Can Students Learn Grassroots Leadership and Decision-making Skills in the Classroom?

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April 2006

Keywords: Team Leadership, Decision-making, Pedagogy

Ref #: MDS-06-003
CAN STUDENTS LEARN GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING SKILLS IN THE CLASSROOM?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a phenomenological investigation, based on team leadership learning, which emerged from content analysis of 78 student self-reflection assignments. The paper attempts to test an intuitive connection between student learning (in a business communication course) and current team leadership theory, with emphasis on identifying new research areas.

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INTRODUCTION

While grading student assignments in a business communication course, themes consistent with the literature on team leadership emerged. The assignment required students to demonstrate their writing and composition skills and articulate practical application of their learning. Student papers included themes specific to the course material students had found challenging and helpful -- themes related to specific writing instruction and material. Such insights were helpful at a pedagogical level to identify area of difficulty with course content and to suggest solutions or tactics for helping students overcome such challenges. Students consistently reported that their critical thinking skills had been challenged by the organizational simulation in class, and that they learned how to manage large and small group processes, but the significance of the leadership and group dynamics themes, which had also emerged was not clear, especially since the course content was essentially unrelated. This paper attempts to determine the scope of the intuitive connection, and identify the phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature discusses team leadership from 3 levels: 1) understanding leadership roles and characteristics, 2) recognizing how those roles and characteristics relate to team outcomes, and 3) how to develop those skills in students [7][17]. Two bodies of research appear to be relevant to the themes that emerged in the student assignments. First, was the identification of skills essential for team leaders, and second was the complexity of teaching such leadership skills.

Effective leaders are able “to see the big picture” [6, p.28], delegate authority, and empower subordinates, in addition to team leadership, which specifically encompasses additional leadership skills [4][6][9][20][22]. Effective team leadership requires flexibility [25], such as that inherent in Emotional Intelligence [8][15], social capital management, and diversity management [10], especially with regard to establishing trust, which is an essential first stage precipitating group effectiveness [12][23][24]. “Effective team leaders also demonstrate the capability to deal with paradox and contradiction by performing multiple leadership roles simultaneously” [9, p.7], and team leaders need to be “manager, cheerleader, administrator, and coach” [20, p.64], which supports multiple role [3] and multidimensional leadership [18] theories.
Multidimensional leadership is important, as groups develop [18]. Leaders first need to create new solutions and sell them before, second implementing systematic procedures, and third, pacifying potential dissenters [25]. Multidimensional leadership includes managing the “responsibility-authority gap” [3] and requires team leaders to take initiative for accomplishing tasks, yet simultaneously act as supervisor to delegate authority. Additionally, team context [4] and specific project aspects must be proactively managed [21].

The second body of research addresses the challenge of training such leaders. Students, practitioners, and researchers alike, struggle with how to teach students the multi-dimensional leadership skills [23] and confidence necessary to lead successful teams. This paper primarily discusses the training of students to address the deficiency in team leadership skills in new graduates [23]. Although many skills and roles have been addressed in the literature, this paper will only discuss those that students reflected on learning, which are also found in the literature as being significant.

**METHODODOLOGY**

**Data Collection**

Content analysis on 78 student assignments was conducted to determine if students included group/team leadership skills among their self-assessment of learning. Six different sections of a business communication course, over 5 academic sessions between May 2002-August 2003, were given a reflection assignment. The goal was to have students self-reflect upon their own learning. Ungraded student papers had been copied and archived and were reviewed to test a “hunch” that significant grassroots team leadership learning had occurred during the simulation.

**Classroom Context**

The semester-long simulation allowed students to experience and practice small (functional department) and large group (organization of five departments) communication, decision-making and problem-solving. Five components of the simulation challenged students.

