

Still in scrubs: an autoethnographic narrative of teaching, learning, and leading in virtual spaces

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Abstract

Purpose – This autoethnographic study examines how teaching a synchronous virtual leadership course for healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic transformed my pedagogical stance and understanding of relational leadership learning. The purpose is to illuminate how connection, autonomy and presence shaped learning dynamics across screens and influenced my development as an educator and leader.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an interpretivist, relational autoethnographic design, the inquiry draws on reflective journals, field notes and course artifacts generated during and after instruction. An inductive, iterative analytic process guided theme development, supported by memo writing, triangulation and reflexive journaling to establish trustworthiness. Relational-Cultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory provided a conceptual frame for interpreting moments of connection, autonomy and educator transformation within the virtual classroom. Narrative vignettes illustrate pivotal pedagogical encounters.

Findings – The findings reveal that relational presence, mutual empathy and autonomy-supportive practices shaped learners' engagement and motivated their leadership development. Students demonstrated agency, collaborative problem-solving and cross-departmental connection, even while navigating workplace strain. The virtual environment amplified vulnerability and authenticity, leading to reciprocal learning and a shift in my teaching stance – from structured content delivery to relationally responsive, co-created leadership learning. These insights highlight how leadership development unfolds through connection and self-directed growth, particularly in virtual settings.

Research limitations/implications – As an autoethnography, the findings reflect a single educator's experience within a specific healthcare context and are not generalizable. However, the study expands methodological conversations in leadership education by illustrating how autoethnography can capture educator transformation, relational dynamics and virtual pedagogical practice. Future research should explore relational and motivational processes across diverse virtual leadership programs and examine how educators' reflective practice shapes learning outcomes.

Practical implications – The study offers concrete guidance for leadership educators and facilitators of virtual programs. Designing synchronous learning environments that support autonomy, competence and relatedness can enhance student engagement and voice. Practices such as structured reflection, flexible assessments and collective dialogue foster trust and co-created meaning. Educators are encouraged to hold their teaching structures lightly, cultivate presence and lean into responsive facilitation to strengthen relational pedagogy in online settings.

Originality/value – This study contributes to leadership education scholarship by demonstrating how autoethnography can illuminate educator transformation within virtual learning environments. It offers a theoretically integrated account of how Relational-Cultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory operate together as a pedagogy of connection and agency. The vignettes provide rare insights into real-time leadership learning across screens and highlight the potential of relational, responsive virtual teaching to foster authentic leadership development.

Keywords Leadership education, Autoethnography, Relational-Cultural Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Virtual pedagogy, Healthcare leadership

Paper type Research article

Her voice was raspy, and she wanted to keep her video off. She had tested positive for COVID-19 earlier that week, yet here she was—dialed in not from a quiet corner of the hospital as usual, but from her home. I told her it was okay to rest, that her health came first, but

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she insisted on staying. “*I wouldn’t miss this class for anything,*” she said. That moment stayed with me—not because it was dramatic, but because it revealed something I had not named yet: how much we were all learning from each other. Not only about leadership, but also about presence, purpose, and persistence. I had entered the virtual classroom expecting to teach. Instead, I was being taught.

This is a story of how virtual teaching became a mirror, showing me who I was as a leader, a woman, and a teacher. It is also an intentionally reflexive account, an autoethnographic inquiry grounded in journal notes and student feedback. I chose not to record class sessions because these working students needed a “safe space” to share openly with each other about their respective challenges and successes. I witnessed how they used their collective wisdom from different areas of the hospital to help each other through a challenging situation.

All student voices are anonymized. Where direct quotes are used, they are drawn from personal emails and course reflections. My methodological approach follows relational ethics, aiming to honor the dignity and agency of all participants.

How I came to teach this class

The invitation came on a quiet afternoon—an email asking if I would be willing to teach a virtual leadership course to healthcare professionals at a hospital in a regional healthcare institution outside the United States. It was a Transformational Management Certificate Program, a colleague said. Three different cohorts across departments—nurses, pharmacy techs, administrators, housekeeping, and even security staff. The program was anchored in *The Student Leadership Challenge: Five Practices for Becoming an Exemplary Leader* by [Kouzes and Posner \(2018\)](#). I said “yes” without hesitation, but not without assumptions. I imagined the usual challenges: time zones, camera fatigue, and the now-routine struggle to create engagement through pixels and audio delays. I expected to teach strategies, facilitate some case study discussions, and offer encouragement to tired professionals juggling work, school, and their lives. I received a syllabus and prepared a structured lesson plan, full of frameworks and theory—ready to help them lead others more effectively.

