

1. Deborah N. Smith
Associate Professor
Kennesaw State University
1000 Chastain Rd., MD 1802, LIB Bldg. 17, Rm. 422
Kennesaw, GA 30144
dsmith1@kennesaw.edu
770-423-6874

Deborah B. Roebuck
Professor
Kennesaw State University
1000 Chastain Rd., MD 0404, BB 225, Rm. 339A
Kennesaw, GA 30144
droebuck@kennesaw.edu
770-423-6364

2. Connecting the Dots of Leadership Through Interview Assignments

3. Presentation Track - Practice Paper

4. Abstract:

This paper describes an assignment, *interview with a leader*, the presenters have incorporated into several leadership courses. Because the assignment is grounded in constructivist and social learning theories, students learn to examine the complexities of leadership while they apply leadership theory to practice.

5. Biographical sketches:

Smith holds a BA. in Psychology (Furman University), M.Ed. in Student Personnel in Higher Education (University of Georgia), and Ph.D. in Higher Education (Georgia State University).

Roebuck holds a BS in Business Education and MA in Business Education (Truman State University), and Ph.D. in Business Education (Georgia State University).

6. Yes, please print this proposal in the conference proceedings, if accepted.

7. Yes, please consider the proposal for a poster if not accepted.

8. Yes, we are willing to serve as reviewers for this conference.

9. Yes, we are willing to serve as session facilitators at the conference.

Connecting the Dots of Leadership Through Interview Assignments

Introduction

The academic study of leadership is a pendulum that has swung from debates regarding whether leadership can even be taught (Doh, 2003; Dalzo-Parks, 2005) to how best to teach leadership (Danzig, 1999; Getz, 2009). Curricular and co-curricular examples of college student leadership development are abundant in the literature (Day, 2001; Eich, 2008; Riggio, Cuiiia, & Sorenson, 2003; Rost & Barker, 2000). The descriptions of these examples are comprehensive and usually focus on program outcomes and assessment (Black & Earnest, 2009; Eich, 2008). While such a focus is helpful for big picture thinking about effectively teaching leadership, what is scant in the literature are descriptions of the smaller components (e.g. descriptions of assignments and activities) that comprise the day-to-day teaching of leadership. This paper describes one technique, *interviews with leaders*, which the authors have found to be an effective tool for addressing several course learning outcomes.

At the conclusion of the assignments students can...:

- 1) explain how factors such as gender and culture affect all aspects of leadership.
- 2) discuss the issues specifically pertaining to men and women in leadership positions.
- 3) describe how leaders impact group process.
- 4) describe how followers can influence leaders.
- 5) discuss leading through change.
- 6) converse about ethical responsibilities of leaders.
- 7) suggest strategies for leader and group renewal.
- 8) articulate connections between leadership theory and practice.
- 9) outline current issues important to developing and future theories of leadership.
- 10) share how interacting with successful leaders gave them insight into the challenges and opportunities of leadership.

Background

The *interview with a leader* assignments have been used several times at a large, public, masters level, Southeastern university in the following leadership courses: 1) an undergraduate foundations course centered around theories and models of leadership, 2) an undergraduate course focusing on global and cultural contexts of leadership, and 3) a graduate course emphasizing women's leadership. In each of the three courses, the interview assignment was grounded in constructivist (Bush, 2006) and social learning (Bandura, 1977) theories. As such, the assignments guided students to reflect upon how they constructed, defined and made meaning (constructivism) of the practice of leadership by learning from the experiences of others (social learning).

Description of Assignments

Students selected the leaders they wanted to interview. Selections ranged from former teachers, coaches, bosses, work colleagues, community leaders, and pastors. The students used an interview guide to facilitate their dialogue with their chosen leader in interviews that lasted

from one to four hours. Following the interview, students were also encouraged or required to thank their interviewees in writing.

After completing the thank you letters, students wrote reflective papers addressing the various aspects of leadership which were relevant to their course. In all three courses, students considered how the leadership theories and models they were learning connected to the actual practice of leadership. Papers were evaluated utilizing the criteria outlined below.

Interview assignment from Foundations of Leadership undergraduate course

Students select a leader to interview. The only restriction is they may not choose an immediate family member or college student. The leader signs a form that provides the professor with contact information. The following questions serve as both an interview guide and the framework for the reflective paper:

1. What is the name of the person you interviewed, with what organization or entity is he or she associated, and what sort of leadership role does he or she have?
2. Why did you select the person you chose to interview?
3. Find out the following from the leader you interview and address each aspect in your paper:
 - self-description of his or her leadership style
 - how he or she obtained this position of leadership
 - personal philosophy or view of leadership
 - how the leader developed this philosophy (e.g. other people, situations, etc.)
 - opinion as to whether or not the leader's own gender, culture, and/or ethnicity impacted his or her development of this personal philosophy/view of leadership, or how or she leads others
 - how, as a leader, he or she interacts with and is impacted by followers
 - thoughts on group process and leadership
 - what are the practical day-to-day issues of leadership with which he or she deals
 - thoughts on leading through change
 - thoughts on personal or group renewal strategies
 - ethical responsibilities of a leader
 - advice for you as a student studying leadership
 - anything else that might interest you
4. What did you learn from this interview that made the most impact on you and why?
5. How does what you learned in the interview either validate, refute, or reinforce what you have learned about leadership in this class? Make specific reference to theories, models, etc.

