

## BEYOND THE WEEKLY DISCUSSION BOARD POST:

### Increasing Content Engagement in an Undergraduate Survey of Leadership Theory Course

#### Abstract

Blogging can be an effective way for students to increase their engagement with course content. Using their daily lives as a leadership laboratory enables students to observe leadership theories in familiar contexts. This application brief discusses a semester-long assignment where students were asked to reflect on, synthesize, and apply course material through a personal blog. This assignment has been used in an online undergraduate survey of leadership theory course for non-leadership majors. Students reported that maintaining a personal blog helped them improve their critical thinking skills, recognize and document the practicality of the course material, and remain accountable and learning throughout the entire semester. Two recommendations are presented for instructors considering a reflective blog assignment: avoid being too prescriptive in the questions asked and refrain from requiring students to comment on each other's work.

#### Introduction

As leadership educators, we teach our students that leadership is happening all around them and that leadership occurs at all levels of an organization (Northouse, 2019). Presenting leadership as a collaborative process rather than a position often challenges students' conceptualization of leadership as well as who is and is not a leader (Shehane et al., 2012; Wielkiewicz et al., 2012). Working through the cognitive dissonance that follows is a natural part of any development process (Collier & Rosch, 2016). However, students who are at the beginning stages of their own leadership development may struggle to know how to improve their effectiveness as a leader as well as how to assist others in their leadership development (Collier & Rosch, 2016; Shehane et al., 2012).

Addressing these concerns can be facilitated more easily in a face-to-face leadership course, as discussions and interactions between the students or between the students and instructor are natural byproducts of being in the same physical space. But what happens to students with similar concerns are enrolled in an asynchronous online leadership course where real-time discussions either with the professor or their classmates are not feasible? Without the luxury of being in a classroom simultaneously with their students, online instructors typically endeavor to leverage technology to recreate that sense of shared space and encourage engagement with the material, classmates, and instructors (Champion & Gunlaugson, 2018; Mooney et al., 2014).

As leadership educators, we have a duty to help our students shift their focus from merely acquiring information to applying what they are learning in real

time within their unique context and in alignment with their capacity and competence as emerging leaders. In this application paper, I detail a reimagined approach to reflective journaling to help students recognize the practicality and applicability of leadership theories across contexts, discuss outcomes and implications of the assignment, and discuss considerations for those looking to incorporate a similar assignment.

## Review of Literature

The demand for online courses is rising (Champion & Gunnlaugson, 2018). Online courses are convenient for college students and often are a better fit with a student's class or work schedule, and online courses can also benefit the institution. Without classroom availability dictating the time and size of a course, online courses are able to reach more students than many of their face-to-face counterparts (Manning-Ouellette & Black, 2017; Richardson & Swan, 2003), and they give institutions greater flexibility in course delivery. Subsequently, online education is becoming "an integral part of academic institutions" (Barber et al., 2013, p. 17), not just for enrollment management but also for campus safety. For example, transitioning courses into a remote, online setting enabled faculty to keep teaching and students to keep learning during the COVID-19 global pandemic while attempting to reduce virus transmission.

In recent years, a variety of computer mediated communication tools, like class forums, electronic discussion boards, social media platforms, and blogs have all been adopted in collegiate courses (Palmer et al., 2008; Simpson, 2002). The electronic discussion board was the most prevalent tool (Evans et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2016; Jo et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2008). However, frequency of use does not automatically mean quality of use, as the efficacy of discussion boards has been debated (Champion & Gunnlaugson, 2018).

Typically with discussion boards, students are required to respond to a series of prompts provided by the instructor and then comment on the discussion posts of other students in the course (Palmer et al., 2008). Ideally, these comments build into a conversation among the students; however, experience has shown that in undergraduate courses, many posts never reach the level of a full discussion with a variety of students engaging in an on-going conversation in response to an original post (Jo et al., 2017). Rather, undergraduate students tend to only post the minimum amount and quality of new and reply messages to receive credit (Kim & Shaw, 2014; Palmer et al., 2008). Furthermore, simply asking students to read and comment on their peers' discussion posts does not automatically generate meaningful content, increase critical thinking, or deepen the learning of the students involved (Mooney et al., 2014). As a result, for many students, the discussion board becomes a routine box to check for the week, rather than an opportunity to analyze, synthesize, or apply the course material in their unique context (Evans et al., 2017).