By the second session, I realized this class was not going to follow my plan. These were not just professionals upskilling; they were leaders already, surviving in real time. Some logged on still in uniform. Others joined from hospital break rooms or parked cars. Their screens lit up with stories of burnout, teamwork, courage, and care. I had walked in thinking I was there to teach these international, multigenerational, emerging leaders in transformational leadership. What I did not expect was to be led into my own transformation.

Teaching, in this space, became less about curriculum and more about connection. Recent studies have emphasized similar shifts toward relationally grounded and self-determined learning, particularly in virtual and professional education settings ([Giacumo, 2024](#); [Mabuan, 2022](#)).

The virtual nature of the course shaped every pedagogical decision and exchange. Students logged in from hospital wards, break rooms, parked cars, and home spaces, often amid demanding shifts. Bandwidth limitations, shifting locations, and the exhaustion of working through a pandemic meant that presence could not be taken for granted. At the same time, the virtual format enabled staff across departments and schedules to gather synchronously, turning the online classroom into a shared leadership laboratory rather than a simple content-delivery site. These conditions made the virtual space not merely a backdrop but an active pedagogical force influencing agency, voice, and relational dynamics. This mirrors broader trends in leadership education, where transformational learning has been shown to flourish in virtual environments when dialogue, reflection, and real-time meaning-making are intentionally prioritized.

I remembered my “aha” moment when I found my anchor and emerging voice around the belief that whether the relationship is between parent and child, counselor and client, or teacher and student, it is a vital component for developing healthy human relationships, behaviors, and motivating change. This came alive for me with these emerging leaders I was charged to teach.

Upon reflection, during one class discussion where students shared professional challenges, collaborative strategies were notably offered with care and concern for each other. This approach fostered a sense of mutual support and empowerment. When one student shared their struggle with balancing work and study, peers offered practical advice and empathy, demonstrating the relational dynamic that Relational-Cultural theory (RCT) emphasized.

My Reflective Question: How do I foster mutual growth in my teaching relationships?

Theoretical Framing

Leadership learning is inherently relational. It unfolds through encounters that invite voice, cultivate agency, and make space for authentic connection. Two frameworks—Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—guided how I made sense of what occurred in this virtual classroom and how I came to understand my own transformation as an educator.

Relational-Cultural Theory (Miller, 1986; Jordan, 2008) positions growth as something that happens *through* connection rather than apart from it. Mutual empathy, shared vulnerability, and relational authenticity are viewed not as optional interpersonal qualities but as the very conditions under which people learn, lead, and develop. In teaching, RCT encourages educators to move beyond delivering content toward cultivating relationships that support mutual growth. This lens helped me see how small moments of presence—pauses, invitations, stories, and listening—created a sense of trust that allowed students to step forward as leaders in their own right.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995, 2000; Lumpkin & Achen, 2018) complements this by explaining the motivational experiences that support sustained engagement. SDT suggests that when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they are more likely to invest in their learning and take initiative. Within this course, these needs showed up in unexpected ways: students exercised autonomy through choosing assignments, demonstrated competence by applying class insights to real workplace dilemmas, and strengthened relatedness through acts of care and peer support. SDT provided a way to understand why these behaviors mattered and why they felt so powerful in practice.

Together, RCT and SDT form what I came to see as a pedagogy of connection and agency. RCT helped me attend to the relational climate and SDT helped me recognize how voice, choice, and capability emerged within that climate. Used together, these frameworks illuminate how leadership learning can develop not through hierarchy or expertise but through relationships grounded in trust, mutual engagement, and the courage to show up fully.

These ideas are especially important in synchronous virtual spaces, where physical distance can easily become emotional distance. Yet, in this course, the opposite occurred. Screens became windows into real-time professional life—hospital wards, break rooms, parked cars, kitchens—and the virtual environment created a kind of intimacy that disrupted traditional classroom boundaries. The online format asked all of us to be present differently. It required attentiveness, relational intentionality, and a willingness to engage without relying on the usual cues of face-to-face settings. RCT and SDT helped me understand why those dynamics mattered and how they shaped the learning we co-created.

In this way, the theoretical framing is not an abstract overlay but a reflection of what unfolded. These frameworks provided the language to articulate a deeper truth. Leadership learning is relational work, and virtual spaces when held with care and presence can become powerful places where connection, agency, and transformation take root.

