

Using Book Discussion Groups as a Supplement to the Leadership Classroom

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Background

When I first began teaching at the University of Illinois during the Fall, 2005 semester, I was quickly approached by students who wanted to earn honors credit in my course: Introduction to Leadership Studies. At the University, students and their instructors complete Honors Credit Learning Agreements which allow honors program students to receive honors credit in some of their courses. The learning agreements typically specify the expectations that need to be met in order for honors credit to be awarded. Some instructors have a set menu of options which they provide to students, and others help students construct independent projects which address an area of interest and connect to course content. Being new to the University and also a proponent of self-directed projects, I decided to meet with interested students individually and help them design a project that would best meet their needs.

Often, these honors projects would include things like exploring additional literature in order to expound on a topic covered in the course (basic leadership theory) and then writing a paper; or exploring a leadership concept not covered in class and presenting the information to their classmates. These projects seemed to work well but did pose challenges of additional grading and trying to determine the value of the experience for the student and the learning that occurred. Coincidentally, during that same year, I had the opportunity to participate in book discussion groups with other faculty in my college. We focused our discussions on books which helped us to consider how to be more effective educators of college students. As someone who has always enjoyed reading, I found that I benefited from the books and the opportunity to discuss them with others. Following that train of thought, I began to wonder if a book discussion group would be an effective strategy for helping college students learn about leadership.

How it Works

At the beginning of the Fall, 2006 semester, I offered the opportunity of a book discussion group to my students in AGED 260: Introduction to Leadership Studies. Initially, I offered it as an honors credit opportunity only. That generated some interest, but not enough (in my opinion) to form a group. I decided to extend the opportunity to those students interested in receiving bonus credit. In my class, although there are several ways to earn bonus credit, the maximum bonus credit that can be received is 50 points. I determined that I would be willing to offer up to 40 points of bonus credit for participation in the reading discussion group. I asked interested students to let me know their intent by a specified date, and then we moved forward to determine a schedule. Once the opportunity was extended to a wider spectrum of students, the response was greater than anticipated. We ended up with enough interested students to run two groups that semester as well as in the Spring, 2007 semester.

The book I selected for the discussion group was Michael Useem's *The Leadership Moment*. There were several reasons this book stood out as a good choice. First, it provides a variety of real-life examples in leadership. With theories courses in particular, I find that this is sometimes a missing piece for many students. The concept might be somewhat understandable but is often not easily applicable. My hope was that Useem's book would help students to see the application more readily and be able to make connections to classroom learning. Secondly, *The Leadership Moment* is a fairly easy read. It is divided into nine chapters, each with a different story, and is not highly academic. Therefore, I believed it would be something manageable for college students that would perhaps be more appealing and "fun" than a typical college textbook. Third, the length of the book and the way in which it is structured make it possible to get through it in weekly meetings without taking up the entire semester—so there is room at the start of the semester to get organized and room at the end to wrap up before students become too immersed in final projects, papers, and exams.

I decided at the outset that I did not want to have more students in the discussion group than there were chapters in the book. My primary concern was making sure that the group size was conducive to discussion without being overwhelming. I wanted everyone to have the chance to participate equally, and I did not want students thinking that could sit back, disengage, and still get credit even though they were not full participants. I had also determined that, although I expected everyone to be fully prepared at each session, I wanted each student to have a turn as the discussion leader for the chapter/meeting of their choosing. This meant that they would accept responsibility for keeping the discussion moving (using questions, though-provoking statements or observations, etc.) if it were to stall out.

Once I had heard from all interested students, I suggested potential meeting times based on my availability. We ended up being able to organize two groups and accommodate everyone who was interested. In the fall, one group met Thursdays over lunch (in between the two sections of my course), and one group met Thursdays over dinner. Each weekly meeting lasted between 45-60 minutes, depending on when it took place. We met for a total of nine weeks, and we were able to use open classrooms and/or offices in my building as our regular location(s). In the spring, we ended up with a lunch group on Thursdays (again between the two sections of the course) and a dinner group on Tuesdays. One change implemented in the spring was the addition of a tenth meeting so that our first meeting could focus on expectations and on the book's introduction. This allowed us to get to know one another and establish a rapport before delving into the main part of the book.

Results to Date

At the end of the Fall, 2006 semester, participating students were asked for their feedback on the book discussion groups. They were asked the following questions:

- Why did you participate in the book discussion group?
- Did you receive honors credit or bonus credit for your participation?
- What was your overall impression of the book, *The Leadership Moment*?
- What was your overall impression of the book discussion group?
- What did you enjoy most about the experience?
- What would you change? (feel free to include suggestions for how to change)
- Do you believe that the book discussion group helped you better understand the contents of AGED 260 (or vice versa)?

Response to the questions was optional. Of the 13 students who participated, fewer than half received honors credit. The majority received bonus credit. Eight responded to the questions, and their feedback was overwhelmingly positive. They also had some good ideas for improvement (such as the aforementioned additional meeting to give participants time to get to know one another). Some of the comments included:

I truly enjoyed the group. It was a great outlet to have quality discussion on leadership. It was nice to get to know a few more students. I was impressed by everyone's participation and insight to the chapters. It was great to see things from several other viewpoints- ideas and thoughts that I never would have come up with myself.

I really enjoyed the opportunity to have each student lead, as this opened up the discussion and made it a community to learn together.

At first I was a little leery about the book being solely biography based but I quickly grew to enjoy the specifics. I found the stories very entertaining and something to aspire to. I liked the fact that leadership theories were implicated and shared by means of real-life experiences.

I was able to get involved with a class besides simply showing up for lecture each day. The book discussion group made the entire class seem more personable which is extremely hard to find at a university of this size.

There were several times when completing a reflection/discussion paper or in the midst of a mini-test, a discussion we had in the group popped into my head and helped my answer the question. I felt the group was a great study tool to further explain the topics we were currently discussing in class.

I really enjoyed being able to express my own personal opinions and experiences, as well as the small group setting, something that's becoming rare in college today.

Yes, the concepts from the leadership moment often directly correlated to what we were learning in class.

Yes, often I felt we made connections to class unintentionally. Which was great to reinforce knowledge or clarify a concept I did not fully grasp. It was nice to apply the chapters to what we studied in a less format setting. This also made me feel, wow this information is more relevant than I thought, great.

Yes, a lot. Many times I find myself relating the stories to the theories we are reading that week. It helps me understand and think more about how the theory works.

Although the Spring, 2007 discussion groups are still in progress, I anticipate another mix of positive feedback and constructive suggestions at its conclusion.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The book discussion groups, in my estimation, have proven to be successful. The main positive outcomes include increased faculty/student interaction, the chance to examine practical application of leadership theory, and an increased understanding of leadership theory. It is generally well-received by students and also provides a unique way for them to earn credit.

Some challenges include the need for additional time investment on the part of the instructor, the issue of how to handle any missed meetings of the discussion group, and how to decide upon and obtain the book(s) that will be used. Every instructor will have different options available to address these challenges and may make a variety of choices in doing so. As for the discussion groups at the University of Illinois, one of my next priorities is to investigate other books that could be used. While I think *The Leadership Moment* is an excellent selection for this type of experience, I know there could also be others. For a time, I considered Gardner's *Leading Minds* but concluded that it does not correspond well with a 200-level undergraduate course. The main concern for me is to continue with books that provide attainable case studies which my students can understand and relate to. For courses other than those focused on leadership theory, it would make sense that other texts (non-case study) could also be useful. Which book selection will add value to the classroom learning will depend on the focus and level of the course to which the book discussion group is being connected.