Evaluation of assignment is based on: 1) the depth to which all of the above questions were answered (the most weight is given to numbers four and five), and 2) the degree to which the assignment instructions were followed (e.g. paper length, font, spacing and margin specifications). Points are deducted for spelling and excessive grammatical or mechanical errors. The paper is worth 18 percent of the overall grade.

Interview assignment from Leadership in a Global Society undergraduate course

Students engage in an intercultural experience by participating in an event or events sponsored by a culture with which they do not normally identify. The goal is for students to actively participate and interact with the people of the selected culture for a minimum of four hours. The professor discusses examples of experiences that do and do not qualify for this assignment.

Students also interview a person who is a leader for the event or organization. The leader signs a form that provides the professor with contact information. In the interview, students learn the following from the leader:

- the history of the event they attended
- how the leader came to be involved with this event
- how the leader obtained this position of leadership
- how the leader interacts with followers, and to what extent the cultural norms of the group he or she leads affect this process. Students ask specifically about conflict resolution and decision-making processes.
- what the leader would like the majority culture to know about the culture/group he or she represents
- anything else that might be interesting to the student

Students are encouraged to formally thank the person they interviewed (in writing) for his or her time, and for the opportunity to participate in the cultural experience. The students share what they most valued about the experience.

Upon completion of the experience and interview, students write an essay addressing the following:

- descriptive details of the event (date, time, and location)
- the name of the person interviewed and the leadership position of that person
- why they chose the particular experience
- what reservations, if any, they had about completing the assignment
- what they observed, how they felt, and if applicable, what they did during the experience
- how this experience challenged or confirmed any previously held notions they might have had about this culture/group (honesty is encouraged)
- highlights of what they learned in the interview, spending the most time discussing what the leader had to say about leading his or her cultural group
- whether or not what they observed or learned correlated with their textual and classroom learning
- what they personally learned or gained from the experience

Students also give a 15-minute class presentation describing what they did and learned from their experience. Students are encouraged to use a visual aid.

Evaluation of this assignment contains several components (experience, interview, paper and presentation). For the experience and interview, students receive either full credit or no credit. They must, however, submit their plans and receive prior approval for the experience; failure to do results in a ten point deduction. Essay evaluation is based on; 1) the depth to which

the student answered all of the above questions, and 2) the degree to which the assignment instructions were followed (e.g. paper length, font, spacing and margin specifications). Students lose points for spelling and excessive grammatical or mechanical errors. The professor evaluates the student's presentation on the level to which the student followed the requirements (e.g. time length and focus on what he or she learned). The entire assignment counts for 26 percent of the overall grade.

Interview assignment from Women's Leadership Lab graduate course

Students conduct an hour interview with a practicing female leader. The leader signs a form that provides the professor with contact information. After the interviews are scheduled, students ask the interviewees to answer the questions below in preparation for the interview.

On a scale of one (very rarely) to five (constantly), can you rate the extent to which you use the following skills or behaviors during your workday?

Managing personal stress	Orchestrating change
Managing time	Delegating
Facilitating group or team decision making	Setting goals
Making private decisions	Listening
Recognizing and defining problems	Managing performance
Using oral communication skills	Coaching and mentoring
Interviewing	Managing conflict
Motivating others	Empathizing
Building teams	Achieving self-awareness
Conducting meetings	Solving problems
Gaining and using power	Negotiating
Thinking creatively	Inspiring a shared vision
Fostering collaboration	Challenging the process
Modeling the way	Encouraging others
Using written communication skills	Doing e-mail
Doing daily reflection and renewal	

Students ask the following interview questions.

1. What comprises a typical day at work?
2. What are the most critical problems you face as a female leader?
3. What are the major reasons female leaders fail in positions like yours?
4. What impact do you perceive women have made in your particular area or discipline?
5. What are the outstanding skills or abilities of effective female leaders you have known?
6. If you had to train someone to replace you in your current job, what key abilities would you focus on?

7. What is your personal philosophy/definition of leadership?
8. Have you observed differences in the way men and women lead? If yes, what differences have you noted? If no, why do you think this is so?
9. How did you first get involved in leadership?
10. Who is your role-model/mentor when it comes to leadership?
11. What has been your biggest challenge in leadership?
12. What has been your biggest celebration in leadership?
13. What are some resources that every leader should know about?
14. What are some words of advice that you would give to a new leader or an aspiring female leader?

Within one week, students send thank-you letters following the principles of effective business writing. After the thank you letters are sent, students capture their learning in a three to four page report. The reflective report provides interviewee background information, discusses the interviewee's responses to the questions, highlights five key lessons learned from this leader, compares and contrasts his or her philosophy of leadership with the interviewee's philosophy, shares what has been learned from being an interviewer, and concludes with insights drawn from the experience.

The professor evaluates the assignment based upon content and mechanics. Students lose points for grammatical and mechanical errors as well as lacking depth and reflection in their responses. The assignment is 16 percent of the overall grade.

