

Recapturing Relevance in a Graduate Leadership Program: An Experiment in Self-Directed Learning

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Academic Citation: Carol Sawyer and Michael Villaire, “Recapturing Relevance in a Graduate Leadership Program: An Experiment in Self-Directed Learning,” Kravis Leadership Institute, *Leadership Review*, Vol. 7, Fall 2007, pp. 111-121.

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Keywords: Leadership, curriculum, followers, experienced reflection

Abstract

Relevance in education, in particular a bridge between theory and practice, often remains an elusive goal. In particular, graduate education in leadership and management faces considerable challenges. A call to action for an extensive re-thinking of design, content, delivery, focus, relevance, even integrity, of programs has emerged from respected thinkers and leaders in this field. In response to this call, faculty and selected students at one university collaborated on development of a master’s level course in management and leadership for mid-career students. Principles of Chaleff’s courageous follower--“Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader”—and Mintzberg’s “experienced reflection” were applied as a framework to learning. Students brought their own experiential backgrounds to classes, using a didactic format as a jumping-off point for sharing real life examples, perspectives, and a lens through which to distill theory in a way that made sense to them. This article provides an overview of the thought process behind the creation of the course, its

components, goals, and continuing impact on the participants. An annotated bibliography of student-selected readings is also provided.

Few would likely disagree with the observation that one of the richest and most relevant components of a graduate level course class session is that short period of time devoted to discussion of the academic material at hand, when dialogue focuses on synthesis and integration of theory into daily practice. Near the end of these discussions, it is not uncommon to hear a comment such as, “Now that is something I’d love to spend a whole class session learning about.”

This article explores the experiences of nine graduate students—mid-career professionals with significant leadership and managerial responsibilities in health care, social work, education, communication, science, and government—who initiated and co-created with faculty an experimental course to capture that rich, lively, interactive component to meet their needs and interests. The resulting experience was a master’s level course which came to be known as “Living as Learning Leaders.”

Well after the “Living as Learning Leaders” course itself ended, the work begun there and lessons learned continue to evolve both in the workplaces of these managers, and in a variety of activities designed and led by them to share their experiences with other students and in other settings. Participating faculty have now three times used the co-creation process initially experienced in this seminar. This high-energy dynamic—set in motion by one student’s email message requesting such a customized course—has resulted in a model of graduate education significantly different in terms of focus, power, culture, energy, design, satisfaction, responsibility, and communication. Students, often viewed as *followers* in the classroom setting, moved to the forefront in both course design and delivery, evidencing the sources of power described by Chaleff (2003, 18-19). In particular, the dynamics of the temporary and co-created organization were characterized by what Chaleff describes as “*the power of faith in self, belief in our observations and intentions, in our integrity and commitment*” and “*the power of relationships, of networks of people who know and trust us*” (18).

Henry Mintzberg, writing in Managers Not MBAs (2003), advocates *experienced reflection*, a process of continuous interplay between the experiences practicing managers bring to the graduate education classroom, to meet with conceptual ideas, theories, and models introduced by faculty.

We can say that the managers live in the *territory* while the faculty provide the *maps*. Reflection takes place where these meet: experience considered in the light of conceptual ideas. The resultant learning is carried back to the job, where it impacts behavior, providing further experience for reflection on the job and back to the classroom. This constitutes a recurring cycle . . . (264).

The approach Mintzberg describes, one that enriches the involvement and responsibility of students, was central to the course dynamics. The course consisted of ten sessions—

seminars of rich conversation. Faculty input of suggested readings was linked to topic areas identified by the students both in a pre-semester planning session and throughout the scheduled time frame of the course. Students put their own stamp on the initial faculty suggestions of readings, with the result that often each of the students was reading different materials, and bringing richer and more diverse ideas, resulting in unique and powerful seminars. Case work, video, discussion board postings online, and (occasionally) short faculty lectures were all employed to explore such topic areas as systems thinking, the meaning of work, organizational culture, philosophic foundations for organizational leadership and life, ethics, politics, and power. The course was prefaced and framed by reading Peter Vaill's book, Learning as a Way of Being (1994). An evening with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to learn about "flow," a special seminar focused on the film *Art of Possibility*, and a Leadership Forum in which capstone masters theses were presented—these supplemented the classroom sessions. Student (follower)-centered, -designed and -led experiences infused both the course and the many related follow-up activities that continue to result from this experience.

The significant impact of this unique learning immersion on the individuals participating in the course was captured in end-of-term commitment statements, evolving approaches to individual learning, and skills and knowledge that even now are reshaping both understanding and behavior in professional workplace settings away from the university. The evident shift in leader/follower dynamics, ability to rethink and recast traditional approaches to learning, and the resulting energy, focus and impact, are all affecting managerial practices as well as the ongoing learning of these mid-career professionals.

