JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

JULY 2022

APPLICATION SECTION

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MEET OUR LEADERSHIP STUDENTS: An Online Exercise to Develop Personas Application Manuscript

Abstract

Using an exploratory multi-case study approach, we examined student perceptions of leadership through analysis of introductory discussion board forums in online undergraduate and graduate leadership courses to formulate leadership student personas. A review of related literature reveals that leadership's broad application results in a vast array of interests and motivations related to pursuit of a leadership degree. To that end, development of student personas provides leadership program administrators and faculty with a better understanding of their needs and characteristics. In this application paper, we will share qualitative data compiled from four online leadership courses. Our preliminary findings identified data-driven personas that showcase how leadership students with varying backgrounds and aspirations envision knowing our leadership students, as well as recommending future research that can help advance the field of leadership education.

Keywords: *leadership development, leadership pedagogy, online discussion, persona*

Introduction

Guided by the general question of "who are our leadership students," we were interested in gaining insights into the various types of students in our classes. Specifically, we wanted to have a better understanding of the experiences and career aspirations of those seeking a leadership-related degree. As educators in the field of leadership, we have found that our students' diverse backgrounds enrich our classes. These vast student differences, however, can also create challenges. There is not a clear-cut 'leadership' career path and new students begin their degrees at varying points along the many paths. Hence, we utilized a dynamic introductory discussion to get a clearer picture of our leadership students, with the ultimate goal of developing leadership student personas. These personas were intended to be a useful tool to improve our courses, curricula, and co-curricula. In our application paper, we highlighted our exploratory approach and key observations of our findings that included undergrad and graduate classes, traditional and non-traditional

students at different levels of development (e.g., introductory leadership courses versus upper-level leadership courses), and different domains of leadership (e.g., organizational vs law enforcement). Our work also provided faculty and administrators a starting point to aid both course and programmatic assessment within leadership programs, as well as prompted clear research recommendations.

Review of Related Scholarship

The lack of consensus on what leadership is and how to define it is well documented (Ciulla, 2012; Northhouse, 2018). Given that scholars cannot agree on its meaning, it is not surprising that students struggle to conceptualize it. Leadership has wide-ranging relevance and can look very different in different situations. Hence, the very complexities that make it difficult to define is partially due to the context-dependent nature of its application (Andenoro et al., 2013). This can be observed in the fragmented field of leadership education (e.g., organizational, educational, agricultural, law enforcement). In response, there have been calls to unify the burgeoning field and develop a cohesive framework of leadership (Brungardt et al., 2006; Seemiller, 2016). Further, scholars argue that leadership education may benefit from an "evidence-based leadership pedagogy" to bridge the gap between leadership theory and student practice both in their coursework and in the field (Werner et al., 2016, p. 206). We argue that one avenue to meet this goal is by getting in tune with our leadership students, their understanding of leadership, and their professional and personal leadership goals.

Recently, many have advocated for complexity leadership to serve as a unifying theoretical foundation for leadership degree programs (Andenoro et al., 2013; Shoup, 2016; Winton et al., 2018). Practitioners, regardless of industry or discipline, need adaptive leadership skills to thrive in times of change (Komives, Lucas et al., 2009). At least among online graduate-level leadership programs, some standardization in curriculum exists to support this goal (Winton et al., 2018). However, educators continue to advocate for the development of leadership competencies for all students (Seemiller, 2016). As promoted by Komives, Longerbeam et al. (2009), we must account for leadership development growth. Similarly, Webber and Scott (2008) argue that leadership development should address dimensions such as career stage, career aspirations, and professional skills. That is, developing students as leaders is not limited to one major, career field, or level of education, and doing so can offer a multitude of benefits for the educator (e.g., accreditation, university mission, behavioral benchmarking) and the student (e.g., career preparation, common language; Seemiller, 2016). Yet, provided that there is progress toward a broad set of foundational competencies to guide WHAT we are developing in leadership, we still know little of WHO we are developing. These insights are critical as we build leadership programs utilizing newer modalities of learning to facilitate the application of leadership competencies.