1. The simulation utilized departments within an organization. Rather than competing against each other student groups were responsible for accomplishing the organizational task. As a result students learned how to build collaborative relationships.
2. Departments consisted of the same students over the semester, so they developed both large and small group norms, established trust, and “experimented” with different communication and decision-making processes, which allowed them experience problem-solving cycles.
3. Students received multiple layers of feedback. They shared work, gave each other informal feedback, and after initiating new processes, received both implicit and explicit feedback. They also had formal peer-feedback assignments, and individual, departmental, and organizational functioning was both peer and instructor assessed.
4. Students had authority over the organization and structure of departments. However, since role ambiguity and interdependence was designed into the tasks, what worked for one group, often had organizational repercussions. As a result, students learned to compromise and manage large-group discussions.
5. Students were given full responsibility for both task and process components of the project, which they found difficult. Students are accustomed to being told how to organize their groups, often being given explicit process guidelines. The simulation forced them to take
initiative, strategize, get buy-in from peers, and make decisions with imperfect information. They fully managed group development, and had sufficient time to make and fix mistakes.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

Because this exploratory research intended to confirm the existence of a classroom phenomenon around student learning, no predetermined variables were identified, and very little interpretation of student “meaning” occurred. Potential trends were tallied using a frequency count, which was then cross-referenced with skills, roles, and styles found important in the literature. Table 1 presents the frequency and corresponding percentages for each theme.

Once identified, terms were clustered according to course content. Because students were trained to identify the most important points, and the assignment was short, all values are reflected, rather than just the largest values. The results of even 10% of students, warrants inclusion because it meant they felt the component was among their most significant learning or challenge.

**TABLE 1 – Student Reflected Learning and Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme (n = 78)</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building/maintaining relationships</td>
<td>34 44%</td>
<td>2 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing/outlining/structuring</td>
<td>17 22%</td>
<td>3 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
<td>6 8%</td>
<td>19 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion/professionalism</td>
<td>19 24%</td>
<td>3 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity/innovation/brainstorming</td>
<td>8 10%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-management</td>
<td>9 12%</td>
<td>9 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>7 9%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative/self-reliance/anticipation</td>
<td>16 21%</td>
<td>3 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>22 28%</td>
<td>7 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking/analytical skills</td>
<td>17 22%</td>
<td>5 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with group diversity</td>
<td>16 21%</td>
<td>9 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating/collaborating with team</td>
<td>22 28%</td>
<td>6 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task completion processes/role assignment/leadership</td>
<td>15 19%</td>
<td>6 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>6 8%</td>
<td>1 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research/networking/gathering information</td>
<td>31 40%</td>
<td>1 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large group decision-making/problem-solving</td>
<td>12 15%</td>
<td>10 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing problem/getting or giving feedback</td>
<td>11 14%</td>
<td>1 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning/learning from mistakes</td>
<td>8 10%</td>
<td>6 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning/preparation/goal-setting/strategizing</td>
<td>29 37%</td>
<td>2 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>75 96%</td>
<td>51 65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

The complexity and interdependency of team leadership components makes the task of teaching students how to become team leaders difficult. Simulations and games are often used to help create an environment that allows students “to appreciate wholes and gain a systems awareness of the issues surrounding policies” [19, p.359]. Experiential learning, as it is often called has been validated, although it may not be fully understood.

A relationship has been found between group decision-making processes and the effectiveness of those decisions, suggesting 3 findings: “1) Groups with a more positive attitude toward the task… perform better. 2) Groups that devote more effort to their work perform better. 3)
Groups in which there is an unequal distribution of influence tend to perform better...[suggesting] that those group members who are more effective decision makers have more influence.” [5, p.545] For a simulation to be effective, in addition to setting the context so that students start with a positive attitude, and are motivated to put forth more effort, creating an opportunity for emergent leadership appears important. If “the goal of a simulation is to develop skills to apply concepts effectively through making decision and taking appropriate courses of action” [11, p.559], then the design of a simulation would appear to need sufficient time to allow for group decision-making, including time and authority to develop group norms, processes, and policies. Such literature informed the design of the simulation used in this study, and leads to the questions, (1) what did students learn about team leadership, if anything and (2) can a pedagogical activities be linked to that learning?