Multiple studies have shown that reflecting on past leadership experiences, rather than reflecting on theoretical or conceptual aspects, is one of the best ways for students to develop their leadership competency and capacity (Cain et al., 2012; Gifford, 2010). Indeed, as Jenkins (2012) noted, reflective journaling is one of the most common pedagogical tools used by instructors of in-person undergraduate leadership courses. But "most common" does not mean widely adopted by faculty nor adopted for the entire semester, as reflective journals were used by fewer than 22% of study participants and were used in only one-third of class sessions (Jenkins, 2012). A separate study of faculty who teach undergraduate leadership courses online revealed similar results in that reflective journals were common but not widely used (Jenkins, 2016).

Helping students reflect is not the only benefit of

using a blog as a course assignment. Previous research has proposed that blogs “can promote creative, intuitive, and associational thinking” (Cain et al., 2012, p. 73), even without requiring comments from other class members. The general applicability of the competencies taught within leadership studies programs is a strength leadership educators should be actively vocalizing to our students. Specifically, the multi-dimensional nature of leadership studies courses provides students opportunities to develop transferable skills for multiple contexts (Chan et al., 2012).

Effectively supporting students as they connect their leadership learning to multiple contexts can be a challenge in a face-to-face course and an even greater challenge in an asynchronous online course. However, intentionally utilizing integrative learning techniques provides the scaffolding whereby students can practice and develop abilities such as creative or critical thinking. The use of integrative approaches to learning supports students as they work to “think the world together [rather] than think it apart” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 22). Integrated learning exceeds compelling students to make connections between disciplines. Rather, it is the ability to first reflect on, then synthesize, and then apply what the student learned in one context into a new and different context (Owen, 2015). To thrive in this post-industrial world, students need to be able to integrate what they learn across disciplines and throughout their lives (Huber & Hutchings, 2004). By facilitating reflection, connection, and application between leadership theories and the varied contexts occurring in daily life, students are given opportunities to develop skills and competencies needed to think critically and solve problems in innovative ways. Thus, using a continuous, semester-long personal blog without commenting on others’ work in place of using multiple discussion boards or written reflection assignments provides a unique avenue for eliciting integrative learning in undergraduate students.

## Description of the Application

Admittedly, blogging is not a new pedagogical tool, yet this assignment was a reimagined approach to reflective journaling to help students recognize the practicality and applicability of leadership theories across contexts. This assignment has been used in an online non-majors section of an undergraduate survey of leadership theory course. The course was taught 100% asynchronously and typically has more than 100 undergraduate students from a wide variety of majors across the institution enrolled each fall and spring semester. For approximately one-third of the students enrolled, this course was the only academic leadership course they took in college.

The assignment consisted of having each student use the blog feature in the campus-adopted learning management system (currently Blackboard) to create and maintain a personal blog throughout the entire semester. Each week, between two and four guiding question prompts were presented to the students. The questions were not designed to spark discussion or have the students simply reiterate key concepts discussed that week in lecture or the course readings, but to encourage critical reflection on, synthesis of, and application of the course material discussed that week within the unique context of each student’s daily life. Thus, their daily lives became leadership laboratories, the spaces and places whereby they were able to practice and observe the course content in action. The students were not asked to significantly change their normal daily activities, but they were asked to view the world around them through the lens of a leadership scholar and write about their observations and experiences. Listed in Table 1 are examples of the guiding questions students answered in this assignment.

Each student was required to submit at least eleven posts over the course of the semester; a minimum of one post a week, except for the first week of the semester and the weeks of exams. The students were encouraged to express their creativity with the assignment and approach it as they would if they were writing a personal blog. They were also

