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Student-Centered Transformative Learning in Leadership Education: An Examination of the Teaching and Learning Process

Paige Haber-Curran¹ and Daniel W. Tillapaugh²

Abstract

Innovative and learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning are vital for the applied field of leadership education, yet little research exists on such pedagogical approaches within the field. Using a phenomenological approach in analyzing 26 students' reflective narratives, the authors explore students' experiences of and process of learning within a student-centered and inquiry-focused leadership capstone course. The process of this transformative learning experience is represented in five themes, which include the following: (1) challenging mental models of learning, (2) building trust, (3) finding freedom and empowerment, (4) deepening commitment to learning, and (5) reframing learning and self. Additionally, the students' approach to learning changed throughout the course, shifting from dependence/independence toward interdependence. Implications for the use of this pedagogy and areas for future research are discussed.

Keywords

transformative pedagogy, transformative learning, adult learning

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A primary aim of American higher education is developing students who will be contributing members to society (Astin & Astin, 2000). Accordingly, colleges and universities emphasize competencies such as leadership development, interpersonal skills, and critical thinking in their mission statements and student learning outcomes (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2009; Keeling, 2004). There remains a gap between these desired outcomes and instructional methods employed in the college classroom (Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001; Singham, 2007; Thomas, 2009). Traditional approaches to education focus on “teaching delivery rather than on student learning” (Shepherd & Coggriff, 1998, p. 349), with a model of teaching often in which the instructor seeks to control and determine the learning of the students (Dyson, 2010). Lecture-based teaching can result in a lack of learner motivation and disengagement. Further, literature suggests a serious gap between the content and its applicability to practice, whereby students often “fail to develop the full battery of skills and abilities desired in a contemporary college graduate” (Duch et al., 2001, p. 4). This challenge is not only a disservice to students, but also to society, which is in need of people who have the capacity to lead and mobilize positive change.

There is an influx of formal leadership programs, both curricular and cocurricular, on college campuses aiming to develop leadership capacity in their students (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack, & Wagner, 2011). As such programs are developed, there is a need to examine the role that student-centered transformative approaches to teaching and learning may have within the context of formal leadership education and development programs. In this article, we present the theoretical framework for the study and different pedagogical approaches supporting transformative learning within leadership education. We then provide background information about the study by discussing the context of the leadership studies minor, how we constructed the syllabus and curriculum, and how we managed our instructor role and authority. Then, we present the methods and findings from a study on the experiences of undergraduate students in a leadership studies course in which student-centered and inquiry-focused approaches to teaching and learning were used. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and implications for practice and future research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this process was adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). Adaptive leadership represents contemporary thinking within the field of leadership studies and focuses on the complex challenges we face that do not have clear or identifiable solutions. Heifetz (1994) suggests people often address adaptive challenges with technical solutions, which involve surface-level fixes that only temporarily solve the adaptive issues. Innovative approaches are required for solving adaptive challenges, and transformation within one’s self and/or within a group must take place, whereby individuals or groups must shift their beliefs, values, and/or behaviors and examine the issue through a systems perspective (Heifetz, 1994).

Adaptive leadership meets the leadership needs of society today, which is increasingly characterized by complexity and uncertainty.

Transformative and Student-Centered Learning

At its core, adaptive leadership requires transformational shifts within individuals and groups through critical self-reflection and the ability to shift one's perspective, understanding, and behavior (Daloz Parks, 2005; Heifetz, 1994). The aims of transformative learning are consistent with the framework of adaptive leadership. Moving away from deductive and empirical approaches to learning, transformative learning involves adjusting one's "problematic frame of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). King and Kitchener's (1994) framework of reflective judgment further supports the process and aims of adaptive leadership; the framework outlines a process of how one views and acquires knowledge. As one's development becomes more complex, an individual recognizes the uncertainty of knowledge and actively engages in the process of ongoing inquiry.

Transformative learning is a process, and instructors play a pivotal role in constructing learning environments in which students learn to be critically reflective and examine their own beliefs. Instructors who promote transformative learning "create a common ground of intellectual commitment . . . [and] stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over" (Boyer, 1997, p. 24). Student learning is at the core of transformative education; thus, instruction moves past the control-based models of teaching to be student centered (Dyson, 2010).

Pedagogical approaches used within the classroom can have a direct influence on the environmental capacity for transformative learning to occur. Many scholars (Boyer, 1997; Duch et al., 2001; Freire, 2000; Mezirow, 2003) highlight that pedagogies that reinforce traditional learning (i.e., lecture, learning by rote) can stifle students' opportunities for transformative learning. We adopted pedagogical approaches that were student-centered and encouraged reflection and inquiry, which included problem-based learning (PBL), feminist and critical race pedagogies, cogenerative dialogue, and case-in-point pedagogy, which are discussed subsequently.