THE MODEL

Faculty were guided by concepts from Chaleff (2003), Mintzberg (2003), Vaill (1994) and Lipman-Blumen (1996). Thus, followership, reflection, expectations, and collaboration were emphasized. The class was developed around topical discussion areas for each in-person/in-classroom seminar in the ten-week course, and facilitated by faculty and guest faculty. Class meetings were enriched by participation before and after in electronic discussion boards.

Among the class topics:

- Setting expectations and norms for class meetings, readings, and discussion boards using concepts from foundational texts noted above
- Systems thinking
- The nature and meaning of work
- Organizational culture
- Philosophy and leadership
- Ethics and leadership
- Politics
- Machiavelli, power, and leadership
- Final seminar/wrap-up/next steps

This course sought and found value in authentic self-expression, in learning how to look at an idea from multiple angles, with diverse faculty and student perspectives shaping discussions that encouraged each of the participants to become aware of the self-imposed factors that were affecting their own perspectives. Collectively, participants learned from exposure to the wisdom of multiple scholars. Individually, they began to unlearn the habits that were restricting their ability to make learning personal and, hence, valuable and relevant.

ROLES AND GOALS

The mix of students likely played a significant role in the overall success of the class. A dozen graduate students, of the eighty then enrolled in the program, were invited to enroll in the course, with selection determined by faculty knowledge of students' academic maturity, managerial experience, communication skills, diverse professional settings, and prior course completion of at least fifteen credit hours toward the degree. What each of the nine enrolling students brought to the learning experience (or sought to improve by participation in the class) was in many ways just as important as what they tried hard to "leave at the door." Students sought to improve a variety of personal and professional attributes (several of these are listed below, with the relevant scholar and related reading identified in parentheses):

- Listening. "I want to work on being present, being in the moment. I don't want to be tied to my pencil and notepad, furiously scribbling. I want to hear, I want to listen, and to be truly engaged in the conversation." (Wheatley 2001)
- Enhancing appreciation of, and an ability to navigate, a world of increasing "white water," in which unplanned events, chaos, and a need to think quickly and adaptively are prized and required. (Vaill 1996)
- Leaving our desire for measurement, quantification, and a clear path toward an established objective at the door. Experiential learning is valuable, and meandering down a path to see where it would take us is valued. (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers 1999)
- Developing our ability to "ask better questions." This is well summarized in a shared quotation attributed to Art Linkletter: "As one gets older, the question to ask of a new acquaintance is not, 'How old are you?' but rather, 'How are you old?'"
- Defining for ourselves and trying to understand better our roles as leaders, including defining and continuing to forge the type of leaders we are and wish to be, how our leadership affects our organizations and those we lead, and the links or interrelations between our leadership skills and our personal lives. (Bennis 1994; Bennis 2003)
- Making connections. "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous." (Confucius) Thinking about what we have learned and making the connecting bridge between that which we have

learned in the classroom and that which we face on a daily basis is an important aspect of leadership. (Mintzberg 2003)

- Strengthening our ethical standards. All of the scandals reported in recent years have made this assumptive practice more critical and a “front burner” concern for us all.
- Enjoying the journey on the way to the destination. All of these items are guiding stars and milestones on the journey. If we keep only the destination in mind, we are cheating ourselves out of one of the greatest privileges of all – enjoying everything we encounter on the journey.
- Tapping into “the zone,” or a “flow state,” i.e., an ability to focus and concentrate on a subject and feel in command and attuned to the flow of ideas at the moment, to access (and apply) experiences and knowledge in a more effortless fashion, and bring greater understanding and connectedness to the moment (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). (In Blackboard discussions, the zone/flow concept was expanded to include creativity, and exploring ways of accessing that process more freely and purposefully.)
- Accepting (at first unspoken, but later codified) a fundamental improvisational principle – Never deny. “Yes and” was the transitional phrase among discussants, not “Yes but.” This was more than just a nod to politeness in a group dynamic. It is an acknowledgment of Chaleff’s concept of the fluidity of the Leader/Follower dynamic. The phrase “Yes and” subtly and quickly shifts roles of leader and follower.

That sense of the flow state—a desired outcome—is captured in relation to organizational life with these words, applicable as well to the seminar experience:

Assuming that an appealing vision has been communicated, and trust established, then what remains to be done is to make certain that organizational behavior does not deprive workers of the enjoyment that comes naturally from being able to do one’s best. To summarize briefly the essential conditions for flow to occur, they are: clear goals that can be adapted to meet changing conditions; immediate feedback to one’s actions; and a matching of the challenges of the job with the worker’s skills. (Csikszentmihalyi 2003, 202-203).