Methodology, research design, and ethical considerations

This study employed an autoethnographic design to examine how teaching a virtual leadership course for healthcare professionals reshaped my understanding of leadership, pedagogy, and

my own professional identity. Autoethnography was selected because it centers lived experience as data and allows the researcher to interrogate how personal history, relational encounters, and professional practice intersect in moments of transformation. As [Ellis, Adams, and Bochner \(2011\)](#) note, autoethnography brings together the autobiographical and the cultural, enabling the researcher to interpret personal experience in ways that illuminate broader social and pedagogical processes. This method is especially well-suited for leadership education, where the interplay between self, relationship, and context often becomes a primary site of learning.

Research question

Guided by this approach, I examined the following question:

How did leading this virtual leadership course transform my teaching practice, and what did I learn about fostering mutual growth and connection in synchronous online spaces?

Research design

The study followed an interpretivist, relational orientation in which meaning emerges through reflection on lived experience. My analytic focus was not on evaluating student outcomes but on understanding how my assumptions, decisions, and relational stance as an educator shifted over time. Theoretical framing from Relational-Cultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory (see Theoretical Framing section) informed how I interpreted moments of connection, autonomy, and voice but did not predetermine the analysis. Instead, these frameworks served as conceptual guides while the data itself—my journals, field notes, and course artifacts—shaped the emergent insights.

Data sources

Data were derived from materials I generated before, during, and after each class session:

- (1) Reflective journals written immediately following each session (27 entries, approximately 40 pages). These journals captured emotional responses, emergent questions, observations about student interactions, teaching decisions, and moments of discomfort or insight.
- (2) Field notes created during lesson planning and debriefs, documenting shifts in my pedagogical choices, decisions to revise assignments, and reflections on student engagement.
- (3) Course artifacts such as lesson plans, slides, written prompts, and weekly adjustments that reflected evolving instructional intent.

These materials provided a record of both action and interpretation, allowing me to trace how meaning-making unfolded in real time.

Analytic approach

Analysis followed iterative, inductive techniques commonly used in qualitative inquiry ([Saldaña, 2015](#); [LeCompte & Schensul, 1999](#); [Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009](#)). First-cycle coding identified recurring patterns related to relational engagement, teaching stance, autonomy, and competence. Second-cycle coding involved grouping these patterns into thematic clusters that informed the construction of the narrative vignettes. Reflexive memos written alongside coding helped surface assumptions, emotional responses, and shifts in understanding.

Rather than treating vignettes as illustrations of predetermined concepts, each vignette represents a moment that marked a change in how I understood my role as educator and leader. The analytic process therefore moved between experience, reflection, theory, and re-storying aligning with contemporary autoethnographic practice in education and leadership studies.

The iterative coding process produced three overarching analytic clusters—relational engagement, transformation of teaching stance, and learner autonomy and voice—that became the foundation for constructing the narrative vignettes. Each vignette represents a moment that marked a shift in how I understood my role as a leadership educator. To illustrate how these themes guided analysis and interpretation, [Table 2](#) provides a summary of the vignettes, the core themes associated with each, and the insights they illuminate.

Researcher positionality

As an educator and leadership consultant trained in counseling psychology and organizational development, I occupy an insider–outsider position. I share professional commitments to care, service, and ethical leadership with the healthcare staff I taught, yet I am culturally distinct from the Bahamian context and conscious of the power I held as instructor. My positionality shaped what I noticed, how I interpreted classroom interactions, and what I chose to document. Journaling served as both data and a tool for checking my own assumptions, biases, and emotional responses throughout the course.

Trustworthiness

To strengthen the credibility of this inquiry, I employed several strategies:

- (1) Reflexive journaling to make visible my thinking, reactions, and decision-making.
- (2) Triangulation across journals, field notes, and course artifacts to identify consistent patterns.
- (3) Thick description in vignettes to allow readers to understand context and relational nuance.
- (4) Analytic transparency through memo-writing and iterative coding, which created an audit trail of interpretation.
- (5) Theory-informed reflection that linked personal experience to broader pedagogical and motivational constructs without forcing alignment.

These strategies support the interpretive integrity of the findings while honoring the subjectivity inherent in autoethnographic work.

Ethical considerations

This project draws exclusively on materials I authored and does not analyze or reproduce identifiable student data. Student comments included in vignettes are paraphrased, anonymized, or presented as composite experiences to protect confidentiality. Because no interviews, recordings, or institutional data were collected, the study meets criteria for exempt autoethnographic research ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). Names of organizations and individuals remain confidential.