Results

Through a comparison of student papers, the professors' reflective course narratives, and end-of-course evaluations in which students often talked about the interview assignment, the authors detected several repeating themes or outcomes. The first notable outcome was that students began to develop a deeper understanding of leadership. In alignment with constructivist theory (Bush, 2006), their old views of leadership were challenged. They began to think of leadership as something more than a title or position and started to realize it was something they could learn. Students wrote about the complexities of leadership and expressed an admiration of and deep appreciation for the leaders who had influenced their lives. One student commented, "Mr. Bell really helped validate leadership as a whole for me, and showed me that leadership is a process and is something that comes in many different forms." Another student wrote, "He has opened my eyes to the things that I know I can accomplish. I have now set my standards higher to reach the goals and aspirations that will make me a great leader."

The second outcome, in congruence with Danzig's (1997) research, indicated that the experiences and stories shared in interviews provided "a way for novices to move from the superficial to deeper issues embedded in their studies. Stories lead to new understanding of how expertise is gained in the real world by linking the study of leadership to professional practice" (pg. 123). Students clearly demonstrated an understanding of how specific leadership theories and models were either intentionally or unintentionally applied in their interviewees' daily leadership practices. A graduate student had this comment, "Nancy told a few stories during the interview that helped me recognize her ability as a leader is so great because she is in tune with herself." Similarly, an undergraduate remarked, "Becky's leadership style re-enforces what I have learned in this leadership class. It's almost exactly like the circular flow of information diagram." Another undergraduate stated:

After this interview, I realized that a lot of what Danielle was saying we had learned in class and in the book, for example Leader-Member Exchange theory....it was refreshing to see that a lot of what happens in the real world can actually be learned in school.

While another graduate student stated, "As I was conducting my interview, I felt like I was listening to a chapter from our assigned books."

The third outcome was in alignment with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which suggests that errors are reduced or eliminated when we observe others, reflect on their actions, and then use their experiences to make decisions about our own responses. Students often wrote that post-interview, they began thinking about their own leadership actions in light of the insights and experiences their interviewees had shared with them. For example, one undergraduate student wrote, "I also thought that using political power and coercion methods, in certain situations, would be the best way to accomplish the task, but after talking to Elise, I no longer believe that either of those two methods works effectively." While a graduate student had this comment:

This interview with my Fleet Operations Manager gave me a lot of insight into what she does on a daily basis. I discovered through this process that the underlying skills to complete our jobs are very much the same, even though our responsibilities are vastly different. It made me realize that I am currently honing the skills and behaviors I need to become an effective leader. I was also able to learn exactly what the definition of leadership is directly from a leader, not a book.

The fourth commonly mentioned outcome was that many students went beyond the assignment requirements and shadowed or visited with their interviewees more than once. This was most often true of students who were interested in the same field as their interviewee. In one instance, however, the student and his interviewed leader shared a passion for Chinese culture. As a result, the student signed up for a study abroad trip to China.

Recommendations

The authors have utilized the interview assignments several times, but continue to revise the assignments each semester. Our most recent recommendation is that students obtain professor approval about who they will be interviewing early in the semester. Some students procrastinate and end up selecting someone to interview that may not have been the best choice

(e.g. a relative or co-worker). In fact, one of the authors moved her interview assignment to be the first assignment due. She found when the assignment was due at the end of semester, students rushed through conducting the interview and writing the paper. By moving the assignment to the beginning of the semester, students often refer to their interviews throughout the semester.

The authors also recommend that a database be maintained listing who students interviewed. Some of the interviewees expressed a great interest in the leadership courses in which the students are enrolled. They would make excellent future guest speakers or perhaps be willing to serve as official mentors to students.

On a related note, the authors also recommend that professors follow-up with students who went above and beyond the assignment requirements. It would be interesting to find out if they are still shadowing the person they interviewed or pursuing their passion for a new culture to which they were exposed. These students would also make great panel participants at a conference, or serve as guest speakers in future sections of the courses.

Finally, the authors recommend professors explore the possibility of taking the necessary steps to turn the interview assignments into an official research study. The rich interview data would provide a solid basis for a qualitative study. Cross-cultural, gender and disciplinary perspectives on leadership are among the many possible facets that could be examined.

Conclusion

Conducting interviews with leaders meets several of the attributes that Eich (2008) noted comprise a high-quality leadership program – connection, reflection, discussion and encountering episodes of difference. Furthermore, some of the interviewees, who are colleagues of the authors, commented that they enjoyed talking to the students and sharing their experiences. These professors found the assignment validating and the resulting reflection professionally renewing.

In conclusion, the authors believe the words from their students sum up the value of using interviews to connect leadership theory and application. One student stated:

In my role in HR, I can use the learning I gained from this interview on a daily basis. From facilitating meetings to leading projects, my success will come from effective communication and preparation. Both of which are key skills that Joann has shared as important to leadership.

Another student wrote, “I enjoyed the interview process for this assignment. I believe the best way to gain insight from a leader is to have a conversation; and this assignment was the spark that made that conversation happen.”

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