Table 1.  
Personal Reflection Blog Guiding Questions

Course Topic	Example Questions
Power	How has your membership in various groups (student organizations, jobs, etc.) influenced the way you lead and the types of power you use? Explain.
Leadership Behaviors	Provide an example from this week where you “caught” yourself demonstrating your preferred leadership orientation (task-oriented or relationship-oriented).  Provide an example of when someone’s leadership orientation got in the way of their effectiveness as a leader (can be from your own life, if you choose). What could they have done to be a more effective leader?
Path-Goal Theory	Should a leader adapt their style to meet the needs and remove the obstacles of each individual, or the group as a whole?  What do you see as the follower’s role in Path-goal Theory? Explain.
Leader-Member Exchange	Contrast the experiences of in-group and out-group members in an organization with which you affiliate. Provide examples.  Think of a professional relationship you are a part of where you are in the stranger phase. Work this week to move along the leadership-making continuum to acquaintance and/or mature partnership phases. How did you do?
Transformational Leadership	In your chosen field of study/career path/what you want to do after graduation, do you believe it is possible to be a truly transformational leader? Why or why not?
Servant Leadership	How does your desire to serve others fit with your aspiration to lead? Explain.
General Reflection	How has your understanding of leadership changed so far this semester? [asked at the midpoint of the semester]  Review your virtual introduction and what you hoped to learn this semester. Have you learned what you hoped to learn? Have you learned more/less? Explain. [asked at the end of the semester]

required to include a form of media with each post and connect it to their observations and experiences that week. In other words, the posts were not simply to become another version of a discussion board with students merely responding to the questions posed by the instructor. From music lyrics, television or movie clips, to experiences in other courses, at their jobs or with student organizations, to illustrations of their intermural teams, roommates or families, all aspects of their lives served as potential examples and source material to draw upon for inclusion in their blog posts.

The structure and timing of feedback for the blogs reinforced the practicality and applicability of the course content, regardless of individual context. Requiring weekly blog posts over the entire semester provided structure to the course and helped the students gain confidence in their ability to reflect, synthesize the material, apply what they were learning, and accurately recognize leadership theories or approaches in their daily lives as the semester progressed. Grading the blogs each week provided the students with ongoing formative feedback. The blogs were graded on the depth of the reflection,

specifically how the students were able to connect and apply course material to their daily lives, not on the specific contexts or examples used.

## Discussion of Outcomes and Implications

A majority of students had a very positive reaction to this assignment. Many found it to be an effective learning tool and preferred it to the typical discussion

board assignment. One of the prompts for the final blog post of the semester asked students to reflect on using a weekly blog as a forum to process and apply course material each week. Open coding of the students' responses was followed by axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), which led to the designation of six benefits identified by the students from maintaining a semester-long blog. Several students mentioned how keeping a blog helped them improve their learning of the course material as they applied the concepts in their lives (Table 2).

Table 2.  
Student Voices: Application and Increased Learning

Theme	Example Quotes
Application	<p>"This is what makes this course so unique because we get the chance to assess ourselves and what we have learned, then apply it to our own lives and leadership styles... Something about reflecting over what we have learned each week in a blog post helps the knowledge stick better in my brain and applying it to my own life and experiences takes my understanding to the next level. I began to appreciate these bogs posts more and more as the semester progressed." (Spring-26)</p> <p>"Having a weekly blog on the lesson helped me dive into each leadership theory more than had I just read the material. Having to write from my own experiences draws real-life examples to the lessons and shows that the text has real implications on how to lead." (Spring-22)</p> <p>"I enjoyed this practice overall as it really helped me by forcing me to be independent with the knowledge gained, and then forced to improve my courage and go apply the knowledge to the world around me." (Spring-56)</p> <p>"This is the first class I have had to blog in and it has changed the way I think about writing. Instead of dreading weekly writing, blogging has created a way for me to express my ideas and opinions. After getting the hang of blogging, it became a great way for me to process and apply the material to leadership scenarios in my week. By relating the material to my life, I was able to better understand it." (Spring-58)</p>
Increased Learning	<p>"To be honest I didn't think it would work writing a blog, but however as I went through this course and started writing these I realized I had learned more than [sic] I had thought. It is a very smart idea and I really liked it and wish more of my classes did this. I actually looked forward to the blog at the end of the week each week." (Spring-75)</p> <p>"At first, I did not like the process of having a blog to reflect... However, as the semester went on, I actually found it very helpful. I started thinking about concepts throughout the day and what to write at random times which helped me consistently write memorable and impactful things in my life pertaining to leadership. I am glad the blog had me thinking on these terms." (Fall-25)</p> <p>"Using a blog to reflect was definitely new to me and I had never done such a project before. Doing so made me more conscious of the things that I was learning. It was definitely a great process for me to learn the course material as it forced me to apply the material to my life and real-world situations." (Spring-48)</p>

Students also commented specifically about the connection between their thinking and this assignment. These statements represent students' views on how blogging helped them think about the course material more critically or in deeper or more meaningful ways (Table 3).