PBL

PBL is a "student-driven, collaborative and reflective learning process" (Shepherd & Cogswiff, 1998, p. 348) in which students are faced with real-world problems resembling those they are likely to face in the future. PBL challenges traditional approaches to instruction that emphasize *what* students should know, instead of

emphasizing *how* knowledge can be acquired and applied in practice (Shepherd & Cogswright, 1998). Further, this pedagogy challenges traditional classroom authority structures whereby the instructor provides the problem and acts as a consultant to the students. Students engaged in PBL work demonstrated higher levels of student engagement and motivation as well as reasoning, problem solving, and other cognitive skills (Shepherd & Cogswright, 1998).

PBL facilitates the type of change needed within higher education curriculum and enables students to learn “‘*how* to think’ rather than ‘*what* to think’” (Thomas, 2009, p. 245). Cunningham and Cordeiro (2006) suggest PBL fits neatly within the context of leadership studies, particularly as it strengthens one’s critical thinking skills and knowledge acquisition. Through PBL, students gain insights from feedback from their peers and their instructor as well as through self-reflection activities. This creates double-loop learning, a concept coined by Argyris (2002) that captures learning that happens through attempting to reach a goal over time and ultimately changing the goal or discarding it completely due to increased perspective; double-loop learning is identified by researchers as vital in dealing with complex problems (Senge, 2006).

Feminist and Critical Race Pedagogy

Feminist and critical race pedagogical approaches inform transformative learning, particularly as it relates to authority dynamics within the classroom. Feminist and critical race approaches center learning as a liberatory act. Dirkx (1998) discusses liberatory learning as transformative learning and as a pedagogical approach whereby students engage in a “meaning-making process aimed at fostering a democratic vision of society and self-actualization of individuals” (p. 9); this connects with Freire’s (2000) concept of emancipatory learning where individuals are engaged in learning that raises both individual and collective consciousness through praxis, or the intersection of dialogue and action to create deeper learning meant to enact social change (Dirkx, 1998). As Cranton and Taylor (2012) maintain, “Transformative learning theory need not be about individual transformation *or* social change; it is about both” (p. 10).

The role of the traditional classroom is also challenged; the classroom becomes a “place where consciousness is interrogated, where meanings are questioned, and means of analysis and criticism of the social world as well as of a text or assignment are encouraged” (Weiler, 1988, pp. 114–115). Thus, instructors using these approaches attempt to maintain a flattened hierarchy while subscribing to administrative practices dictated by institutions, such as the individual grading process, which may not adequately measure one’s learning (Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 1994). These frameworks suggest compelling arguments to encourage instructors to deviate from the traditionally prescribed role of professor and encourage students to take up their authority in their learning.

Cogenerative Dialogue

Cogenerative dialogue is a collaborative approach to teaching and learning that seeks to transform “the teaching-learning context for the purpose of improving both teaching and learning” (Stith & Roth, 2010, p. 369). Cogenerative dialogue honors the experiences, understandings, perspectives, and roles of everyone in the class, regardless of the role (LaVan & Beers, 2005). Together, teachers and students assess their process, “cogenerating” and negotiating ideas for how the class can best operate through continuously reexamining and determining ground rules, roles, and responsibilities for the teachers and students (Tobin, 2006). This provides an “opportunity for participants to identify and review practices that are unintended and habitual, while discussing the power relationships, roles, and agency of all of the stakeholders” (LaVan & Beers, 2005, p. 326). Cogenerative dialogue reflects the aims of transformative learning, providing an opportunity for students to engage in authentic learning experiences in which they learn to work effectively with others, learn from their behaviors, and take responsibility for their learning.

Case-in-Point Pedagogy

Used specifically within the context of leadership education and with a focus on adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994), case-in-point pedagogy provides the opportunity for students and instructors to use dynamics occurring within the classroom as means to practice one’s leadership and to learn about leadership and organizations (Daloz Parks, 2005). Case-in-point is informed by and reflects the self-analytic approach of examining social systems reflected in the Tavistock tradition and group relations work (Hayden & Molenkamp, 2002); Heifetz (1994) and Daloz Parks (2005) provide guidance in bringing these concepts into a classroom setting. The group uses itself as a case study, honoring what takes place in the classroom as “an occasion for learning and practicing leadership within a social group . . . [the classroom is] a social system inevitably made up of a number of different factions and acted on by multiple forces” (Daloz Parks, 2005, p. 7). The group seeks to operate in the “here and now”; while dynamics are unfolding, group members come to understand themselves within that space, learn how the group is organizing itself, and understand how systems play a role within their “organization” or social system (Daloz Parks, 2005). Reflection is central to this work, allowing students and instructors to learn from their experiences and gain new understandings of oneself, one’s approaches to leadership, one’s relationship with others, and the overall system (McIntosh, 2010).

