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2. **Providing Rigor, Relevance and Relationship in a College Leadership Course**
3. Innovative Idea Practice Paper
4. The researchers utilized an innovative teaching approach to synthesize classroom content, service-learning and peer facilitation. Upperclassmen were hired to work with current students to develop teamwork, service-learning projects and leadership skills. Students appreciated the hands-on application and direct involvement of the peer facilitators.
5. I would like the proposal to be considered for presentation only.
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Providing Rigor, Relevance and Relationship in a College Leadership Course

Introduction

Leadership is best when it is both learned and applied. In an effort to lend meaning and application to leadership learning, the authors instituted innovative pedagogical strategies in an introductory leadership course. The course, administered in a large Midwestern university, was designed to allow students the opportunity to learn, apply and relate to various aspects of leadership. The course instructor set out to blend academic rigor, personal relevance, and peer relationships in a manner devised to increase student engagement and life-long content retention. The three-way blending of these concepts has been described as rigor, relevance and relationship.

Theoretical Background

Transformational leadership has been defined by Bass (1999) as referring to a leader who moves, “. . . the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration” (p. 11). Specifically transformational leadership focuses on increasing the involvement of others and developing team goals. In an effort to foster the development of transformational leaders, the class was split up into groups of students who undertook a service-learning project. Each team was assigned a peer facilitator whose job was to aid in the development of the service-learning project. Thus, teams were constructed with the goal of developing transformational leaders. Bass (1999) described transformational teams and stated, “Members of transformational teams care about each other, intellectually stimulate each other, inspire each other, and identify with the team’s goals” (p. 11).

The use of teams in society is rapidly changing (Horner, 1997). More often than not, degree of separation between formal leader and leaders within the team is narrow. Formal leaders are shifting their focus from an autocratic to a bureaucratic style of leadership, resulting in an increased focus on the importance of team members (Horner, 1997). The present innovative teaching practice sought to establish an initial leader who was similar in age and background with the group members. Thus, seeking to avoid the usual stereotypical image associated with a prescribed leader.

The innovative teaching practice was grounded in educational literature pertaining to the usefulness and importance of peers in the teaching process. Both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasized the benefits of peers in the learning process. Vygotsky developed the Sociocultural Theory of learning based on the active involvement of peers, adults, and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, Vygotsky believed advanced, or more knowledgeable peers, teachers, or other adults greatly aided the learner in the construction of knowledge. Vygotsky’s theory emphasized the role of peers as knowledge providers, yet holds at its foundation the sociocultural view that learning can not be removed from the social context (De Lisi & Golbeck, 1999).

Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development is largely based on the active involvement of peers. As peers interact with each other, they challenge the established norms, effectively creating a state of learner disequilibrium (Palincsar, 1998). The state of disequilibrium “. . . forces the subject to go beyond his current state and strike out in new directions” (Piaget, 1985,

p.10). Thus, learners are challenged to work with others, discuss ideas, and eventually reach a cognitive equilibrium (De Lisi & Golbeck, 1999; Palincsar, 1998).

Description of the Practice

In an effort to increase student rigor, relevance and relationship in an introductory leadership course, six upperclassmen were selected to serve as peer facilitators. The term “peer facilitator” was chosen to avoid the stereotypical, power-laden image conveyed by the term “teaching assistant.” Peer facilitators, all of whom had taken the class one or two years prior, were randomly assigned to one of six student groups. Each peer facilitator was responsible for five to six students.

A unique and innovative aspect of the program was the nature of the instructor/peer facilitator working relationship. The peer facilitation position was voluntary and supported by a stipend. Consequently, the peer facilitators did not receive college credit, were not graded on their efforts, and were not bound by work study requirements. Thus, the peer facilitators’ motivation stemmed from a personal desire to develop skills and some monetary gain.

Another unique aspect of innovation was the amount of freedom supplied to the peer facilitators. Each peer facilitator was supplied a course text and assigned the task of disseminating four chapters of course content as well as assisting in the development of a group service-learning project. The assignment of four chapters and the service-learning project covered a four week span of a 10 week course, thus allowing the peer facilitators substantial opportunity to interact with the students. The course instructor allowed the peer facilitators complete freedom in determining the manner in which the leadership content was presented. The peer facilitators were encouraged to be creative, avoid lecturing, and utilize any teaching technique, manner or setting they felt would best convey the information. During the four weeks the peer facilitators were instructing and assisting the teams, the course instructor assumed a supportive role and provided resources for the peer facilitators. The course instructor rotated between peer facilitation groups and merely observed the interaction between the peer facilitators and students. Quite often the peer facilitators would meet with the students in either separate classrooms, outside settings, or a local coffee shop.