Methods at-a-Glance

The iterative coding process generated three overarching analytic clusters—relational engagement, transformation of teaching stance, and learner autonomy and voice. These clusters provided a framework for interpreting my reflective journals, field notes, and course artifacts, and informed the overall organization of the analytic narrative. [Table 1](#) summarizes the research design and analytic procedures that guided this process.

To provide analytic transparency and demonstrate how coded patterns informed the construction of the vignettes, [Table 2](#) summarizes the core themes, analytic focus, and illustrative insights identified through iterative analysis.

Table 1. Summary of research design and analytic approach

Element	Description
Research Design	Autoethnography grounded in interpretivist and relational inquiry (Ellis <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018)
Theoretical Frameworks	Relational-Cultural Theory (Miller, 1986; Jordan, 2008) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995)
Context	Virtual leadership course for healthcare professionals a regional healthcare institution outside the United States
Participants	Not studied as human subjects; reflections reference composite impressions of approximately 30 adult learners across three cohorts
Data Sources	Author's reflective journals (27 entries, 40 pages), field notes, and evolving course artifacts (slides, prompts, lesson plans)
Analytic Approach	Inductive coding, reflexive memo writing, and iterative theme development (Saldaña, 2015; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Ybema <i>et al.</i> , 2009)
Key Analytic Themes	(a) Relational engagement, (b) transformation of teaching stance, (c) learner autonomy and voice
Ethical Position	Exempt autoethnographic study; relational ethics (Ellis, 2007) guided anonymization and representation
Validity Strategies	Reflexive journaling, triangulation of data types, and maintenance of analytic audit trail
Storage & Confidentiality	All files stored on encrypted, password-protected device accessible only to author

Table 2. Themes identified through iterative, inductive analysis

Vignette	Core theme	Analytic focus	Illustrative insight
(1) Transformational Practice	Shifting Teaching Stance	Movement from structured instruction to relational responsiveness	Spontaneous whole-group dialogue guided the shift from planned content to co-created learning
(2) Relational Engagement	Trust, Mutual Empathy, and Presence	Development of relational safety enabling authentic voice and vulnerability	Reflective openings and storytelling deepened connection and shaped classroom climate
(3) Connection Beyond the Screen	Belonging and Cross-Department Collaboration	Virtual interactions catalyzing real-world professional connection	Students recognized workplace interdependence and initiated peer support outside class
(4) Motivational Empowerment	Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness	SDT-aligned conditions fostering intrinsic motivation and ownership	Choice-based assignments and peer support elevated engagement during workplace strain
(5) Reflective Growth	Educator Transformation	Reframing teaching as presence, listening, and shared leadership	Journaling illuminated shifts in identity and awareness of relational leadership practice
(6) Voice and Visibility	Encouraging the Heart	Empowerment through recognition, affirmation, and relational trust	A quiet student's participation demonstrated how leadership emerges when individuals feel seen

Findings

The following vignettes expand on the themes identified, offering situated examples of how relational, motivational, and pedagogical dynamics unfolded in the virtual classroom.

I had it all planned: eight modules, structured slides, pre-written discussion prompts, and a carefully scaffolded assignment schedule. I even mapped out when I would introduce the core

theories—situational leadership here, transformational leadership there. As a leader, I believed that preparation showed respect. As a teacher, I thought structure would offer support. But by the second class, my slides started to feel like a barrier.

Vignette 1: transformational practice

That first night, as I prepared to send everyone into breakout rooms, a student asked, “Professor, can we just stay in the main room tonight?” I paused, my cursor hovering over the breakout button. “Of course,” I said. And just like that, the plan shifted.

What followed was not a derailment—it was depth. Without being segmented into small groups, students leaned into a conversation that unfolded naturally. A nurse shared a difficult conversation she had with her supervisor. A pharmacy tech reflected on trying to lead her team through a policy change with no warning. Someone else asked, “How do you lead when you don’t feel heard?” I closed the slide deck. We did not need bullet points that night—we needed stories.

Over the weeks, this became our rhythm. I held my structure lightly. I still prepared, but I let the room’s needs shape the flow. Sometimes I would begin class with a quote or a short reflection and wait. If there was silence, I would stay with it. Eventually, someone would speak, and the conversation would rise from what they needed—not what I had planned.