GROUND RULES

In one sense, there were no ground rules to the process. The format and conditions evolved naturally through conversation, modeling, discussion, and a desire to create a shared, significant learning experience. At a later date, when the experience was shared in a Class-in-Common with all students in the Masters of Science in Leadership and Management program, the nine Living as Learning Leaders seminar participants reflected on the shared assumptions that guided the class experience. These shared assumptions—in reality, a pact—were identified as “Conditions for a Safe and Secure Learning Environment.” The effect of this pact was to clear the path for true learning to take place. It encouraged students to identify barriers to true conversations and other inhibitors such as old habits, egocentric behavior, and classroom format constraints, and to transcend

them into a new experience. Course participants felt that the following list of conditions was fundamental and essential to the success of the learning process (underlined terms represent key words or phrases that participants felt deserved special emphasis):

- Be present, in mind, body, and spirit.
- Maximize the free exchange of ideas. Share.
- Spend time face-to-face. Keep format flexible. Allow group learning to evolve.
- Trust in the process: let product evolve from the learning.
- Listen – and hear. Respond rather than react.
- Be curious. Question everything. Challenge assumptions. Doubt absolutes. Explore and investigate.
- Be open-minded: embrace diversity of thought.
- Respect other points-of-view. Embrace the value of others' contributions.
- Bring a sense of humor and a willingness to be vulnerable.
- Seek better questions. Look for more than one right answer.
- Seek connections.
- Celebrate discovery and learning with joy.

THE ROLE OF SHARED VALUES

The creation of a community of learners is centered on the recognition of and commitment to shared values. Concepts in the book by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon (Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet 2001) were explored one evening. Many of the values highlighted in the research that resulted in that book were infused throughout the design and experience of the course. Among the central values recognized and acknowledged as shared and held in common by students and faculty were the values of Challenge, Risk Taking, Creating Balance, Creativity/Pioneering, Curiosity, Openness and Searching for Knowledge (255-256). These values played a dominant role and were held among and across all student and faculty participants:

People who do good work, in our sense of the term, are clearly skilled in one or more professional realms. At the same time, rather than merely following money or fame alone, or choosing the path of least resistance when in conflict, they are thoughtful about their responsibilities and the implications of their work. (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon 2001, 3)

Both popular press and scholarly literature authors (Bennis 2003; Burns 2003; Carter 1996; Cashman 1998; Cloke & Goldsmith 2005; Covey 1992; George 2003, 2007; Heifetz 1994; Hesselbein 2002; Katz & Kahn 1978; Kouzes & Posner 2003, 2007; Lipman-Blumen 2000; and Wheatley 2002, 2007, among others) are attentive to the significant role of shared values in organizational leadership. Often such values are not openly expressed or brought forward for the full focused attention that can build both the commitment and the energy of individuals to meet organizational and societal goals. Yet it is through shared values that community is built and sustained. The community of learners described here quickly became a power-filled approach to leadership

development. This power emerged for individuals first, and ultimately for organizations of all kinds impacted by the learning and transformation effected through the course experience. The culture of the academic setting was enriched and enhanced, in ways described by leadership scholar John W. Gardner (1990, 37): “. . . the interaction between leaders and followers does not take place in a vacuum. It is embedded in a historical or cultural context. It has an institutional setting. And these surrounding circumstances substantially affect not only the nature of the interaction but also the leadership attributes that are effective.”

OUTCOMES AND PRODUCTS

At the end of the Living as Learning Leaders course, students were asked to draft their own Commitment Statements, a short set of thoughts and pledges that they felt would help keep alive in their leadership roles the spirit of inquiry, reflection, respect, and community they had experienced in the class. Following is an example of one of these statements, which were framed as completions of the following statement:

“As an outgrowth of my engagement in the series of seminars entitled ‘Living as Learning Leaders,’ I commit to:

“Living an authentic life as a leader and a person, where who I am at the office is no different than who I am at home: Engaged, caring, open, strong, loving, modeling positive values and strong ethics. . . . Embracing curiosity and wonderment, following these states to books and good conversations, and remaining a perpetual beginner and learner. . . . Being bold and courageous, understanding that if I have committed to knowing and having faith in myself, my actions will come from a righteous place worthy of leading and following. . . . Living in the moment, listening, respecting, and participating.”

Another product was the creation of a monograph entitled Living as Learning Leaders; An Experiment in Self-Directed Learning in a Graduate Leadership Program. This monograph described the basics of the course (evolution and development, structure, purpose and goals, topics, etc.) but went further in sharing some of the richness of the course. Among the captured items were quotations used as discussion “points of departure”; selected quotes from students in discussion board postings reflective of what students observed and sought from themselves and others during the course; basic structure and approaches used in the creation of the course; artwork created by one student of the course participants and the beauty of the experience; a list of some “better questions” to ask; other products developed to date that used the course as a genesis; and an annotated bibliography of readings students undertook on their own for the class.

