4-2018

Yes! And ... I'm So Tired of Experiential Learning

Scott J. Allen
John Carroll University, sallen@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2018

Part of the Business Commons

Yes! And . . . I'm So Tired of Experiential Learning

Scott J. Allen[1]

For more than a decade, I have been experimenting with curricular and cocurricular approaches to leadership education. In the classroom, my focus is teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in leadership, and in 2015, I cofounded a nonprofit, Collegiate Leadership Competition, which is an organization dedicated to creating a practice field for leadership learning and education. I read the work of Byrne, Crossan, and Seijts (2018) and truly appreciate their approach and thinking when it comes to developing leader character. In a nutshell, I could not agree more with their thinking, and like them, I have been experimenting with new and innovative ways to teach leadership. Crucible moments within an experiential learning pedagogy can be exhausting and, depending on the approach, come with risk. In my own experience, there is a shadow side to such endeavors, and the purpose of this rejoinder is to explore this dimension as an important topic for discussion. While Byrne et al. (2018) and I have arrived at a similar space conceptually, I have used the work of other scholars that readers may find interesting and helpful in their own practice. I begin by sharing three resources that have fundamentally shifted how I think about teaching leadership. I continue with five key considerations for educators interested in experimenting with crucible moments as an experiential/active learning intervention.

Seminal Works in My Growth as Leadership Educator

Three works have fundamentally informed how I think about developing leaders: Sharon Parks' *Leadership Can Be Taught* (2005); Merriam, Caffarella,

[1]John Carroll University, University Heights, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:
Scott J. Allen, Department of Management, Marketing, & Supply Chain, John Carroll University, One John Carroll Blvd., University Heights, OH 44118, USA.
Email: sallen@jcu.edu

and Baumgartner's book *Learning in Adulthood* (2007); and Ericsson and Pool's book *Peak: Secretes From the New Science of Expertise* (2016).

Ron Heifetz has been experimenting with the *case-in-point* teaching methodology for more than a decade. In essence, this approach creates an environment where everyone (teacher included) becomes a part of the "case" under examination. According to Parks (2005),

> In case-in-point teaching, what goes on in the classroom itself is occasion for learning and practicing leadership within a social group. The class is recognized as a social system inevitably made up of a number of different factions and acted on by multiple forces. The class also has a clear and challenging purpose - to make progress in understanding and practicing leadership. (p. 7).

In his teaching, Heifetz often takes on the role of provocateur (see Elmore et al., 1989) as many of the course concepts emerge and can be seen in the room. *My Key takeaway*–The *classroom* can be used as a laboratory to *practice* leadership.

Along with case-in-point methodology, I discovered a table in Merriam et al.'s book *Learning in Adulthood* (2007, pp. 295-296), which nicely described five different paradigms of learning: cognitivism, behaviorism, humanism, social learning, and constructivism. Their work fundamentally shifted how I think about the design of each course. In my experience, much of the work in the business school was focused on cognitivism. However, if our expressed goal is *developing* leaders, we were more focused on leadership studies (cognitivism) than developing skill (i.e., behaviorism), gaining a better understanding of self (i.e., humanism), connecting students with mentors (i.e., social cognitive), or making meaning from experience (i.e., constructivism). *My Key Takeaway*—When it comes to developing leadership, multiple paradigms of learning are needed.

The third work is *Peak* by Ericsson and Pool (2016). Hailing from the expertise literature, the authors cover several attributes of *deliberate practice*, which is the primary factor contributing to an individual gaining expertise or working at the highest levels of their craft (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). When listing their 11 attributes of deliberate practice, the authors shine a light on the Achilles heel of leadership learning and education—true skill building. In my experience, few educators have a clear understanding of their first requirement, which states that deliberate practice "requires a field that is already reasonably developed—that is, a field in which the best performers have attained a level of performance that clearly sets them apart from people who are just entering the field" (Ericsson & Pool, 2016, p. 98).

Another of their attributes suggests that the educator helps students "develop skills that other people have already figured out how to do and for which effective training techniques have been established" and has "teachers to provide beginners with the correct fundamental skills in order to minimize the chances that the student will have to relearn those fundamentals skills later when at a more advanced level" (Ericsson & Pool, 2016, p. 99). These two attributes illuminate some key challenges: Who are the best performers in leadership? How are they deemed "best"? What are the core skills to be developed? Who are the models for said skills? What are the building blocks for developing said skills? *My Key Takeaway*—There is a great deal of opportunity within the skill building domain of leadership education.

The Leadership Laboratory

I have been experimenting with the content previously discussed and crucible experiences as a way to help the course content "live" in the classroom (e.g., problem solving, stressors, negotiation/influence, leadership/followership styles, ethical decision making). My first foray into this space occurred when I asked my graduate students the following question: "What should your final exam be? It must be innovative and challenging." This one question kept students busy for three to four evenings of class and all of the concepts emerged! They became the case study. Then, for eight semesters I required my graduate courses to secure a certified Guinness World Record as part of their third exam. Every section met mission and attained a certified world record through Guinness. I have also partnered with real organizations and challenged students to meet a mission (e.g., teams of 6 secure 160 new organ donors in 3 weeks). A fourth approach was the use of lists that challenge students to accomplish a number of tasks in a short period of time—often culminating in a presentation to CEOs in the community. A fifth approach was event-based activities. For instance, plan a Pecha Kucha (www.pechakucha.org) event and secure *A-list* presenters in an extremely short amount of time. Finally, I have used the Collegiate Leadership Competition (www.collegiate-leader.org) as a way to make the course content live—students practice for 3 months in class and then compete with other schools in their region. Each of these crucible experiences has raised the heat and served as a springboard for course content to live.

