing an example of a written assignment would provide students with more concrete examples and expectations. At times, particularly in the beginning, presentations and discussion went longer than anticipated. It was hard for the instructor to interrupt such rich and engaged dialogue; however, this caused time compressions later on. Either adding more time to class meetings or contracting up front to maintain stricter time limits or more controlled discussions would help here.

Finally, although formally testing Super's theory or assessing students' vocational identity development over the course of it were not specific intentions of this course, including some sort of quantitative indicator on these aspects would be appropriate. This could be done by perhaps including a separate assignment which involves journaling their activities as they relate to each of Super's exploration phase tasks of crystallization, specialization, and actualization; as well as a pre-post type of assessment to assess growth on them. That said, the primary purpose of the course was to create a unique transdisciplinary where students applied leadership learnings to their individual majors and intended careers.

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