Three months after the completion of the course, the students had the experience of designing and delivering a customized and highly interactive seminar about the course for all graduate students and faculty in the University of La Verne’s Master of Science Degree Program in Leadership and Management. This evening, called a “Class-in-Common”, has been a component of the graduate program for eight years, and provides

an opportunity for building culture, social interactions, and learning that integrates across the curriculum.

For the June 27, 2005, Class-in-Common, the Living as Learning Leaders students collectively determined to share with Class-in-Common participants not the results, but the learning *process* that evolved. In designing the session the challenge arose of how to communicate the essence of their shared experiment in learning by leading an interactive evening that acknowledged multiple learning styles and invited reflection on the very meaning of the term “learning.” The purpose was not to recreate the class experience, but rather to share the excitement generated when process was allowed to lead product, rather than chase it. One of the primary learning activities devised by the group involved inviting small groups of students to engage in conversation centered on pre-determined single word topics (mindfulness, conversation, doorways, etc) and then introducing Vaill’s (1996) concept of asking “better” questions. Then, and once again with no stated product expectations, small groups self-organized with the goal of asking better and better questions.

The Living as Learning Leaders model was also shared, in differing ways, in two scholarly leadership conference settings: at the 7th Annual International Leadership Association Global Conference, “Emergent Models of Global Leadership,” held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands in November 2005 in a session entitled: “Points of Departure: Graduate Students and Faculty Co-Creating Meaningful Learning,” and at the Kravis-de Roulet Conference: “Rethinking Followership” in February 2006, hosted by the Kravis Leadership Institute in Claremont, California.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION POINTS

As the course progressed, it became evident to class participants that materials presented in the class topics listed above were the stimulus for participants to find their own path on which to evolve into learning leaders. Leadership commitments drafted by students at the end of the course both evidenced and reinforced this goal.

Learning, and related rich conversations, benefited greatly from a posting thread available on the University of La Verne website supported by the electronic software, Blackboard. This interactive electronic bulletin board provided a venue for posting ideas, quotations, reflections, and perhaps most importantly, a place to react, interact, and state thoughts and feelings both innate and those which resulted from thinking and reacting to other postings.

The electronic format also reinforced another key concept: learning does not take place only in the classroom on one evening a week during prescribed hours. Postings on the bulletin board provided evidence of this over and over. Entire exchanges would be posted during nocturnal hours; thoughts that occurred to one student would be posted mid-day, and responded to moments later by another checking in to see the latest “nugget.”

The discussion threads often evolved in unexpected ways, providing rich and thought-provoking reading and departure points for reflection and further postings. During class, if it became evident that there would be insufficient class time to adequately address an idea, a discussion board was often requested to provide an opportunity for thoughts to be shared and ideas explored, particularly after sufficient time for reflection had passed. Students encouraged one another to, as Cashman says, listen to “. . . the ‘voice’ that speaks to you through inspiration and intuition” (2003, 26) (also Covey 2004; Palmer 2000) and to stimulate continuing group learning by sharing the results. This essence of self-directed learning became one of the most powerful aspects of the course; far from being supplemental in nature, the discussion boards soon evolved into a primary learning modality.

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined a model for graduate education that stresses empowered followership, reflections, shared value expectation, and collaboration. Syllabus topics for each class served a dual purpose: students were first exposed to information provided by faculty for the evening in traditional, didactic fashion; and in-class exercises allowed for exploration of the topics in a non-linear, self-directed manner. The academic information imparted served as a point of departure for discussions that were not only allowed, but encouraged. These discussions provided a means for students to discuss among themselves aspects of the topic that most interested them. Another unique aspect of the faculty lecture portion of the course was the degree to which student “push back,” or students challenging statements or assumptions made by faculty, was not only tolerated, but *encouraged* and used as another departure point for learning and interaction.

Students and faculty together and individually stepped forward to willingly assume different roles and responsibilities in this dynamic, grounded in shared values and common purpose, with the goal of experiencing and committing to learning that would continue beyond the course and term in which the class was co-created. As a result, a unique culture was created and sustained—a culture highly supportive of the students’ individual and collective goals for this learning opportunity. Students quickly became what Pearce and Conger (2003) identify as “legitimate stakeholders and custodians of system values and norms” . . . with a “shared collective identity” (245). Ultimately, the structure varied as necessary as the topic and focus led in unexpected directions. The leader/follower dynamic—the faculty/student traditional roles—blurred and ceased to matter, as the group grew more skilled at both sharing and listening.

The Living as Learning Leaders experiment can be, and has been, viewed through many lenses. Ultimately, one of the most appropriate is that of Chaleff’s Courageous Follower principle. Being willing to flow within the moment between Leader and Follower, practicing courage and respect, learning and mentoring—all of these represent a balance, the yin and yang of leadership and followership. If Living as Learning Leaders participants learned no other lesson, they learned that no leader is complete without *being* complete: balance and openness are the doors to earning trust and achieving success.

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