It is generally accepted that there is not a 'typical' leadership student, but there is scant research on the topic. Anecdotally, we know students striving for a degree in leadership come from a variety of backgrounds, are at different levels of leadership development, and have unique personal and professional goals. In this way, the research suggests development of personas to assist in better understanding the needs and characteristics of students. This strategy is especially beneficial to online students whose face-to-face interaction with faculty is either limited or nonexistent, further widening the gap between assumed knowledge (ad-hoc personas) and actual findings (data-driven personas) (Minichiello et al., 2017; Lilley et al., 2012). Furthermore, development of personas and related narratives also seek to enhance empathy through conveyance of "goals, values, needs, and actions" thus bringing to life students who might otherwise be personified by their name alone (Minichiello et al., 2017). Additionally, persona development creates a common language allowing for interdisciplinary implementation yielding effective communication and identification with the student; providing an especially salient outcome for leadership faculty (Lilley et al., 2012).

The literature also utilizes user-centered design (UCD), a term affiliated with product development, to

further support use of student personas. Briefly defined, UCD "focuses design activities on user needs rather than aesthetics" (Kozar & Miaskiewicz, 2009). However, practitioners often still have difficulty applying the principles of UCD and have found integration of personas to be helpful in remaining focused on the end-user (Kozar & Miaskiewicz, 2009). While originating from industry, UCD has strong implications in academia as faculty strive to remain student-centered in developing programs and learning outcomes focused on student interests and meeting market demand. Yet, due to the interdisciplinary nature of leadership a notable gap exists in the literature demonstrating the need for future research and implementation of data-driven student personas.

Description of the Application

Our goal was to better understand our leadership students, their goals, and their understanding of leadership. To achieve this goal, in the spring semester of 2020 we instituted an exercise in four online leadership courses at two universities that varied by level (i.e., undergraduate 100- and 400-level courses, and graduate 500-level courses) and by leadership domain (i.e., organizational leadership and law enforcement leadership). One institution was a private, midwestern university and the other was a public, east-coast university. Our total sample was 72 students.

For online courses, it is quite common, if not standard, to have a discussion assignment where students introduce themselves. Rather than a passive assignment, however, we encouraged students to engage in conversations with their peers. We instructed students to be creative and use levity to build dialogue around their expectations for the course and how it relates to leadership. Although the focus and core questions were consistent across classes, we tailored questions to meet the goals of the class. Students were generally instructed to (1) include standard introductory information (e.g., program of study, major/minor, hometown, number of leadership courses taken, job role), (2) create an elevator pitch of what leadership means to them, including why leadership is important to them professionally, (3) describe how leadership is integrated into their workplace and/or community organizations, using examples, and (4) discuss their perceptions of the course/program and what they expect to learn, how it might influence their academic and professional pursuits, and how it relates to leadership. Finally, to encourage participation and engagement we had students get creative in their responses and piloted unique elements in each class to gather data on what levers might work best. Students were instructed to add images, or humorous memes, that represented their characterizations. Students uploaded photos or brief video clips of themselves. Some classes had students respond to a specific number of classmates' posts, while some utilized grading rubrics, and others offered extra points.

Finally, we utilized a 5-item, formative assessment to gauge student's perceptions of the exercise. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree) aimed to gather reactions of the exercise, including their satisfaction, feelings of connection, and perceptions of growth.

Qualitative Approach to Developing Personas. Provided the exploratory nature of developing leadership student personas, we followed a flexible, iterative process for content analysis (Insch et al., 1997; Schilling, 2006; White & Marsh, 2006). We started with an inductive process to limit a priori notions of leadership student characteristics. An independent researcher (i.e., someone not affiliated with any of the classes) immersed themselves in the data, took notes of each student, and identified common themes according to leadership students' aspirations, expectations, and experience (Mulder & Yaar, 2006; Schilling, 2006). General themes were counted by how often they were mentioned within all posts. This initial analysis served as the basis to collectively develop a coding scheme, or codebook, that allowed us to approach the identification of personas more systematically. Our coding scheme included a description of the salient criteria identified in the initial coding and a corresponding descriptive rating scale. We had multiple coders review the coding scheme and established a coding process.