One evening, a student shared that she had advocated for a change in her department’s morning briefing protocol—an idea she had first mentioned hesitantly in class. When I asked her what made her follow through, she said, “I guess I believed in my voice a little more after hearing everyone respond.”

This was transformational leadership in action, not me directing from the front, but co-creating a space where others stepped into their own authority. It was also RCT in practice: growth-in-connection and mutual empowerment unfolding in real time. That is when I knew I was not just teaching leadership—I was modeling it. Not through performance, but through presence.

I adjusted due dates, offered grace, and revised learning activities on the fly. I asked students what kind of support they needed, and I listened. They helped shape the course. They taught one another. And I found myself becoming a different kind of leader/teacher—not one who led from the front, but one who held space and followed what was unfolding.

This experience redefined leadership for me. I used to equate it with certainty, with direction, with vision. But this course reminded me that real leadership often means letting go—letting go of rigid plans, of needing to be the expert, of controlling outcomes. It means making room for others to rise.

What I had once viewed as “flexibility” I now understood as transformational practice adapting not just to accommodate students, but to trust them. To believe that when given the space, they would step into their own growth and bring each other along. I had entered the class prepared to lead. What I discovered was that my greatest act of leadership was being willing to co-create the learning with them.

Vignette 2: relational engagement

I began each class with either a quote or something reflective, often about courage, growth, or leadership. At first, I saw it as a simple warm-up, a pause before diving into content. But over time, those quotes became something else. They became our heartbeat.

One morning I opened with: “Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge.” A nurse unmuted herself, still in scrubs, and said quietly, “That’s what I do every night. But no one ever says it like that.”

The room softened.

That night, instead of breakout rooms or theoretical discussion, the students desired an open forum, so we shared as a collective. One student described staying late to help a new hire who felt overwhelmed. Another reflected on apologizing to a colleague after a misstep—something

she had never felt empowered to do before. I realized that the classroom was not filled with talk; it was filled with trust.

These exchanges deepened trust and blurred the boundary between teaching and learning. Theories of mutual empathy and voice from RCT came alive, grounded in cross-cultural respect—our differences in background enriching, not dividing, the dialogue.

As the weeks passed, more students began to reflect and share their workplace challenges and successes in practice. One Saturday morning, a student summed up the week by saying: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” She said it reminded her of our discussions—and of herself.

These were not just words anymore. They were invitations into each other’s lives. And in the process, I began to unlearn what I thought “facilitation” was. I found myself closing my slides more often, following their voices and not my plan. Sometimes, I would hear myself say, “Let’s stay here for a moment,” as a story unfolded that held weight beyond the syllabus. I no longer feared silence. It became a space for listening. I used to think connection was the by-product of good teaching. I now believe it is the foundation.

Later, I would come to recognize these experiences as evidence of RCT in practice. Mutual empathy. Respect. Growth-in-connection. But at that moment, it felt like something much simpler and more sacred: trust being built, voice by voice. This form of emergent connection echoes recent findings that relational leadership learning develops through meaningful interpersonal encounters that invite reflection, shared inquiry, and mutual support (Stewart, Anderson, & Cripps, 2025).

Vignette 3: connection beyond the screen

These emerging relationships reflected how connection fostered not only belonging but also initiative, aligning with self-determination perspectives that link relatedness to motivation and leadership behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). After our third or fourth session, one student shared something unexpected:

Three of us ran into each other in the hospital hallway this week, she said. We realized we’ve been working in different departments all this time, but we never really talked until this class.

The others smiled in recognition. She went on to explain that they had agreed to meet regularly as a small group—just to check in, share insights, and support each other’s leadership goals. What began as a virtual gathering had begun to ripple outward, creating new patterns of connection within their workplace.

The class came alive in that moment. Others began reflecting on how rarely they interacted across units, and how this new awareness could strengthen teamwork throughout the hospital. What started as a conversation about leadership theory became a realization about community.

For me, this was a turning point. It demonstrated what Relational-Cultural Theory calls mutual empowerment—the understanding that growth happens through, not apart from, others. The students were leading themselves, transforming learning into living practice. It reminded me that the power of connection does not end when the session closes; it continues in hallways, conversations, and small acts of leadership that bridge roles and departments.

Vignette 4: motivational empowerment

I had always believed in giving students options, but I had never fully understood the power of autonomy until this course. The first moment it truly clicked came when designing the final assignment. I remember staring at the final blank course shell, wondering: *What is the best way to assess transformational leadership and learning?* A standard paper? A case analysis? And then I thought about how my students showed up after long shifts, often logging in from their cars or workstations. They did not need to be tested. They needed to be trusted.