Pedagogical Approach

Our approaches to teaching the capstone leadership course blended aspects of the aforementioned pedagogical tools in seeking to facilitate transformative learning

that was student-centered and inquiry-focused. Subsequently, we discuss the context of the minor and course, how we constructed the syllabus and curriculum, and how we managed our instructor role and authority.

Context

The undergraduate leadership studies minor at the University of San Diego (USD) exists with the purpose of preparing students to take responsibility for their lives and their communities to address the critical leadership challenges of the 21st century and beyond. The leadership studies minor espoused the idea that one can engage in leadership from anywhere in an organization, with or without formal authority. An assessment of the minor indicated graduates wished they would have developed a greater capacity to “lead in the real world.” Assessment results prompted significant program changes, one of which included transforming the capstone leadership course, which served as a culminating experience for students. Within the course, traditional approaches to teaching and learning were challenged using the variety of pedagogical approaches previously described to facilitate transformative learning.

Syllabus and Curriculum

Death to the Syllabus! (Singham, 2007) served as a source of inspiration, as we sought to transform this course. Singham (2007) discusses how the typical controlling college syllabus discourages student learning, and he challenges this norm by using syllabi that include students in the decision-making processes of the course. In seeking to challenge the traditional syllabus, we identified ways in which the syllabus (and thus our approach) could enable students to have a voice in the course. The course was taught 3 times during the duration of data collection, and the syllabus and our approaches included similar themes yet differed slightly each time.

We stressed this course would involve students as active cocreators, communicated in the syllabus as “The purpose of this course is to take responsibility for your own learning about leadership.” Informed by the tenets of PBL, we provided the course description and the learning outcomes of the course but left much of the course direction up to the students. To a great extent, the students determined what they wanted to learn, how they wanted to learn it, course deliverables, expectations for themselves and others, and assessment of their learning.

In reflecting on the pedagogical approaches of case-in-point teaching and cogenerative dialogue, we prioritized making space for students to learn from the group process. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), it is essential to create a holding environment, or “a space formed by a network of relationships within which people can tackle tough, sometimes divisive questions without flying apart” in which individuals can take on leadership (p. 102). Initially, we began this process through word in the course syllabus, but also action in our facilitation. In the syllabus, we stated, “Throughout the course students will continuously examine the group process to

better understand and apply leadership concepts to practice.” To implement this, we used various strategies. One strategy was spending the last 20 minutes of class discussing group dynamics. Another was to intervene during a class session to “pause” the process and help the students examine the emerging group dynamics. A final strategy was to assign the students a research project in which they studied their group process to discern what they were learning about themselves and leadership. These strategies allowed the students to examine how they learn, how they make decisions, and how dynamics such as authority, trust, communication, and roles influence the leadership process.

Role and Authority

As is inherent in the strategies described previously, the traditional role of instructor and authority dynamics of a classroom were challenged. Singham (2007) wrote:

It is assumed that we have to teach in an authoritarian manner because of the way students are. However, all the literature on student motivation has convinced me that the opposite is likely to be true: students act the way they do because we treat them the way we do. (p. 55)

Feminist and critical race pedagogy informed our views on the authority dynamics within the course. Although our styles of teaching are naturally student focused, we shifted the authority dynamics even more with the goal of empowering the students to engage in the co-creation of course structure and curriculum. We arranged chairs and tables in a horseshoe formation and mixed up our placement among the students rather than at the front of the class. We approached our roles as “consultants” and how we took up our roles shifted based on the needs of the group. Some of these behaviors included sitting back and observing, probing or challenging, providing suggestions or guidance, participating as a group member, and teaching concepts. At times, we also chose to be physically absent, so the students could experience what it was like without formal authority present.

Although we experienced the students expressing great excitement and opportunity with having a professor in a different type of role, they also seemed to feel anxious, looking to us for guidance and to alleviate their anxiety. It was tempting for us to fulfill the students’ desires and fall into the traditional instructor–student relationship. However, we resisted and were transparent about this decision (see Tillapaugh and Haber-Curran, 2013, for details regarding our experiences teaching in this way). We relied on Heifetz’s (1994) notion of *putting the work back on the group*. This framework suggests leaders often are asked to take on the work of the group when the team is uncertain or dealing with ambiguity; however, rather than engage in this process and take on the work, leaders should instead put the responsibility back on the collective group (Heifetz, 1994). These pedagogical approaches were a new addition to the leadership studies minor and warranted examination. Thus, we sought

to examine how students experienced the course and their process of learning through the use of student-centered and inquiry-focused pedagogies.