Program Design

Prior to the start of the spring quarter leadership course, an open application was made available soliciting upperclassmen to serve as peer facilitators. Six upperclassmen, who had all previously taken the course, were selected to serve as peer facilitators. The peer facilitators were paid a \$600 stipend for their involvement in this project. Prior to the beginning of the course, the instructor and six peer facilitators met to begin planning for the course. The instructor supplied the content to be learned (book chapters) and directed discussion concerning ways the peer facilitators thought the information could best be presented. The peer facilitators interacted as a group, discussed previous leadership experiences, brainstormed on leadership activities and began soliciting resources from both the college leadership center and the course instructor.

During the first week of the quarter, peer facilitators were introduced to the students enrolled in the leadership course, and specifically those students in each of six peer facilitation groups. After initial introduction, the peer facilitators were removed until the 5th week of the quarter. Peer facilitators were re-introduced into the course at the beginning of the fifth week, and given three weeks to directly interact with the five to six students who comprised their group.

Results to Date

Based on the student interaction with the peer facilitators, the students were asked to write a brief, non-graded reflection paper concerning their perceptions of the peer facilitation and service-learning experience. The student papers reflected three major benefits of the peer facilitating process. In general the students appreciated the innovation of the peer facilitators, the enhanced educational experience, and the relational benefits to having a peer facilitator. While the authors made no attempt to categorize the learning outcomes in terms of the rigor, relevance and relationship, the quotes from the students tend to cluster in these three categories.

- “I have never been in a class where this idea was implemented. . . overall I really liked having a peer facilitator.”
- “The peer facilitator was a great idea”
- “She put the topics into ways of teaching them or relating them to stuff most of us have done. It helped the material stick with me.”
- “Our peer facilitator had a tremendous positive impact in helping us better understand . . . She presented a true example of what it means to be a leader, by exemplifying her creativity, active participation, and excellent communication skills.”
- “I really felt as if I retained much more of the information.”
- “The peer facilitator allowed me to express how I really felt . . . I do not open up easily to professors as I see them as somewhat intimidating.”
- “Peer facilitators could relate to us as students as they were riding the same emotional roller coaster in the game of life!”
- “I really felt closer to the peer facilitator than I usually do to a professor, due to the more individualized attention.”
- “The peer facilitator was like a mentor, a wonderful resource.”
- “Our peer facilitator was like our own personal professor to guide us.”

Recommendations

The students recommended to:

- “Have one peer learning session very early in the quarter so that the group members and the peer facilitator have a better chance to become acquainted before jumping head first into the project.”
- “Define what a peer facilitator is and the role they bring to our class.”

The peer facilitators recommended to:

- Increase the contact time spent with students.
- Allow the peer facilitators an opportunity to meet with students during the last class meeting to provide “closure.”

The instructor recommended to:

- Be careful in the selection of peer facilitators, including preferential selection of individuals with prior teaching/small group leadership experience.
- Allow time to meet with peer facilitators, as a group and individually, during the peer facilitation experience in order to gauge effectiveness and monitor student progress.

Conclusions

Overall student reaction was extremely positive with the exception of one team. One team did not like their peer facilitator. They felt the peer facilitator was not an effective communicator or leader. The students recommended increased care in the selection of future peer facilitators, yet, overall verbalized overwhelming support for the importance and continuation of the peer facilitation and service-learning process. The peer facilitators recognized a personal benefit and indicated unanimously that they would enjoy serving in a future peer facilitation role. The peer facilitators perceived increased growth and development in communication, leadership and teaching methods. Based on the results of the innovative project, the course instructor strongly recommends the continued use of peer facilitators.

Costs

The peer facilitation project was funded through the Undergraduate Faculty Teaching Partnerships (UFTP) award. The UFTP was part of a larger USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant written by Dr. Anna Ball and Dr. Neil Knobloch. The monetary resources utilized for this project consisted of \$3,600 (6 x \$600) in peer facilitation stipends and \$300 in materials and supplies.

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