So, I gave them a choice: write a leadership analysis paper or design a leadership tool for their workplace. The results were creative and practical, ranging from training modules and

desk manuals to a strategic plan for a departmental revamp. One student created a peer training module for her department. Another, a supervisor in a small clinic, designed a strategic plan for new hires. One student reflected on concepts learned in class and described how applying them during a workplace conflict changed her approach. These were not assignments. They were acts of ownership.

Giving students freedom to choose did not result in inconsistency; it resulted in competence. They rose. They reflected. They created. And because it mattered to them, it began to matter differently to me.

Self-motivation showed up at each session. The moment that still echoed within me came from the student who called me after she tested positive for COVID-19. *"I'll be there tonight,"* she said. *"But I'll have to keep my camera off."* I told her it was okay to rest, to take care of herself. Yet, she replied, *"I'm not missing this class for anything."*

That night, she logged in quietly. The chat was filled with well wishes. Someone offered to share notes. Another asked if she needed help with the assignment. No one asked me what to do—they just showed up for her. And for each other. It was then that I understood what relatedness looks like in real time. It was not a group project or a breakout room, but a moment of shared humanity. A moment when presence is enough.

While reflecting on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), I realized I had seen it come to life: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Not because I lectured on it. But because I stepped back and let it emerge in them—and in me.

Vignette 5: reflective growth

I did not expect to feel so seen while teaching a class over Zoom. In traditional classrooms, I was used to performing the role, organizing, delivering, and motivating. I knew how to "model the way," how to lead from the front. But something about this virtual space stripped away the distance between teacher and student. There were no lecture halls, no side conversations, no hiding behind formality. There was only the screen, the voices, and the vulnerability we shared each week.

One evening, a student reflected on the opening quote: *"Great leadership usually starts with a willing heart, a positive attitude, and a desire to make a difference."* She said it reminded her of the class itself. It struck me—this space we had created, unpolished and real, was working not because I was presenting perfectly, but because I was showing up with a willing heart.

I found myself growing quieter—not out of fatigue, but out of reverence. These students, still in scrubs and guard uniforms, speaking from break rooms, hospital workspaces, and cars, were teaching me what it means to *lead from within*. They were not looking to be led. They were looking to be seen, heard, and trusted. And so was I.

I began journaling after each class, often in the stillness that followed as the screen went blank. One night, I wrote, *"Today, I didn't teach. I listened. I watched leadership unfold from every square on my screen."* In that stillness, I started to hear myself more clearly, my insecurities, my assumptions, my quiet longing to teach with less performance and more presence.

I once believed leadership was about speaking with confidence and commanding a room. But this class showed me that sometimes, the most powerful form of leadership is to *encourage the heart*—to recognize someone's quiet effort, to hold space for their voice, and to let them lead their own transformation.

After the course ended, I kept thinking about what had shifted. I taught the same content I had taught before. But this time, something changed in me. I let go of managing impressions and leaned into the work of creating space—brave, honest space—for learning to unfold. I stopped needing to prove I was qualified. Instead, I led with care, with curiosity, and with a deep belief that leadership can begin in silence and still carry great strength.

The more I reflected, the more I understood that transformation in teaching does not come from what we say, but from what we are willing to unlearn. In this course, I unlearned my need for polish and certainty. And I rediscovered my purpose: to lead with empathy, to teach with reflection, and to trust that when we *encourage the heart*, real growth follows.

My Reflective Question: I now ask myself regularly, am I leading with a willing heart? Am I creating a space where others feel safe enough to lead?

Vignette 6: voice and Visibility

She was quiet at first—a housekeeping supervisor, always present, camera on, but rarely speaking unless called on. She listened intently, and I could see in her eyes that she was taking in everything. Still, I encouraged her. Every voice mattered in our class—not just the confident ones. One evening, during a class discussion on managing team dynamics, she unmuted herself.

“Professor,” she said hesitantly, “I’ve been having this issue in my department...what would you do?” I turned the question back to the group first, believing that collective wisdom often held more than I could alone. They responded thoughtfully. Then I spoke, not with solutions, but with curiosity and affirmation. I did not think much of the moment. But weeks later, after the class ended, she emailed me. She had missed the final survey and wanted to share her feedback. She wrote the following:

You are a phenomenal teacher. What better way to learn the Transformational Leadership Course than by being in a class with a transformational teacher? The discussion outputs gave me the opportunity to reflect well on the topics. You were very encouraging, and you created a trusting space where we could share our work experiences and challenges.