Method

This phenomenological study addressed the following research question: How do students describe the experience and process of their learning in a student-centered, inquiry-focused leadership course? The aim of phenomenological research is to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Through the analysis of multiple narratives, the researcher describes the meaning of participants’ lived experiences of a phenomenon through identifying themes spanning multiple stories (Creswell, 2007).

Participants were 28 traditionally aged undergraduate students enrolled in the leadership capstone course at the USD. Closely reflecting the demographics of the leadership minor and the university, participants were predominately White and approximately three-quarters of the participants were women. Twenty-six of the participants were juniors or seniors, and two were sophomores. Participants’ final reflection papers in the course, ranging from approximately 4 to 15 pages, served as the source of data for the study. Participants were asked to describe what they learned in the course, how they viewed leadership as a result of the course, and how they contributed to the learning that took place in the course. Students were invited to participate in the study once the course was complete so as not to influence students’ assignments or experiences.

Data collection spanned three sections of the course from 2008 to 2010; each section had approximately 12 students enrolled. Although the pedagogical approaches in each section varied slightly, the instructors deliberately employed pedagogical approaches that were informed by the aforementioned transformative and student-centered learning approaches. Further, since much of the course’s direction was up to the students, each section played out differently. Despite this variance in experience, the researchers felt there was substantial commonality in the course structure and format, and the data supported this conjecture, whereby the themes identified spanned student data across the three sections. It was outside of the purpose of this study to examine differences across the three sections, serving as a limitation of this study.

Phenomenological data analysis involves capturing significant statements or quotes within the participant narratives and collapsing statements and quotes into themes. Themes fall within the three categories of what the participants experienced, how they experienced it, and the “overall essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Informed by Colaizzi’s (1978) framework addressing issues of validity and reliability in phenomenological data analysis, we first examined the data sources in full to get a sense of the phenomenon. We then identified significant statements from the reflection papers; organized the statements around clusters of themes; and referred “these clusters of themes back to the original protocols in order to *validate*

them” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59) and made adjustments prior to developing the description of the phenomenon and finalizing the themes (Beck, 1994). We used NVivo software to assist with organizing data and assigning themes.

Presentation of Themes

Thematic content analysis of participants’ reflection papers revealed a number of findings about how students describe the experience and process of their learning in the course. Several themes emerged from the data analysis regarding how the students experienced the course pedagogy and how their *relationship with learning* shifted throughout the course. These themes include (1) challenging mental models of learning, (2) building trust, (3) finding freedom and empowerment, (4) deepening commitment to learning, and (5) reframing learning and self. Additionally, there were three key stages of learning that were discussed by the students, which included (1) dependence/independence, (2) transition to interdependence, and (3) interdependence. These experiences of transformative learning are described in more detail subsequently.

Challenging Mental Models of Learning

Upon entering the course, students quickly realized the course format and expectations would be different than other courses. For some students, this realization came on the first day of class: “After reading [*Death to the Syllabus!*], that’s when I realized that the system of learning, which we had been used to in our academic career, was about to be changed entirely.” Students noted the structure and pedagogies used in this course were unlike previous classroom environments; their mental models of classroom learning reflected previous experiences where learning was viewed as fairly transactional and hierarchical. One student wrote, “Not ever at USD have I been challenged to take responsibility over my learning about anything; everything has always been provided.” Another student reflected on what classroom learning meant to her prior to this course, “My mental model constructed learning as a teacher announcing information, me studying it, and then repeating it on a test.”

Authority. The authority structure between the students and the instructor was different from past classroom experiences; one student discussed the relationship between the student and the instructor to which he was accustomed in other courses: “[there is] a definitive line between the student (the know nothing) and the teaching (the know all) . . . this structure was destroyed.” Additionally, students’ relationships with other classmates were often challenged; their previous experiences had largely been more individual, being “the student,” not part of a “group.” One student described this shift, “In most undergraduate classes, one hardly interacts with any other classmates. One goes to class, listens to lecture, reads their text books, and takes their tests.” This quote suggests that this student’s previous learning

experiences had been the traditional banking model of education, whereby knowledge was dispensed by professors, deposited into students' minds, and measured by rote (Freire, 2000). This student's experience was not unique from other participants in our study. For almost all, students' mental models of learning were steeped in *independence*, whereby learning is an individual activity, or *dependence*, whereby the student is dependent on the instructor, who transfers knowledge to the student; learning therefore was neither transformational nor collaborative.

