

USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM TO ENGAGE LEARNERS IN DEVELOPING AS LEADERS:

The Personal Leadership Experiment

Abstract

Finding effective ways to reach today's college audience is challenging and social media is one way to attempt to meet students in their environment. This application brief discusses a course activity and assignment that combines the scholarship of leadership education with reflection about personal leadership behaviors through social media. This assignment has been used in leadership education courses with undergraduate students both in a traditional face-to-face course setting and in an online format. The assignment attempts to help students integrate what they are learning about leadership with their actual behaviors as a leader. By documenting their leadership actions and thoughts through Twitter or Instagram, students are held accountable to develop their leadership capacities

Introduction

While often used interchangeably, leadership development and leadership education are distinct, yet highly related, endeavors (Brungardt, 1996). Leadership development is grounded in the idea of capacity development – the capacity of individuals to more effectively contribute to leadership processes, to develop cognitive complexity and adaptability, and to develop the social capital to “enhance cooperation and resource exchange” (Day, 2001, p. 585). Leadership development is used to describe the continuous progress of improvement that occurs over the course of a lifetime; thus, it is a long-term investment. Included under the umbrella of leadership development is the subset of leadership education. Leadership education focuses on the educational activities and environments intentionally designed to influence an individual's development as a leader (Brungardt, 1996).

Bridging potential gaps between development, lifelong learning, and education through instruction in the classroom can be a challenge. Leadership educators may attempt to promote the leadership development of their students, but in a traditional fifteen-week course, there is not enough time to dedicate to the practice of leader competency development and still cover the assigned curriculum (Hartman, Allen, & Miguel, 2015). Additionally, many leader competencies require more than fifteen weeks to develop proficiency, thereby making the time our students spend in our courses developing their leader competencies that much more valuable.

As those tasked with teaching leadership, we have the responsibility to help our students shift their mentality toward learning from “just for this course” to the broader perspective of lifelong learning. It is one thing to know strategies and behaviors for being an effective leader, but another to put those strategies and behaviors into practice

in real time. Therefore, a short-term “personal leadership experiment” assignment is included in our leadership education courses, where students are asked to identify a particular leader behavior to intentionally practice, pre-reflect on their experience, and reflect on their practice. Through the use of social media, this assignment attempts to make learning relevant, practical, and effective. In this application brief we provide the content and context for the assignment, discuss outcomes and implications of the assignment, and explore potential adaptations to the assignment that could prove useful in the continued development of principle-driven leaders across contexts.

Review of Literature

Discovering how to be an effective leader does not happen simply by learning leadership models, theories, or approaches in the classroom. Multiple studies have shown that one way, if not the best way, to learn leadership is through first-hand experience (ex. Brungardt, 1996; Buschlen & Guthrie, 2014; Conger, 1992). Thus, practice is needed, as there is a difference between intellectually knowing what you should do in a situation and actually doing it when the situation is upon you (Hartman et al., 2015). In other words, instructors should provide experiences in which individuals can connect leadership theory to practice (Nelson, 2010). Reflection, intentionally pausing to carefully consider aspects of an experience, acts to catalyze lessons learned from experience and is also an essential component of leadership learning (Owen, 2016).

One option is to create experiential learning opportunities outside the classroom, as “experiential learning contributes to the time dedicated to intentional practice of actual leader behavior” (Hartman et al., 2015, p. 465). Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory is one of the most cited theories

when discussing the importance of experience or action/practice in the process of learning and development. Experiential learning is the vehicle through which individuals are able to “strengthen the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development” (Kolb, 2015, pp. 3-4), as they act, reflect, adapt, and act again. Students have opportunities for experiential learning through involvement in learning activities. Student involvement in learning has been linked to higher levels of learning and outcomes of persistence, satisfaction, and academic achievement (Astin, 1999). Social media is a tool that can be used to involve students in learning.

Increasingly, leadership is conceptualized as a blend of knowledge, skills, traits, and behaviors (Northouse, 2019). Programmatically, this conceptualization is demonstrated through the ideas of knowledge, praxis, and reflection (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014). The challenge for leadership educators then becomes one of finding and utilizing ways to reach today’s college students through meaningful praxis experiences (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Subsequently, Jenkins (2012) stressed the need for leadership educators to seek out, engage in, and share effective instructional strategies. We believe social media can be one way to attempt to meet students in their environment and provide that meaningful engagement. The use of digital tools has been found to have a positive impact on students’ writing as digital tools made it easier for students to write and students were more engaged and motivated to write using digital tools (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Description of the Application

This course activity and assignment combines the scholarship of leadership education with reflection about personal leadership behaviors through social media. This assignment has been used in two

different leadership education courses and at two different universities with undergraduate students. The leadership education courses where this has been utilized include a leading change course and a personal leadership course. It has been used both in a traditional face-to-face course setting and in an online format. The assignment and accompanying reflection prompts are an adapted version of the personal transformation experiment developed by Scott Sherman while at the University of California at Berkeley and shared publicly as part of the Transform America program (Transformative Action Institute, 2009).