I leaned back in my chair after reading her words. I had not seen myself that way. I had not realized that what I had offered, a gentle invitation, a space to speak, a moment of trust—this was transformational. Not just for her but for me as well. Although I received positive survey responses and the VP said I was a “rock star,” I had not processed its true meaning. This email became more than a kind affirmation. It became a mirror. A reminder that leadership in teaching is not measured by how much we speak, but by how well we listen. And that sometimes, the most transformational shift happens when someone who was silent chooses to share and feels seen when they do. Many of the student behaviors illustrated in the vignettes—taking initiative, supporting peers, applying new strategies at work—reflect SDT’s assertion that learners thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Discussion and implications

Viewed together, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provide a cohesive lens for interpreting how connection and agency function within leadership learning. RCT emphasizes mutual empathy, authenticity, and growth-in-connection as essential to human development (Jordan, 2008; Miller, 1986), while SDT highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational to intrinsic motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

The interaction of these two frameworks reveals how relational presence and psychological need-support work together to sustain engagement and foster leadership development (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ntoumanis *et al.*, 2021). In this virtual classroom, relational presence created the conditions under which students could exercise autonomy, develop competence, and experience meaningful relatedness, an alignment that functioned as a pedagogy of connection and agency.

Taken together, these theories illustrate how leadership learning emerges through trust-building, collaborative dialogue, and opportunities for self-directed practice rather than

through hierarchical instruction. These relational and motivational dynamics were amplified by the virtual format, where students' lived contexts became part of the learning environment.

This synthesis also aligns with key principles of transformative learning; wherein perspective shifts arise through critical reflection within relationships of trust and dialogue. When applied jointly, RCT, SDT, and transformational learning suggest a pedagogy of connection and agency, one in which learners discover their leadership capacity through mutual support, reflective meaning-making, and courage to act. Across the cohorts, these dynamics became inseparable: relational safety nurtured autonomy, and autonomy deepened connection, forming a reciprocal cycle of empowerment.

Recent work in leadership education reinforces these dynamics. [Stewart et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that relational pedagogy is foundational to leadership learning because it positions knowledge as co-constructed through connection, dialogue, and shared reflection. Their findings demonstrate that relational engagement, rather than content transmission, is what enables learners to make meaningful sense of leadership theory and apply it authentically in practice. Although their relational pedagogy tool was developed within a traditional higher education environment, its underlying principles resonate deeply with the experiences illustrated in this study: trust invites voice, voice cultivates agency, and agency deepens connection. In this virtual course, relational presence functioned not as an added value but as the core mechanism of learning, mirroring the relational trajectories [Stewart et al. \(2025\)](#) describe.

The findings illuminate these theoretical patterns in concrete and situated ways. The vignettes highlight how relational and motivational dynamics reshaped both teaching and leadership within this virtual space. What began as a structured leadership course evolved into a living laboratory of connection, mutual support, and co-learning. Students exercised leadership by advocating for departmental improvements, initiating cross-unit peer groups, and applying theoretical frameworks to workplace challenges. These moments reveal that leadership was not simply being taught—it was being enacted, observed, and refined collectively.

This study also reframes transformational leadership in educational contexts. Rather than emphasizing vision-setting or directive influence, transformation here occurred laterally—through listening, shared vulnerability, collaborative problem-solving, and recognition of one another's strengths. The educator's role shifted from expert to co-learner, modeling humility and presence that fostered collective empowerment. These insights extend existing leadership pedagogy by demonstrating how relational presence, rather than performance, can become a powerful instructional tool.

Limitations

As an analytic autoethnography, this study offers an in-depth account of one educator's experience and does not aim for generalizability across contexts. The reflections draw solely from my journals, field notes, and course artifacts, without direct student data, due to program closure and ethical considerations. While this enhances relational and cultural sensitivity, it also limits the scope of triangulation. The virtual nature of the course further shaped how interactions were observed and interpreted. These boundaries, however, invite future inquiry into how relational pedagogy and leadership learning manifest across diverse virtual, cross-cultural, and professional settings.