Reaction to classroom format. Students reacted to this shift in classroom environment in a variety of ways. Some were excited about the opportunity. One student shared, "[Although] I did feel uncertain in the beginning and felt pretty anxious, it was actually empowering to know that we were given a chance to do this practically on our own." Other students expressed frustration with the process. One student reflected on the initial struggle with course format, "I felt that in the beginning . . . there was a lot of confusion to the structure of this course. People were hesitant to adapt." Students also felt uncomfortable and unsure about how to navigate the new environment and how to make meaning of their experiences. One student wrote, "The first few class sessions I remember as awkward, because many of us were afraid to speak out of turn or offer topics to discuss. I remember returning home dissatisfied with what I had learned, or hadn't learned."

After a few weeks, students began to shift into a stage of beginning to build trust among each other. Further, they began to let go of their mental models. As students opened up, they began to realize their classmates were also struggling and they were "all in it together." One student wrote, "I began to see that I was not alone in my thinking, but also that my thought-process may not have been the best one." This led to the next theme in the process, building trust.

Building Trust

In working through experiences of frustration, confusion, and other challenges, students started to approach the class and each other differently. Further, they began to trust that our intentions as instructors for designing the course in this manner were to provide them an opportunity to learn, not to cause frustration or confusion.

Developing community. As students began to challenge their preexisting mental models and commit to the new learning environment, they began to understand the process. One student wrote, "After recognizing the mental models I entered the class with I learned to abandon them. I trusted the process. I wasn't sure what the pay off of using this approach would be but I knew I was not alone." The students began to listen to each other more and focus on building relationships. One student wrote, "The thing that brought us together the most was our openness to share our struggle with the course." Another student discussed how together the class had to commit to open up to one another:

The only way each of us was to benefit individually in our learning . . . was for our entire class to commit as a whole. What I mean by this is that each classmate had to commit to the challenge of dropping down all the walls of uncertainty and by allowing ourselves to trust and accept our intangible environment.

As is evident in this quote, a key theme that emerged in the analysis is the importance of creating a welcoming environment in order to build trust among the group. One student described this as a “community of care.” Students began to share their ideas, their challenges, and personal information not normally shared in class. One student wrote about her problems opening up to others and how this shifted through the course:

As our class began to trust each other, it made it easier for me to stretch my comfort zone and to share my problems . . . I could only compare this to the level of trust that take [sic] years to create in close friends or a family.

Connecting through vulnerability. To connect with one another, many class sessions started with a “check-in,” whereby students shared whatever they wanted. Check-ins became a ritual and more intimate over time. One student discussed the importance of check-ins, saying they “served as another important lesson in how to build trust. The daily opportunities to be vulnerable and allow others to start trusting each other benefited the group as a whole.” Over time, students became more vulnerable, aiding in students’ relationships with each other and in their approach to the class. One student wrote, “The willingness of my classmates to be vulnerable allowed us to maximize our experience.”

Through building trust and relationships within the group, students began to feel more connected to one another, and as a result, their learning began to *transition into interdependence*. They began to view the process of learning as less transactional, recognizing also that learning does not necessarily happen in a dependent or interdependent way but could be furthered through interdependence. This was evidenced by their emphasis on the classroom as a “community of care” and creating rituals for learning, such as the check-ins, to support networked learning. Once students began to trust the process and build a strong and trusting relationship among each other, they transitioned into the third theme, finding freedom and empowerment.

Finding Freedom and Empowerment

Upon building trust, the students felt more comfortable with the learning environment and with each other, enabling them to more confidently take on the challenge of the course. Students typically began to feel a sense of freedom and empowerment.

Freedom and empowerment for learning. Once students embraced the classroom dynamics, many students seemed to reframe their expectations for what learning

meant to them. One student wrote, "Once the class established this trust, I believe this was the point when I felt I was able to ultimately benefit from the class. I was suddenly able to fully open up my heart to the class." Students also expressed frustration with the educational system and the lack of freedom it had previously provided them. One student remarked how the course allowed students freedom and the learning that comes when individuals "are free to make mistakes." Another student discussed how this freedom was key to personalizing learning, recognizing differences in individuals, and challenging the "one-size-fits-all" model of educational institutions. She wrote, "I think this freedom is a crucial part of the class because we all vary as individuals and in order to get the most out of any class we must individually be responsible for our own learning."