To start the deductive process, we had two independent raters code one class. The coding scheme was then discussed and refined. We then sorted the data by code and looked for categories that adequately described our student sample. We collectively reflected upon the data and established initial categories of leadership students, or personas. This process was then repeated for the second, third, and fourth classes. The coding scheme was discussed and modified as needed, taking into consideration the different levels, course numbers, and leadership domain. These students were sorted by code into the categories. After all courses were coded, we then collectively reviewed the categories and modified them into finalized personas.

Discussion of Outcomes and Implications

To explore student participation within the updated discussion approach, we first compared the total number of posts and average number of replies to past courses. The average of the new approach (M = 5.73) elicited more replies than the standard approach (M = 1.32). More importantly, we noted qualitative differences in students' responses using the new approach to introductions. A few examples are shared to compare, as well as highlight, students' creativity in the updated approach. For example, in a post from the old approach, students generally stated their names, background degrees or experience, and perhaps a hobby or fun fact.

Hello all, I'm John Doe. I currently work as a Principal Engineer at ABC Company, designing jet engines. My background is in engineering with a BS in mechanical engineering and I'm about half way through the MS program. One of my hobbies is racing (during the summer) and working on (during the winter) my toy car. I'm married (10 years) and have two children (5 & 2 year olds) who keep me busy. Really looking forward to this class!

In the new approach, students had a greater tendency to divulge personal information about themselves, their families, and their backgrounds, as well as further expand on what leadership meant to them in the context of their organizations.

Hey all! My name is Jane Doe and I am currently enrolled in the Masters program. I transferred in during the Fall of 2017 and have seven classes left to complete my degree. Being in the world of XYZ means existing in an ever-changing climate that requires knowledge, analytical thinking, change management, and strong leadership skills. Good business models provide access to a leadership hierarchy that is well-rounded in historical data, people skills, leadership skills, and visionary thinking. Being in the Industry for over 30 years, I worked hard to climb the ladder into roles that provided authority to make change. I had to become the best version of me to give those in my charge their best opportunity. I am a mother and wife. I spent 30 years climbing the corporate ladder in ABC Industry just to resign last year when they fell ill. I never expected to take over his business, but I am grateful I did. I now work from home, allowing me to care for my folks, run the business, manage my household, and complete my degree online. Leadership education and experience provided skills to manage priorities, lead people, and exercise influence through thousands of daily choices. Wonder woman has nothing on me. I believe this course will provide an overview of all facets of organizational development, from research and theory to application. I expect to learn how to perform research, how to think outside the box in developing ideas based on research, and how to apply new theories in the business environment, all while working with others. All of this is relevant in my current situation, personally and professionally. Identifying resources, utilizing resources, and creating new and improved methods and ideas as a team are fundamental leadership skills. Wishing you all the best this term! I've attached a couple of pictures, one of my family and the other of my sweet Mom and Dad.

These qualitative differences were corroborated by the students' perceptions of the exercise and courses. Students indicated that the discussion helped them get excited about the course and feel more connected to their peers. They also indicated the exercise was enjoyable and their view of leadership changed as a result of the class (Table 1).

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics of leadership students' perceptions of discussion exercise

Item	Student Level	Mean	St. Dev	% Fav	% Neu	% UnFav
The introductory discussion made me feel more connected to my peers.	UG (n = 48)	3.85	0.99	67%	29%	4%
	Grad (n = 24)	3.92	0.88	67%	29%	4%
The introductory discussion helped me become more excited about the course material.	UG (n = 48)	3.90	1.06	63%	29%	8%
	Grad (n = 24)	3.88	0.99	63%	29%	8%
The introductory discussion helped me reflect on my leadership elevator pitch.	UG (n = 48)	3.92	1.16	71%	13%	17%
	Grad (n = 24)	3.88	1.19	71%	13%	17%
Overall, I enjoyed the introductory discussion exercise.	UG (n = 48)	3.88	1.11	75%	17%	8%
	Grad (n = 24)	4.04	0.95	75%	17%	8%
My view of leadership has changed or developed as a result of this class.	UG (n = 48)	4.27	0.98	92%	8%	0%
	Grad (n = 24)	4.54	0.66	92%	8%	0%

Note. % Fav, % Favorable (strongly agree and agree), % Neu, % Neutral (neither agree nor disagree); %UnFav, %Unfavorable (disagree and strongly disagree).