Future directions

Future research could build on this study by examining how relational pedagogy unfolds across different virtual leadership learning environments, particularly in multicultural or high-pressure professional settings. Comparative studies that integrate student voices, institutional perspectives, and cross-cohort analyses would help illuminate how relational presence and learner agency operate within varied organizational cultures. Additionally, the intersection of Relational-Cultural Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and transformational leadership

pedagogy offers a promising framework for exploring leadership identity development in online and hybrid programs. Further inquiry might also investigate how educators navigate vulnerability, cultural humility, and ethical decision-making when teaching in virtual cross-cultural spaces. Expanding these lines of research could deepen understanding of how leadership educators cultivate connection, autonomy, and reflective practice in an increasingly digitized and global landscape.

Taken together, these insights point to several practical considerations for leadership educators. First, prioritizing relational presence, through open dialogue, storytelling, and reflective pauses. This creates conditions for autonomous engagement and collective learning. Second, flexibility in instructional design should be understood not as a relaxation of rigor, but as a relational practice that communicates trust, respect, and attunement to learners' lived contexts. Third, embedding reflective practices such as journaling, narrative inquiry, or dialogue rounds enables learners to integrate leadership theory with lived experience, strengthening meaning-making and identity development.

These practices align with contemporary calls to integrate relational pedagogy into leadership curricula, emphasizing empathy, shared agency, and ethical engagement in virtual environments (Stewart *et al.*, 2025; Giacumo, 2024). They also highlight the importance of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), which invite educators to balance authority with vulnerability and to create environments where learners feel safe enough to show up authentically. Further, leadership educators designing virtual or hybrid programs may benefit from intentionally cultivating autonomy-supportive practices, competence-building opportunities, and relational connection—three conditions that research identifies as central to intrinsic motivation and professional growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ntoumanis *et al.*, 2021).

These insights hold particular relevance for leadership educators working with adult professionals in high-demand fields such as healthcare. Emerging research on workplace well-being highlights that environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness not only enhance engagement but also buffer against burnout and emotional exhaustion (Slemp, Kern, & Vella-Brodrick, 2018). These conditions were reflected throughout this virtual course.

The patterns observed in this virtual classroom mirrored these findings: when learners experienced relational safety and genuine choice, they demonstrated greater initiative, reflection, and sustained participation despite demanding work schedules. For leadership educators, designing autonomy-supportive and relationally grounded learning spaces may therefore contribute not only to leadership development, but also to the broader well-being and resilience of working adults.

Finally, this work underscores the ethical and pedagogical importance of cultivating human-centered leadership development especially during times of uncertainty and crisis. When leadership education foregrounds connection, autonomy, and mutual empowerment, it contributes to more humane workplaces and educational communities. The findings suggest that the most powerful leadership learning occurs not through transmitting information but through building relationships that affirm dignity, voice, and possibility.

Conclusion: returning to the scrubs

In quiet moments, I return to an image that stayed with me—her voice soft, her camera off, her body recovering from COVID-19, yet still determined to show up. At the time, I saw her presence as dedication. Now, I understand it as something more: a reflection of what we created together in that virtual classroom. She was not simply showing up for content. She was showing up for connection, for her emerging voice, and for the community of practice we were building session by session.

Across the weeks of teaching, the rhythms of our virtual classroom—opening quotes, reflective pauses, shared stories, and unplanned conversations—became a space where leadership learning unfolded through presence rather than performance. My role shifted from delivering material to witnessing growth. I arrived with frameworks, lesson plans, and theory;

however, I left with a deeper understanding that transformational leadership does not depend on physical proximity or formal authority. It depends on trust, relational courage, and the willingness to be changed alongside others.

These reflections reinforce the central insight of this study and that is leadership learning is co-created. It emerges through mutual empathy, shared vulnerability, and the everyday courage of speaking, listening, and showing up. The virtual environment, far from being a limitation, invited a different kind of intimacy. One that blurred boundaries between class and workplace, theory and lived experience, teacher and learner. In that space, students modeled leadership not by following instructions but by supporting one another, taking initiative, and translating insights into action. They led, and I followed.

What I once believed about leadership—that it required certainty, polish, and control—gave way to a more human and relational understanding. Leadership in teaching often means making room for unplanned brilliance, showing up imperfectly, and trusting learners to find their own path forward. This course taught me that belonging is not something to be earned; it is something we create together through presence and care.

These insights extend beyond this single course. They point to the possibility of virtual classrooms as sites of authentic connection and transformational learning, especially in times of uncertainty and cultural complexity. They affirm that leadership education grounded in empathy, autonomy, and relational presence can cultivate not only capable leaders but more humane organizations. Teaching, at its best, is not a performance. It is a shared space of becoming.

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