Table 3.  
Student Voices: Critical Thinking and Deeper Thinking

Theme	Example Quotes
Critical Thinking	"It [the blog] allowed me to critically think about the new material we learned for that week and know how to apply it to our future jobs. It allowed me to put things into perspective and go in-depth into the lecture material. Throughout this semester, I got much better at taking the information I learned and applying it to my life. It was a very beneficial assignment and I enjoyed doing it." (Spring-61)
	"By having to write these blog posts it has made me think more critically of the material in each chapter and I have also had to go back and look at it multiple times with each blog so it helps me retain the material I learn. Throughout the semester I feel like I got more comfortable with my blogs and with discussing my role in a workplace and understanding it." (Spring-24)
	"The blog made me think more about what I have learned from the lectures and chapters. As the semester progressed... I thought more about what I was reading and watching and I started feeling more confident in the material." (Spring-36)
Deeper Thinking	"Doing these blogs every week has been really fun and a cool way to take in the material I have learned. It made me really look at what I learned that week and actually think about it in a deeper meaning. After the first week of doing the blog, my critical thinking to me approved [sic] as I caught the hang of it." (Fall-38)
	"I loved writing a blog. I think it is such a good way to get all my thoughts out, don't be afraid of someone's comments or people judging. I never thought I was going to spend so much time and write so personal that I did, but I think it really helped me learn more and also to think about leadership in different ways with different questions being asked." (Fall-20)
	"Using a blog as a way to reflect on what I have learned each week is BRILLIANT. The blog questions allowed myself to really think deep about what I have read/listened to each week. Most professors make their classes do discussion posts/responses, and I find those really useless and stupid. Blog posts allowed me to reflect upon the week and how to apply that leadership aspect to my week." (Fall-58)

Several students mentioned how blogging kept them accountable and up to date with the material, which can be challenging in an asynchronous online course. Other students discussed how blogging helped them increase their awareness of their own leadership styles and behaviors, as well as how present leadership concepts were in their daily lives (Table 4).

Table 4.

Student Voices: Accountability and Increased Awareness of Leadership

Theme	Example Quotes
Accountability	<p>"I enjoyed getting to create blog posts each week because it not only held me accountable for staying on top of my coursework and notes in this class but also to reflect on my own life... Towards the end of the semester, I started to write more and more into my blogs, which I enjoyed because I reflected more." (Fall-68)</p> <p>"Expressing yourself is always something that one can work on and improves the way you think about a subject. The blogs are an organized way to keep track of your learning, and through that organization one is able to practically build upon the skills learned." (Spring-56)</p> <p>"Writing a blog weekly also made sure I held myself accountable. Being able to write something each week made the things learned in the course ingrained into my brain, resulting to [sic] huge improvements on my exam scores. As the semester went, I started to enjoy the blogs more because I was able to apply them in real life." (Spring-87)</p> <p>"I liked the blog aspect because I could formulate ideas and how I felt about lessons, situations, and questions that we were to focus on weekly. I liked how to [sic] could go back and see how I processed a given lesson as well. This worked for me because it held me accountable for learning the material in a personal and private way and gave me an outlet to process it." (Fall-5)</p> <p>"Also, with it being an online class, the blog helped hold me accountable for learning the material and making sure I had fully grasped the concepts, which sometimes I lose sight of when my classes are online." (Fall-49)</p>
Increased Awareness of Leadership	<p>"The guiding questions were always relevant and helped me think critically about each theory. I also noticed so much more leadership and followership happening in my life than I would have without having this blog." (Spring-91)</p> <p>"And through the reflection blogs I was able to see how present leadership is every day, even when I'm not looking... I was taught that leadership takes many different forms, and should be adjusted based on the situation and people you are working with, because not all styles are always effective." (Fall-64)</p> <p>"As the semester progressed I did not only change my mentality about leadership but I changed as a leader. I tried to apply the some [sic] theories and examples to my everyday life. But most importantly it allowed me to figure out what kind of leader and follower I am." (Spring-44)</p> <p>"Writing these weekly blogs allowed me... to weekly re-access how far I had come and what I had learned for the week." (Fall-3)</p> <p>"I was uncertain about the blog aspect of the course because many professors</p>