For this assignment, students identify a leadership behavior or skill and develop an action plan for practice and reflection to develop this skill. The leadership behaviors or skills for this assignment has varied among instructors. In the face-to-face personal leadership course, the framework of Kouzes and Posner's five leadership practices (2018) has been used and for the face-to-face leading change course, the framework of skills of effective change agents has been used. The characteristics of Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (Shankman, Allen, & Haber-Curran, 2015) in addition to Kouzes and Posner's practices has been used as the framework for this assignment in the online course. Students use Twitter or Instagram as a form of micro-reflection to record their progress throughout the timeframe of the assignment, complete a pre-worksheet of their experiment, and write a final reflection about their experiment. The assignment is typically assigned about one-third of the way into the semester and lasts approximately three weeks. Students are required to have a minimum number of tweets or posts.

For the first part of this assignment, students complete a pre-worksheet that asks them to reflect on the leadership behavior/practice they are choosing to intentionally develop. Specifically, students are prompted to reflect on the following

(adapted from Transformative Action Institute, 2009):

- 1) Which of the leadership behaviors do you want to develop? Why/how would this behavior make the greatest difference in your life?
- 2) How can you measure that behavior? Develop a system for tracking your progress. This could be a rating scale, pre/post self-assessment by you or a friend/peer, using on-line tracking tools, etc.
- 3) Think about where you are today. What is your baseline measurement? In other words, where are you starting? (You want to be able to have an initial measure to observe your progress.)
- 4) Think of times when you have most effectively achieved these behaviors. What did you do differently in those situations? What have been the strategies and situations in which you have been able to achieve success?
- 5) What ideas do you have about developing these behaviors? Are there others you can think of who regularly demonstrate these behaviors? Consider consulting with these individuals to get advice on your plan. Be open to integrating additional strategies from that you learn from upcoming reading.
- 6) Identify the most common challenges that might inhibit progress toward your goals. What are the situations and circumstances in which you are most likely to stumble, fall, and fail? Consider what you might do to address these challenges as specifically as possible. What might you do when you confront an obstacle to change? (For example, say, "If obstacle X comes up, then I will do Y to respond

effectively.”)

7) Create a commitment contract with yourself about your goal. What will you do to keep this commitment in mind?

8) Appoint at least one accountability partner who will keep you responsible to your commitment, and not let you off the hook. This needs to be somebody who will give you honest feedback and help you make course corrections when you fail or fall short of your weekly goals. Don't let it be somebody who will let you get away with doing nothing. Who will be your accountability partner? How often and when will you connect with him/her?

Along with this worksheet, students are instructed on how to set up their Twitter or Instagram accounts for the class activity. Students begin tweeting or posting about their leadership practice or behavior once their initial worksheet is turned in. Students are required to use hashtags to highlight and organize their posts (i.e. #classname, #model, #inspire, #challenge, #enable, #encourage). Students are encouraged to follow their classmates and instructors, especially those who are concentrating on the same practice as they are during this activity.

Suggested content for students to post on social media includes personal reflection on their progress or challenges with the experiment, web-based resources such as quotes, videos, and articles related to the leadership practice or behavior, and responses to their peers. In the online course, students are encouraged to post photos representing the specific actions they are taking to “experiment on the practice and characteristic” in their lives. They are also required to include a short narrative (30 word minimum) detailing how this image ties back to their experiment and course material.

At the end of the experiment, students complete a formal reflection assignment. They include all of their tweets or posts, as well as discuss challenges or successes they experienced putting these concepts into practice. Specific questions used as prompts for their final reflection include (adapted from Transformative Action Institute, 2009):

1) What was the behavior you focused on? What, specifically, did you do to cultivate your chosen leadership behavior over the last three weeks? What actions did you take? (Feel free to list/use bullets for this section). What tools or websites did you use?

2) How did you measure your behavior? What system did you use to track your progress? Was it effective? Motivating? Why or why not? Feel free to share any charts, graphs, journals you may have kept (or pictures of them)...

3) Think about where you are today in comparison to where you started. Have you made progress? Now that the PLE experiment is officially over, will you/how will you continue to cultivate these behaviors? Have any of your behaviors become second nature or habitual? Why or why not?

4) How did you do in achieving the goals you set for yourself in your initial proposal? Were your goals specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic? Did you face any setbacks in achieving your goals? How did you handle those?

5) What, specifically, did you learn about your leadership behaviors from the readings associated with your behavior? Did you integrate any strategies from the reading into your plan?