Development of Leadership Student Personas: Results. Our inductive approach to developing personas began with two sections of one graduate class (N = 32). Consistent with Mulder and Yaar (2006), we reviewed the data by looking for themes around student (1) aspirations for degree, (2) expectations and motivation for the course, and (3) previous experience with leadership (Table 2):

Table 2
Content analysis of leadership students' aspirations, expectations, and experiences

Category	Theme
Aspirations	Become a better leader/improve leadership knowledge and skills (45%) Bring out the best in people/teach others to lead/develop people (39%) Vertical mobility in industry (32%) Coach/mentor/family leader (16%) Influence/Guide (16%) Mid-stage career change (13%) Entrepreneurial (6%) Freedom to express leadership views (6%) Analyze work relationships across levels (6%) Solve problems (6%) Lead an organization one day (3%)
Expectations	Use what is learned in everyday work/applying concepts (45%) Be a leader one day (39%) Improve leadership approach/develop skills/obtain tools (29%) Gain foundational knowledge of leadership (26%) Receive formal training (16%) Blend leadership theories with real-world application (13%) Understand role in leadership (10%) Facilitate discussion about leadership (3%)
Experiences	Current leader (45%) New to the field of leadership (29%) Some experience with leadership position (19%) Soon to be promoted to leadership position (3%)

Next, we discussed the co-presence of themes tagged within student posts and developed a coding scheme. Our coding scheme included 11 criteria, or characteristics, of leadership students regarding their aspirations and experiences. This coding scheme allowed us to utilize a deductive process whereby two independent raters then coded the data, met to discuss discrepancies, and finalized the coding scheme to use on the other three courses. The process was repeated after coding each course. The data was sorted and gave rise to emergent personas (Table 3). We identified six leadership student personas. Generally, these personas vary by the students' career stage, but we found that career stage alone was inadequate. Hence, these personas also reflect qualitative differences by goals and interests.

Table 3.
Finalized leadership student personas

Persona and Description	Example Passages
Upwardly Mobile Industry Leader: These individuals aspire to move up the ladder in their industry or were recently promoted into a leadership position. They generally have some experience with leadership and value increasing their professional mobility, practical skills, and experience.	...I was a team leader/hourly manager at my previous work placement... I gained the interest through my manager who saw something in me to move me up the ladder.
People Developer: Individuals with a passion for developing people. They aspire to bring out the best in their followers/teammates and uncover potential leaders within their teams. They also enjoy leading people to be leaders by teaching others how to lead. They are often coaches and mentors.	… Being a coach, leadership is very important to my field and the profession of the sport...having the ability to provide these young adults guidance and direction, you tend to get more productivity and effort for them.
Continuous Improvement Seeker: Individuals who are currently in leadership positions who aspire to become a better leader. Many of these students with significant experience also have a general passion of displaying leadership in every aspect of his/her life and believe leadership is not confined to the workplace.	… I am currently leading a team of thirteen and feel it is both my duty and my honor to continue to grow in my current leadership role while gaining tactical and useful tools to help accelerate the work that is already being performed by my team...
Passion Chaser/Entrepreneur: These individuals are looking to use the knowledge gained to help with their entrepreneurial pursuits. They may not have much leadership experience. These people have a creative outlook on leadership that they hope to channel in several aspects of their life.	… You can be a leader amongst friends, you can be a leader in your home, you can be a peer and also be a leader. It is about your influence…and I have been pursuing becoming an entrepreneur.
Career Changer: These individuals usually have years of work experience but are relatively new to the field of leadership. They hope to use their leadership training to move into a new career (or stage).	… I am looking to advance to the next phase in my career and would like to develop the necessary skills to eventually lead and create opportunities for others.
Future-Leader: These individuals are new to the workforce and aspire to be a leader one day. They hope to channel what they learn into their potential future role as a leader. These individuals' understanding of leadership may be limited due to a lack of experience.	...In order to become the leader in which I inspire to be, it is crucial for me to gain…the nitty gritty details (that) are vital to leadership development but are rarely explained.