Freedom and empowerment within oneself. Along with understanding the structure of the course, some students expressed newfound freedom and empowerment within oneself. One student expressed how the course structure helped her feel "freed." She identified herself as having a "Type A personality," whereby she often felt uncomfortable with unstructured and unplanned situations. Another student was able to uncover a new, authentic layer of himself and gained a sense of empowerment through this increased awareness, saying, "I learned that I do not need to always be calculated, calm, and collected. I can fail. I can make mistakes without becoming a weaker person." Through finding a sense of freedom and empowerment within the course, students began to deepen their commitment to learning.

Deepening Commitment to Learning

Students expressed a renewed investment in learning. They found an internal motivation to take advantage of the classroom setting and immersed themselves as such. One student reflected on his engagement, "I learned because I wanted to learn." Another student wrote, "Not only have I had to learn to push myself in a way that I have never be asked to push, but I have been eager to fulfill the potential of my learning."

Collective responsibility for learning. Students also felt responsible for contributing to their peers' learning. Students discussed the responsibility they felt to the collective group; one student wrote, "I felt that if I didn't participate or contribute it wasn't just my performance on the line but everyone else." Another student said, "Not giving my full self made me feel as if I was letting down other members of the group. No other class has ever brought this feeling out of me." This emphasis on collective responsibility suggests a movement to *interdependence* for the students and their collective learning experience. Learning was no longer an independent or dependent activity.

Because the students developed the course expectations, there was no formal, instructor-driven attendance policy, which benefited classroom attendance rather

than hindered it. One student wrote, “We had some connection/bond to the class, we didn’t need a policy to keep us in check and we didn’t need a professor either.” Students developed a different type of commitment to the class and to the learning than in other courses. One student, who admitted to normally having poor attendance wrote, “I took responsibility for my learning by showing up to class and being mentally active Once I decided that this class was a priority, I made learning my mission.”

Connection with purpose. A pivotal moment in one section involved a situation early in the semester when, for a variety of reasons, half the class was absent. The class session provided students with a conflict that caused them to examine their purpose and how to enact that purpose. In reflecting on the passion for learning the group developed one student wrote, “the poor showing allowed us to challenge one another and see if we were taking this unique opportunity to learn in a new way seriously.” Students shifted their focus beyond the acquisition of grades, gaining a new sense for learning. One student discussed a heightened level of responsibility being in this course “. . . in the sense that quantifiable grades were not given for each of my efforts and contributions individually; I took on this responsibility not for ‘points,’ and instead, for the sake of my own learning.”

Learning and presence. A number of students gained a greater commitment to being present in the learning process. One student discussed how the check-in rituals allowed the group to recognize the importance of presence, “Our check-ins provide a deeper learning we may not have ever discussed or realized. In a sense, it was a plan way to elicit a profound and challenging concept that our class become centered around: presence.” Another student discussed keeping work, such as her planner or to-do lists in her bag, to maintain being present in class, saying “I wanted to be present in class not only for my own benefit, but for the benefit of the group, as well.” Through gaining a deeper commitment to and investment in learning, students began to reframe what it means to them to learn; they also gained a new understanding of themselves as learners and leaders.

Reframing Learning and Self

The final theme involved students reframing their idea of learning and of themselves. Students moved to a place of recognizing learning as a more active and inclusive process than the traditional and constrained notions of learning they previously held.

Inclusive view of learning. A student described this more inclusive understanding of learning, “Being present in this course has shown me that learning can exist in a variety of ways through a variety of means over a variety of settings.” Students recognized the learning taking place was different than in other courses, using

language as “a different *kind of still rigorous* work.” Students noted although learning in this course was different than the typical type of learning in other courses, it was very meaningful. One student wrote:

I have learned education does not mean being in a classroom I can now see that learning takes places in many different forms from stories, real life experience, and reflection Learning about yourself and others is more important than [*sic*] factual information because it develops us into people and not machines.

Deeper understanding of self. In addition to reframing their ideas of learning, a number of students gained a new understanding of themselves as learners and as leaders. One student, who admitted to often needing to be in control when working within groups, wrote, “I now can see that a group can develop without a formal leader directing actions and that lack of control may be an ideal environment for adaptive challenges.” Another student developed a better sense of control over her own life, “I have realized that I have so much control on [*sic*] how I feel and that there are numerous things that I can do in order to make myself happier and healthier.” Students further developed skills they felt were important to being a better leader and person (e.g., conscientiousness, openness to others and ideas, listening). One student discussed how engaging in the group process helped him learn the importance of listening, something he noted as not doing very often in group settings:

I took the opportunity during the conflict to remain quiet and listen . . . hoping that I can learn from listening, not talking aimlessly. From that day in class forward, I realized how vital active listening is in regard to learning from others Listening and going with the class in whatever direction allowed me to become more aware of the learning opportunities presented in class.

