

Emerging Leaders in Context: Developing the Class Project

Presented by: Gretchen Urkov

The University of Arizona offers a class that gives students an opportunity to practice being a leader and become a contributing member of their community. Students can be leaders without being appointed or elected to a leadership position. How is this possible? By taking Leadership Contexts and Concepts taught by Dr. Nancy Huber in an informal classroom setting with extended class time and lots of interactive assignments.

Students start out by getting comfortable in class and around each other. They make name tents to show and talk about during introductions. This allows them to get past the hurdle of speaking in front of the class, begin the process of building relationships, and made it apparent that each will be expected to contribute.

This is a hands on, informal class which engages students to do leadership rather than studying leadership. Students are able to become leaders in their community rather than studying about other leaders in other places! The expectations for the class project are simple: 1. It has to involve everyone in the class, and 2. it has to somehow engage and enhance the campus community.

One of the best tools for this class is journaling. This is an effective way for students to track their learning, react to what is happening in class and help make connections between events or activities and the concepts discussed in class. Journals are not graded nor read by the professor. They are for students' benefit to help them reflect upon what they are learning, what is important to them and what might have touched them. The professor provides the journals for students as well as in-class time to write in them. Students have appointments twice a semester to talk with her about the journaling process and any other topics of concern.

Towards the end of the semester, several class periods are devoted to finishing the class project which is the primary learning activity for the entire semester. Last year's class created and administered a survey assessing the students' awareness of the University of Arizona as a student centered university. At the last class, students did a presentation of their findings and recommendations. Apart from the results of the survey, here is what students had to say about the learning experience:

"Reflecting on the process of creating and implementing a class project, several elements of that context provided opportunity to learn and practice leadership skills applicable to my growth as a leader."

"The class project enabled all of us to practice our skills as leaders. The basic premise of leadership is that it should involve a shared vision that promotes positive change in the community. The class project was just that ... a shared vision of not only the class but also the university as a whole."

"The class project was a hand's on experience, like a snapshot of the lifelong learning process. The assessment and summary brought about the feeling of accomplishment and closure."

Students have the freedom to design a class project that provides an opportunity for everyone in the class to know what it feels like to lead. Through the class project, students have the opportunity to become leaders. This experience is essential to their development individually as leaders as they reflect on what is happening and what they want to do. The project helps students learn to look within themselves and find their reason to lead and then develop their own personal philosophy of leadership. The project also encourages them to learn and practice shared leadership, and contribute to the creation of a sense of community in the classroom and at the university.

We are all called to lead. Leadership is a shared responsibility. Collaborative leadership is successful because no one needs to know everything. Power and resources shared **with** people is more effective than trying to gain power **over** them. The notion of followers as passive and in need of constant direction is discarded. Rather than expecting to be told what to do, people are prepared and ready to step in when their particular talent is needed. Leadership and service go hand and hand. Servant leaders have a common purpose-to replace competition with community. Class projects undertaken by students in "Leadership Concepts and Contexts" provide a context for learning and a service to the campus community