We found that students across all levels and programs fit well into the persona categories (Table 4); however, there were discrepancies. Overall, the undergraduates fit into fewer buckets due to less discussion of career goals and aspirations and many of these students were only able to describe leadership through their personal experiences with supervisors (i.e., they did not discuss their own, personal leadership). Undergraduates also had a much larger percentage of 'future leaders' than

either graduate sample. Overall, the graduate organizational leadership program had the greatest distribution of students across the categories, with the highest percentage of experienced leaders. These experienced leaders generally expressed their motivation to pursue the degree was continuous improvement and becoming a better leader. Of the experienced leaders, those with the most work experience tended to have a greater interest in applying leadership to multiple aspects of their lives (beyond just their work). While this learning mindset was also observed within the police leadership graduate sample, given that these students were working in government or law enforcement most of them had an established career path. These students discussed the complexity of leadership but tended to describe their own organization's leadership in hierarchical terms and shared characteristics of the upwardly- mobile persona.

Table 4
Percentage of leadership student personas by program

Persona Category	UG	Grad (ORG)	Grad (Police)
Upwardly Mobile Industry Leader	26%	16%	47%
People Developer	4%	13%	n/a
Continuous Improvement Seeker	17%	26%	7%
Passion Chaser/Entrepreneur	n/a	10%	13%
Career Changer	9%	16%	20%
Future-Leader	39%	16%	13%

Reflections and Implications of the Exercise. Incorporation of this introductory exercise provided insight into the question of "who are our leadership students" and the current perspectives of both undergraduate and graduate leadership students. As faculty members, we develop curriculum with a particular student in mind. This ad-hoc persona, however, may not be an accurate reflection of the current student population and/or their expectations of the course (Minichiello et al., 2017; Lilley et al., 2012). Therefore, additional data-driven personas are needed to ensure the curriculum is meeting the needs of the student.

In pursuit of this objective, we identified six personas that typify our leadership students. It should be noted that these are prototypes of who is choosing a leadership degree and why they are pursuing it; they are not intended to perfectly define every student. While we found that some students were more representative of a given persona than others, there were a few students who had salient characteristics of more than one. Regardless, we found that every student 'fit' at least one persona. As such, this pilot exercise allowed us to get a better grasp of the defining characteristics of our students, which were largely driven by experience, career stage, and future goals. To illustrate, we found that undergraduates generally had less leadership experience and mostly identified as a future-leader or upwardly mobile industry leader, while graduate students tended to have a clearer understanding of what they wanted out of the degree. This was further reflected in the graduate students' chosen program. Many of the organizational leadership students' primary goal was continuous improvement (i.e., broader application of leadership), whereas the police leadership students were primarily focused on developing the competencies they needed for their next career stage.

We also found that graduate students were inclined to have a more in-depth perspective of leadership as well as course expectations. This could be due to the level of the course (5000 level) as expectations would differ from that of a 1000-level course, yet

upper-level undergraduate (3000-4000 level) posts were generally much stronger and closer to the introductory graduate-level posts. This suggest that in addition to professional experience and training, previous academic coursework matters.

It was also interesting to see how students view the role of leadership in their personal and professional lives. Students in the undergraduate courses included words such as trust, integrity, and motivation in their elevator pitch of leadership. While graduate students tended to have a broader conceptualization, using words like influence, promoting purpose, and developing both self and others. Exploring how these perspectives evolve for each of these personas over their degree pursuit can be used in assessment efforts to strengthen courses and programs.

Additionally, the incorporation of student photos provided another dimension not usually achieved in the introductory posts. Several students included photos of their whole family allowing those students who may have taken several previous courses together to further their relationship. The incorporation of personal information naturally occurs in a face-to-face course, but often is not addressed in online courses. Providing these visual cues provides data helpful in developing accurate personas of our leadership students and identifying not only what they hope to achieve professionally, but their personal values as well.