Students appeared to learn several things about effective team leadership. Fifteen students (19%) improved their understanding of multidimensional roles of leadership, twelve (12%) expressed learning how to make decisions and problem solve in large groups, and sixteen students (21%) expressed feeling more confident and comfortable dealing with group diversity. Students also explicitly reflected on improving specific multidimensional leadership areas. Eight students (10%) felt they were more creative and innovative, and nineteen (24%) claimed to have improved their persuasive skills, referred to as the “innovator” role [18], or “conceiving” [25]. Teamwork must combine innovation or creativity with coordination [13], or fulfill “implementor” roles [18] associated with “organizing” [25]. Because team design, especially with regard to leadership roles, is important to a team’s effectiveness [2], students need to learn how to develop a team structure, team processes and assign roles. Seventeen students (22%) felt their organization and structuring skills improved, fifteen (19%) felt their task completion and role assignment or leadership skills improved, and twenty-nine (37%) felt their ability to plan, prepare, set goals, and strategize improved.

The third multidimensional leadership role is “Pacifier” [18] or “accomplishing” [25], which refers to a leader’s ability to maintain group harmony. Thirty-four students (44%) recognized improvement in their skill to build and maintain relationships [8], with seven (9%) specifying increased listening abilities [12], six (8%) increased patience, and sixteen (21%) improved ability to deal with diversity. Twenty-two (28%) enhanced their ability to participate and collaborate in teams, even though sixteen (21%) found it challenging, despite practicing team skills before.

Communication skills presented the largest percentage of students acknowledging both learning and challenges, and was a reflection of course learning objectives. Consistent with the literature [23], students complained about miscommunication between group members. The link between trust and communication, especially regarding how leaders build relationships, persuade, organize subordinate tasks, and provide feedback was a key learning related to course design. “During the initial stages of team formation, a leader who encourages members to exchange information about themselves, and about the work itself, sets a norm of exchange [and trust] early on” [23, p.93]; in retrospect, this philosophy was employed in training students how to establish trust, by allowing students to manage three “observable behaviors” used by leaders to persuade followers: 1) level of assertiveness, 2) level of support, and 3) degree of communication and social capital exchange between leader and subordinates [23]. Effective leader support appears to promote creativity, innovation, and flexibility [23], and encourage social exchange, which is important when dealing with diversity and collaborating during group
decision-making and problem-solving, and was mentioned by fifty students (64%) as a significant learning.

Intrinsic-level skills, consistent with leadership theory, such as initiative or self-reliance [7], confidence, and the ability to learn [1][20], especially from mistakes, also appeared in student papers. Sixteen (21%) felt they improved their ability to take initiative and anticipate directions and problems, twenty-two (28%) felt more confident in their group management skills and 8 (10%) appreciated a new willingness to learn from mistakes.

Team leaders also need to know when and how to gather and analyze information. Thirty-one students (41%) reflected stronger skills in networking, asking questions, and gathering information, thus taking advantage of resources they would not have otherwise used [6][7][22], and seventeen (22%) improved critical thinking and analytical skills. The significance of the final two components is that these traits (initiative, utilizing resources, etc.) are very important when facing ambiguity [16][21], which was one of the biggest challenges for students; nineteen (24%) reflected frustration in dealing with ambiguity, but 42 students (54%) improved their ability to deal with it.

**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This paper was presented to intrigue readers into looking at new ways to test student learning of team leadership skills. The simulation appears to model some of the contexts and situations found in the real world, and allows students to experience large group decision-making and problem-solving at a grassroots level, such as would occur if they were on a new project team. Variables should be investigated individually, and within the larger systems context.

“The bottom line is that if colleges and universities are to continue placing students in teams for purposes of earning a grade, some responsibility must rest on the academic institutions to prepare students to become effective team members and leaders” [23, p.94]. Doing so is important as “new educational strategies” are employed to allow students to experience, learn and practice complex leadership skills [1]. Research should continue on ways to create environments where students can learn and practice complex leadership skills, with explicit intent on the group leadership and process dynamics associated with accomplishing work (making decisions and solving problems) in teams.

**REFERENCES**