6) What reactions did you have to using

twitter/instagram for 'micro-reflection'? Address how tweeting/posting did or did not work for you as a form of self-awareness/accountability? As a way of exchanging tools and information with classmates? As a way of sharing encouragement and support with classmates?

7) What did you learn about yourself during the process? What did you learn about personally developing as a leader?

Discussion of Outcomes & Implications

This assignment has mostly a positive review by students. In the final reflection, students are asked to reflect on what they learned about themselves through this process and what they thought about using social media (Twitter or Instagram) as a form of self-awareness/accountability, as a way of exchanging tools and information with classmates, and as a way of sharing encouragement and support with classmates. One student reflected in the following way about their learning from the assignment:

Overall, I learned that this process was an untraditional type of project, but that is what I enjoyed about it. It was out of the box and it made me think in a different way than projects have before. Also, I became more aware about how I process certain things. I posted a video in one of my tweets, because visual things like videos help me understand more about the subject and are interesting. Lastly, I learned about how I develop best as a leader. In the situation I was modeling the way, I like to show others how to do things. It is almost like a visual learned style, in that I am showing others how to do something, and then they can follow

from that. I also learned that sometimes not everything works out and obstacles do happen. When tough things arise, you just have to pick yourself up and learn from it and move forward (FTF-1).

A similar reaction from a student in the online section:

This project is one that is very unique in the fact that I was required to use social media to complete it. I felt this medium was a very welcome change. I also, felt it made each member of the course feel supported as each member of the class could like their photos or comment if we chose to. I also felt that by being required to make a minimum of 14 posts I was able to stay on track with the project better than other projects that did not require this. I also felt I learned more of the material that was being used in this project. This was because each post had to be connected to the [leadership course] coursework and include at least a 30-word caption. As a result, I often tried to tie the photo to the coursework using just the caption. Overall the Instagram aspect of the experiment was very helpful in requiring me to continue working on the project constantly and helping me to gain a deeper understanding of the material (OL-4).

The following three student reflections are specifically about the nature of the assignment and their reaction to using micro-reflections through Twitter or Instagram and their development of leadership behaviors:

Using Twitter for micro-reflections helped me personally with accountability. When I missed days or saw my classmates practice encouraging the heart it motivated me

more to go out for the run even after a long day of work, school, and training for my main sport. What I liked most about using Twitter and following my classmates is that we were all doing different things and we all got to see how others practiced these behaviors. The conglomerate of our tweets felt like a model for what I hope to be in the future when leading. I want to do everything from the things I do well such as modeling the way, to the things I do not so well such as encouraging the heart. The Twitter activity gave me ideas on how I can improve on all 5 practices and gave me motivation to do well in my own personal leadership experiment (FTF-2).

Initially it felt rather strange and out of place. I do not usually document myself and what I am doing, especially not on such a micro scale. However, I think it did a lot of good for me. I began really noticing the moments I had to be a leader and the moments I failed, and I began holding myself accountable because I knew the entire class would be and because I wanted something positive to tweet. I retweeted some of the things my fellow classmates tweeted and liked some, as well. Reading them was encouraging and, at times, very relatable. This helped me feel like I wasn't alone on this journey and like others were looking out for me and experiencing the same things. I enjoyed the times I got to talk with people in the class about the experiment and ask how they were doing (FTF-3).

I do feel posting to Instagram did help with my awareness. I feel that I was able to put some things to words I wouldn't [sic] been able to do without having a picture to go with it. Having the ability to put some of

my actions into words allowed me to reflect on the things I have done this year. I did feel a change in my awareness as the experiment went on, but I still feel I could of done better at reflecting. It was helpful to know that my comments had to relate to class, because that pushed me to reflect deeper and not just talk about surface things (OL-1).

The following students in the online section commented that posting to Instagram served as a means of accountability. The assignment also helped students engage with the course material on a daily basis.

Posting on Instagram did help serve as a form of accountability. It forced me to reflect on my interactions throughout the day and kept a constant reminder to keep helping others when I had the opportunity to. This helped me work on my relationship with my friends. My comments were related to the course content. I explained how I was enabling others to act and how I was being more flexible. With every post, I made sure to look at the class notes I have written down to make sure they coincided with the comment I made about my picture. This was helpful because it kept me engage with what I have learned about my behavior and characteristic in class (OL-2).

As the weeks progressed, I obviously became more familiar with the course content, and it became easier to see how our actions fit within the framework of a shared vision. Consequently, putting together the captions became easier, and each one helped me to remember how the experiment was designed to promote improvement in my leadership behavior. I had to think about how each post reflected

some element of the course content regarding inspiring a shared vision and developing relationships. Putting it into words in the form of a short caption was a good exercise for learning the material. As a whole, I think the Instagram reflections were a good way to keep me on track and make me think about the experiment on a daily basis. I also thought that reading other people's captions was a good way to reinforce the course material in other areas (OL-5).