While there have been a number of incredible learning moments, there are some hidden challenges that must be acknowledged and planned for at the beginning of the process.

Communicate and Gain Support

Ensure that your department chair and dean have a solid understanding of your assignment, its objectives/purpose, and potential of the pedagogical purpose behind your efforts. In my experience, students talk with faculty, staff, other students, and so forth. Ensuring that some key decision makers understand exactly what you are doing (and why) is critical because there will be some interesting interpretations by your students. Inevitably some of these will get back to you and your colleagues. Another consideration is that experimenting in this way can affect your student evaluations—I have experienced sudden drops in evaluations from semester to semester. Preparing decision makers (e.g., tenure and promotion committee) for this reality is an important consideration—especially if salary, tenure, or promotion is linked to student evaluations. You also need to prepare the students for the experience. Communicating and setting a strong foundation for students is another important part of the process.

The Learning Can Be Messy

As soon as you present the challenge, you have given up control. On more than one occasion, I have said to myself, "It would be so easier to lecture for the last four nights of class. So much less stress. So much easier. This is draining." This approach can be messy because it is rare that I know how individuals and the group will respond. Nor do I know the answer to the puzzle they are working. In many ways, I am learning with them in real time and doing my best to respond to what is happening in the room. Just this fall I had students say (in the large group), "This is going to impact your student evaluations," and "You are unethical and this project is unethical." As someone who likes to maintain control, the approach has challenged me to learn and grow as well.

If Possible, Tap Partner(s)

If possible, partner with another faculty member, executive in the community, or a colleague to help you throughout the process. Byrne et al. (2018) suggested there was a *team* of people engaged in their 5-day experience, in some cases psychologists. Although I have partnered with a CEO in the community for three semesters, the vast majority of my courses have occurred alone, which has been stressful. It is not uncommon that *you* the educator become the lightning rod for their frustration and, at times, anger. Having a partner (or partners) in the process can protect you, provide another set of

eyes, and help with critical reflection and meaning making. Partners can also help you gauge the appropriate level of "heat" in the experience. As Parks (2005) suggests,

> The teacher is also practicing leadership—skillfully allowing enough disequilibrium (confusion, frustration, disappointment, conflict and stress) to help the group move from unexamined assumptions about the practice of leadership to seeing, understanding and acting in tune with what the art and practice of leadership actually require. (p. 8)

You Will Be Triggered/They Will Be Triggered

While you are challenging the class to work at their edge, you will inevitably be brought to yours as well. For me, the edge is emotional intelligence, lack of control, and conflict. I struggle with conflict as an individual and the crucible experiences often, by nature, increase the level of conflict between me and the students and among the students. Some students are developmentally ready for this experience and others are not. Some students are less emotionally stable than others. Throughout the years, I have psychologically lost a few students—they were so triggered that they could not see the purpose and refused to search for the learning. They were just mad. And when they got mad, they said (or wrote) nasty things to me, other students, my colleagues, my associate dean, and so forth. My activities often span the semester or the final month of the class, so there are extended periods of disequilibrium within the class. As an educator, you need to be aware of this reality, and do your best to prepare.

Time for Critical Reflection and Real-Time Coaching

As Byrne et al. (2018) wisely suggest, "Accommodation learning without assimilation leaves individuals in a state of disequilibrium. Similarly, crucibles with reflection are just arduous experiences" (p. 281). This is an area of development for me. While I ask students to reflect on a daily basis throughout the process (essentially, a journal post), it is not a facilitated discussion where I can help them make meaning of the experience. In addition, I have not given the needed time to guide the students through Kolb's (1984) four-stage cycle of learning. Likewise, I need to take more time to help students develop the skills required to more easily succeed given the challenging nature of the activity. I often provide a small level of skill building, but certainly not enough to successfully navigate the challenge. As a result, students

can feel lost and "flat-footed," which is good to a point. More often than not, I am rushed for time at the end and do not spend time debriefing at the individual and group levels. This can leave some students wondering about the purpose behind the activities.

Conclusion

So here is the dilemma. I honestly feel that educating in the manner that Byrne et al. (2018) promote *is* the best way to teach leader character—and a host of other leadership-oriented topics for that matter. And, when it works, I know that the learning can be transformational. Comments from my most recent teaching evaluations would suggest this to be the case. One student wrote, "I believe this course is extremely valuable as it pushes students in different ways that a regular business course cannot." Another wrote, "This was one of the most beneficial classes of my career! Wish I could continue this learning." These are great! And . . . I'm tired of experiential learning. There is a shadow side to being the tour guide for people's crucible moments. Sometimes, I wish I could just maintain predictability and total control.

But that is not leadership. Nor the type of leadership educator I want to be.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Byrne, A., Crossan, M., & Seijts, G. (2018). The development of leader character through crucible moments. *Journal of Management Education*, *42*(2), 265-293. doi:10.1177/1052562917717292

Elmore, R. F., Heifetz, R. A., Sinder, R. M., Jones, A., Hodge, L. M., & Rowley, K. A. (1989). Teaching and assessing leadership courses at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *8*, 536-562.

Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological Review*, *100*, 363-406.

Ericsson, K. A., & Pool, R. (2016). *Peak: Secrets from the new science of expertise.* New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Ericsson, K. A., Prietula, M. J., & Cokely, E. T. (2007). The making of an expert. *Harvard Business Review, 85,* 114-121.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning. Experience as a source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide.* San Francisco, CA: John Wiley.

Parks, S. D. (2005). *Leadership can be taught: A bold approach for a complex world.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.