Even the students who reported they were not fans of blogging saw the educational benefit of the assignment. One student commented:

To be honest, I am not a fan of blog's [sic]. I don't read them, and I don't enjoy writing them... That being said, I see the value in doing something that you don't like doing,

or don't normally do- goes with stepping outside of your comfort zone and that's how people grow/develop. I think the blog helped me process the material because I had to think of situations/examples that concepts applied to and it helped me define a theory by using a real-life

situation. One of my favorite things about blogging is that I don't feel pressured to assemble each sentence as though it is the greatest sentence ever. I enjoy being raw and informal. (Fall-36).

A second student mentioned:

Personally, I really did not like using the blogs to reflect on each week's materials... However, I can say this helped me to truly reflect on the concepts and how to implement them in my own life. Overall, I didn't enjoy having to write out a blog each week, but they were useful in understanding and processing the material. (Spring-18)

From the students' responses contained within their final blog post, the weekly blog assignment helped students in an asynchronous online environment develop their leadership behaviors. Students reported that keeping a blog helped them think more critically and deeply about what it means to be a leader. This supports previous research that reflection is a useful way to develop leadership competency and capacity (Cain et al., 2012; Gifford, 2010) and that keeping a blog can promote critical and deeper thinking (Mooney et al., 2014). The students also commented how keeping a blog was a good way to recognize and document the practicality of the course material as well as how prevalent and relevant leadership concepts were in their daily lives. Their lives became active leadership laboratories where they could observe, synthesize, and apply what they were learning in class in new and varied contexts, which suggests that integrative learning was occurring (Huber & Hutchins, 2004; Owen, 2015). Students also felt like the timing and structure of the assignment kept them accountable and learning throughout the entire semester.

## Recommendations

This assignment can be easily adapted to the specific content of other courses. While it is relatively easy to

set up a blog in most learning management systems, they can be time intensive when it comes to grading. From my experience using this blog assignment over multiple years, I have two recommendations for other leadership educators who are considering implementing a similar assignment. First, avoid the temptation of being too prescriptive or theoretical in the questions asked. Rather, ask questions that require students to explore their context to make their own meaningful connections through examples of and ways to apply the course content each week. A blog is not a repackaged discussion board. From my experience, decreasing the prescriptive nature of the assignment does not negatively impact student learning. Encourage creativity through the blog format or required aspects of the assignment, for example, requiring the use of media to support students' insights. By design, blogs are more personal, reflective, and organic in nature. Therefore, if the blog format is to work, students need the freedom to highlight and explore the examples they find meaningful or relevant to the course material and opportunities to apply course content to their unique context.

Second, avoid the need to have students comment on their peers' work. Having students comment on their peers' posts would ideally create a multi-person, multi-post discussion and a sense of community, but it can also lead to students sterilizing their initial posts and limiting their comments on their peer's work for fear of being vulnerable, ridiculed, or ostracized. Using this assignment over multiple years, multiple students have mentioned how they appreciated not having to comment on the posts of others and the freedom to write about what they found meaningful to them at that moment. Moreover, I have found students tend to be more vulnerable and honest in their writing when they know their peers will not be judging or commenting on their work. I have also noticed that as the semester progresses and students gain confidence using their lives as leadership laboratories, they tend to increase the length of their blog posts, without prompting from me, and deepen their critical thinking about and application of the

course material.

If a goal of leadership education is to help our students shift their focus from merely acquiring information to applying what they are learning outside the classroom, then instructors must create assignments where continuous application is focused and reinforced. One way to encourage students to increase their engagement with the course content through application is by assigning a semester-long reflective blog. Using their daily lives as a leadership laboratory, rather than contrived situations or scenarios, enables students to observe what leadership theories and approaches look like, as well as test these concepts in timely and familiar contexts. Working within the familiarity of their own contexts can remove perceived barriers to application, help students increase their self-awareness and vulnerability, and encourage students to discuss course material with others inside their spheres of influence. When instructors shift the focus of the questions asked to personal application and remove the requirement to comment on the posts of others, the likelihood of integrated learning increases and the likelihood of students merely providing the answer they think their professor wants decreases.

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