Understanding how "leadership" is interpreted and processed by students, and potential students, is critical to strengthen our curricula and co-curricula. A few concrete examples as to how we are utilizing our insights gained from this exercise include: incorporating mentoring and coaching programs that align students based on their goals, partnering with professional organizations to enhance career path opportunities, and integrating career development tools more intentionally into advising. Relatedly, there are also implications beyond the classroom including how leadership is marketed to potential students. If, for example, ‘future-leaders’ equate leadership, and leadership programs, as exclusive to upper-level positions, then it is possible we might be losing good students to other degree paths. Ultimately, by identifying students’ goals early we can better assist them in their career development and tailor curriculum to better meet their unique needs.

Recommendations

As discussed, this exploratory exercise identified a gap in the literature. Leadership programs have been examined regarding their competency development and curriculum design; however, personas have only been explored in other discipline programs such as computer information systems and calculus. We argued that through the application of user-centered design (UCD) we can begin to align our curriculum and programmatic learning outcomes with those identified by leadership students (Kozar & Miaskiewicz, 2009). Furthermore, we see our work from this exercise, and the six leadership student personas we identified, as a starting point for more rigorous research that can advance the growing field of leadership education.

While a brief formative assessment was conducted following the exercise, additional data collection is recommended to determine the evolution of students’ understanding of leadership as they matriculate through the program. This information will assist faculty and program administrators in understanding where opportunities exist to strengthen alignment to programmatic learning outcomes. Additionally, assessment of both practical and adaptive leadership competencies will provide in-depth data ensuring students have a solid theoretical and practical foundation thus enhancing career goal development and readiness (Blackwell et al., 2007).

This notion can be further demonstrated through completion of a capstone or comprehensive final project. Thus, the integration of both formal and informal data collection is recommended to ensure the project is reflective of continued progress toward understanding leadership as well as providing another opportunity to assess demonstration of programmatic learning outcomes. Furthermore, completion of an applied project fosters development of adaptive skills through the “ability to focus on an issue, direct attention to detail, management of time

and resources, [and] persistence" enhancing understanding of leadership competencies (Blackwell et al., 2007, p. 41). It would also be interesting to note any changes to the initial persona categorization, especially those related to career goal development.

This data could be essential to co-curricular development as well as marketing of leadership programs. As the competition for future students intensifies, the field of leadership education must find ways to differentiate itself. The more we know about our students the better we can build curricula and co-curricula in a way that resonates with future students. Development of personas could impact co-curricular programs including mentoring and alumni involvement in aligning current students with recent graduates who are currently applying the competencies of the program in a similar way. Further, we found that this simple exercise was effective in building community within the online classroom. Liu et al. (2007) said that "encouraging students to post personal profiles" such as those included in introductory posts increases student engagement and contributes to building a sense of community within the online environment (Liu et al., 2007, p. 11). Hence, we see potential for this this exercise to be part of a broader community-building initiative that attracts and retains students. Such an initiative would help attract students by highlighting that our programs are not reserved for those in leadership positions and retain students by building community-building programs that align with their career development.

Finally, the development of leadership student personas also helps structure curriculum and align it more closely with current research and scholarship in the field of leadership education. Replicating the project to include additional institutions, degree programs, and modality of instruction is recommended to further generalize the results. We recommend a survey-based approach that allows for analytical procedures such as cluster analysis to further validate these persona categories. Such research could help identify possible individuals who are interested in pursuing a leadership degree on a grand or macro scale. As suggested by Andenoro et.al (2013), research should "examine how the role of individual differences such as developmental readiness, leadership self-efficacy, motivation to learn, and leadership experience impacts curriculum development" (p. 5). As preliminary results have indicated, defining personas will decrease traditional assumptions of the type of students who enroll in such leadership programs. By better understanding our students, we become better equipped as educators to create and deliver curriculum that challenges and supports their development into well-rounded leaders.

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