Another student discussed an increased understanding of herself, saying that she gained a “deep personal intelligence of myself.”

Commitment to lifelong learning. A number of students recognized their learning would continue outside of the class, expressing a commitment to lifelong learning. One student described her learning in the course as moving from “fruit juice to jello [jello] is firmer than juice, but it has a lot of wiggle room and potential to solidify more. Jello initially takes the shape of its container, but once it is released from its container it is free standing and maintains its shape.” She continues, recognizing how her learning and development will continue:

I do not think it is possible to fully solidify knowledge at any point in life, especially at age twenty-two. I have become more confident in my leadership abilities, and understanding how to be a more effective leader, but this is something I will tailor and change as I learn more about myself and the world.

Students acknowledged they learned much about themselves from the course, including a commitment to lifelong learning. Many expressed excitement for having a new understanding of learning, particularly for the deep self-reflective practices they gained in the course. Although many lacked clarity of what was in store for them next, doing work that was congruent with their core values emerged as an important pattern among the participants.

Discussion of Analysis

The five themes that illuminate the participants' learning process within the leadership capstone course provide insight into the developmental process of engaging in adaptive work. Participants' collective process of learning, which was deeply informed by a paradigm shift regarding authority and relationships within the classroom environment, suggests a model of transformative learning through student-centered pedagogies (see Figure 1).

Through ongoing reflection and experiencing pedagogical approaches that challenged traditional models of teaching, students critically examined their habitual expectations of what it means to learn and how they approach learning (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 2003). Many students noted the applicability of their learning to their leadership and personal development. Students' relationships within the classroom shifted from dependent and independent to more interdependent models of knowing and being. This reflects increased complexity in students' leadership identity development, whereby students move from more independent ways of engaging in leadership toward more relational and interdependent ways (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). This movement also suggests students' journey of self-authorship, particularly a movement from absolute and transitional knowing to independent knowing, characterized by a stronger reliance on one's internal motivations rather than external forces (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Students' relationship with and understanding of knowledge and learning also shifted. Students' more positivist views of knowledge and learning, whereby knowledge is absolute and the instructor imparts knowledge, were challenged. They adopted a more constructivist understanding of knowledge and learning. This shift from positivist to constructivist thinking of knowledge connects with the suggestion by Cranton and Taylor (2012) that engaging in transformative learning "is a process of examining, questioning, and revising" our lived experiences through our held assumptions and worldview (p. 5). Similarly, many students began to demonstrate aspects contextual knowing as it relates to their self-authorship, acknowledging that some claims are more valid than others, that information must be understood in certain contexts, and that one must be critical of that which they are considering (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This more advanced stage of self-authorship was evident in students questioning their learning on an individual and on a collective level, which also connects with Freire's (2000) concepts of liberatory education.

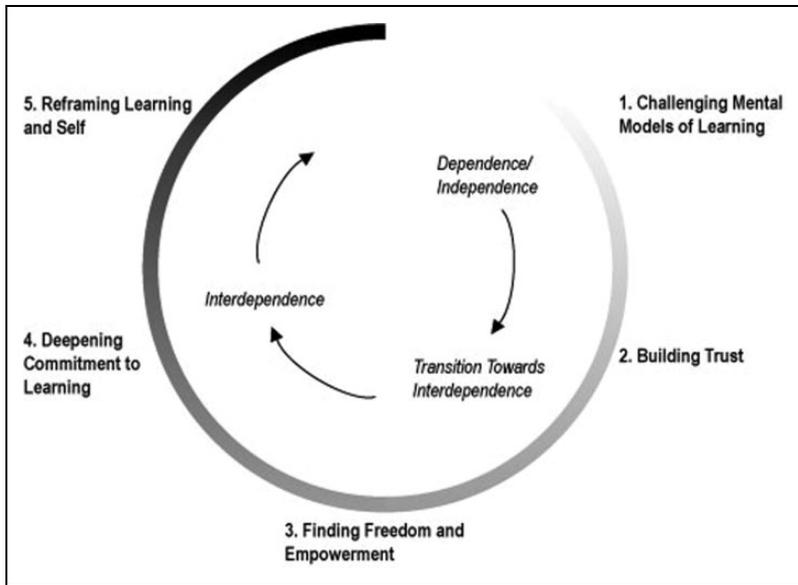


Figure 1. Process of students' learning and relationships.