This student commented on how watching his classmates complete their goals motivated him and that connecting the photos back to the course material helped him bridge the gap between knowledge and praxis.

I enjoyed seeing others work towards their own personal goals and felt motivated by that. The required comments to connect the photos to the class material made me think more analytically about my actions. It seemed to bridge the gap between intellectually learning a concept and putting that concept into action (OL-3).

Based on students' final reflections about this personal leadership experiment assignment, this assignment is assisting students in developing as a leader. Students gained a deeper understanding of the content of the course and were able to assess where they excelled and where they needed to make improvements to their leadership behaviors. Students also felt like the social media postings ensured their accountability to the personal leadership experiment and development as a leader.

Recommendations

This personal leadership experiment assignment

is one that is instructor friendly to utilize and can easily be adapted for the specific leadership content in your course. Based on using this assignment for several semesters, the instructors have developed some recommendations to make this assignment the best it can be both for you and your students.

The first recommendation is to do the personal leadership experiment with your students. Choose a leadership behavior to intentionally develop and post to social media along with your students. Follow their social media activity and comment and engage with their posts. This allows you as the instructor to not only observe their posts, but it makes you vulnerable as the instructor and allows students to form deeper connections with you, which can result in more overall engagement in the course. We believe instructor engagement during the three-week timeframe is critical to making this activity effective for students.

Also, the assignment seems to be more fun when students begin to follow their classmates so it is important to encourage this as often as you can. We would also suggest pulling up some of the social media content during class so that students get an idea of what other students are posting. Some students are hesitant to post anything on social media for fear that others may ridicule them so showing some posts from students within the first few days of the assignments can often be inviting for them to start posting. We as the instructors encourage students to follow us and then we follow them back and try to comment or respond to their posts so that they can experience our engagement and know that we care about what they are posting.

Another recommendation is to think through which social media platform will work better for you in your course. We have found that Twitter and Instagram both can work for this assignment, but both have their pros and cons.

When using Twitter, one of the pros include that you

can “tweet” from a computer or from your phone or tablet. Also, it is fairly easy to set up a new Twitter account with a new email address so that students do not have to include class information on their personal site. However, a Twitter account cannot be deleted. This causes unrest with some students who are very anxious about their social media activity. You can try to ensure them that nothing in this assignment is anything that should put their character at risk. One downside to using Twitter is the character limit of 240, though this was increased from 140 recently. This can actually be a positive in that students have to be very concise when they post and for those students who do not like to write, they are not as overwhelmed with having to come up with pages of content. We find that the limit of 240 characters does not create too much of a constraint for this assignment.

A pro for using Instagram is that there is not a limit to what students can post in their content. Also, Instagram is a very good platform for photos; enabling students to “catch” their leadership behavior in the moment with a picture while allowing them to come back and revisit the experience when they post about it. Another benefit is that students tend to be more comfortable using Instagram. One downside to using Instagram is that you cannot post new photos from a computer without either downloading Safari or changing the settings of your computer to make the program “think” you are using a tablet. However, students can still view their classmates’ posts and make comments from their computers. Requiring students to connect their photos to course content beyond their selected leadership practice and emotionally intelligent leadership characteristic is a challenge for most students at the beginning of the experiment, but as they progress through the assignment, they are better able to apply and see the relevance of the material outside of the classroom. While most students do have

smartphones, there could be instances where a student does not have a smartphone and you would have to then come up with an alternative assignment for this student. In this instance, having the student complete the activity via Twitter could be appropriate.

Some universities have guidelines outlining how to properly use social media as an instructional tool (See Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning). You may want to review your institution’s digital media policies at your institution and inform students about these policies as well. Other recommendations suggested by the Online Learning Conference Institute for Professional Development and ones we would advocate for as well include: provide details about the activity in your syllabus and course description, and encourage the use of aliases for social media accounts.

One other recommendation to make this assignment work well in a course is that you include specific requirements within the assignment. One example would be to require a certain amount of their posts include specific content. One third of their posts include personal reflection on their progress or challenges with their leadership behavior, another one third of the posts contain links to web-based sources such as articles, quotes, TED talks, etc. and the last one third of their posts could contain responses to peers. Another example is requiring the students to post every other day so that they experience the full effect of a three-week experiment rather than trying to post everything in the last three days. The variety in and duration of their posts will lead to much more personal, informative, and compelling content.

Most importantly, this assignment should be fun. Encourage students to take risks and have some fun with the experiment. Invite students to take small steps toward their growth and development as a leader.

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