A key pattern within students' reflections was the emphasis on the importance of the group and its progress as opposed to solely focusing on individual growth. Engagement within the group served as a pivotal experience for the students; the process of students' individual learning was paralleled by the group's development and process of learning how to be a group (Wheelan, 2005). As the group continued to build rapport, their collective work created an environment that enabled student learning. This is reflective of the concept of a holding environment from adaptive leadership, whereby an environment (in this case, the classroom) provides enough challenge and support so as not to immobilize or debilitate the group (Heifetz, 1994).

Evidence of students' learning, growth, and development supports the notion that teaching and learning need not, and should not, follow traditional models (Duch et al., 2001); in fact, some students noted learning more in this course than in any other course during their educational history. Student-centered and inquiry-focused pedagogical approaches help prepare students for active and critical engagement in situations they are likely to face in the future. Students learned *how* to think, not just *what* to think: a key outcome of PBL (Thomas, 2009). They also learned to take up their authority in the classroom and played an active role in their learning, key outcomes of the pedagogies used (Daloz Parks, 2005; Freire, 2000; Tobin, 2006). Further, outcomes achieved in this course, such as integrative learning, critical thinking, and interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, are aligned with the aims of higher education advocated by some researchers and educators (Keeling, 2004).

With colleges and universities devoting increased attention to developing students' competencies for leadership practice (CAS, 2009; Keeling, 2004), these findings suggest a useful connection between the concepts of transformative education and adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). As researchers and teachers, we used adaptive leadership as a theoretical framework and a pedagogical tool, which provided students the opportunity to engage in deeper learning, critical thinking of themselves and the systems in which they live, and integrative approaches to learning. Each of these characteristics are inherent aims of transformative learning (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 2003). The model that emerged from this study connects to King and Kitchener's (1994) reflective judgment framework by supporting the notion that engaging in adaptive leadership practices can lead to deeper inquiry and transformative learning. Using this insight, leadership courses may serve as a useful laboratory setting for transformative practices of teaching and learning given its aims are reflective of contemporary leadership.

Implications for Practice

Students expressed the learning experience as unique; the format and type of learning gained in the course was unlike other courses. There is opportunity to increase the presence of classroom experiences that challenge traditional, hierarchical, and transactional approaches to teaching and learning. Recognizing that not every course can adopt the pedagogical approaches used to the extent that we did, there are opportunities for educators to engage students more actively. Singham (2007) encourages educators to invite students to help determine criteria by which they will be assessed and to collectively determine course expectations.

Similarly, instructors can invite students to help identify learning experiences they feel will accomplish stated learning outcomes of the course. In courses where the learning and classroom process relates to the subject matter (i.e., leadership, education, and sociology), using the classroom dynamics and processes enacted in the classroom as a case study can help students connect with the content meaningfully. In particular, educators may benefit students' transformative learning by using these techniques of case-in-point pedagogy, especially those stemming from the Tavistock tradition or group relations work (Hayden & Molenkamp, 2002). Additionally, identifying learning opportunities that reflect situations they are likely to face in the future and constructing PBL experiences can help students play an active role in their learning and gain critical and integrative skills crucial for postcollege success.

Directions for Future Research

This study examined three sections of one leadership course taught at one university. As such, there is great opportunity for further inquiry into pedagogical approaches that are student centered and inquiry focused. There is opportunity to expand such research across different contexts (e.g., student populations, classroom size, and

disciplines). Exploring the environmental influence on this type of learning would also be beneficial in future studies. This work was done as part of an academic program that often used student-centered pedagogies in the classroom. However, it would be important to understand how the learning process might differ for students in environments that may be less open to these types of pedagogical approaches.

Another area for continued research is examining the long-term impact of this course on students through a follow-up study on the perceived impact of the course on their life choices, approaches to learning, personal and professional relationships with colleagues/peers and persons in authority, and career choices. Expanding this study longitudinally would be helpful to further explore the transformative aspect of students' learning.

Conclusion

Boyer (1997) maintains that "teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but *transforming* and *extending* it as well" (p. 24). From our vantage point as instructors and researchers, we found that transformative learning took place. Students participating in this experience demonstrated significant development in their relationship to learning, which is represented in the five-stage model discussed within this article. By having students co-construct their learning, their investment in their learning shifted tremendously allowing for liberation and deeper commitment to themselves as well as their peers. Through shattering the traditional paradigm of learning in a classroom, we, as a community of scholars, engaged in learning and teaching that meets Boyer's vision of the best teaching possible—where knowledge is transmitted, transformed, and extended.

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