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Effectively Using Discussion Boards to Engage Students in Introductory Leadership Courses

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Abstract

This article discusses the use of online asynchronous discussion boards as a valuable tool for connecting students to leadership concepts, theories, and models in introductory leadership survey courses. Recommendations are given for designing effective discussion boards that engage students and enhance their learning. Student outcomes include construction of knowledge, relevant connections between course material and personal lives, and critical reflection.

Introduction

Leadership Studies faculty who teach introductory survey courses are often faced with the challenge of engaging students. Faculty understand the importance of introductory leadership courses as they provide students with a (a) sound, academic framework to study leadership and (b) solid foundation for future leadership courses. Students, however, are not typically enthralled with learning about the plethora of leadership definitions, concepts, models and theories presented in introductory leadership courses. Additionally, it is in these introductory courses that many students decide whether or not they will continue with further study in the field. Student attempts to learn definitions, theories, models, concepts, etc. through rote memorization often leave them dissatisfied with course content. In order for students to appreciate introductory leadership content they need to connect what they are learning in the classroom to their own lives.

One way faculty can facilitate those connections is through the use of discussion boards. Several years ago I began teaching a foundational leadership course entirely online. In converting the class to an online format, I replaced classroom discussion content with online asynchronous discussion boards intentionally designed to help students analyze and apply leadership theories and concepts. It was not long before I noticed a depth of engagement and learning not observed in my face-to-face classes. Student discussion board posts and replies indicated students were indeed making theory to practice connections and also challenging, supporting and learning from one another. In addition, student course evaluation ratings and comments reinforced my notion that discussion boards were a valuable course component that helped students become genuinely interested in the course material. However, when I first

started teaching online a colleague shared that his discussion board assignments seemed to result in students providing minimalistic or canned answers. Fascinated (and sometimes even moved) by my students' online interactions, I sought to learn what it was about discussion boards that facilitated or stifled student learning.

Literature Review

Unlike classroom discussion participation, asynchronous online discussion board participation provides students with the opportunity to reflect upon their responses and replies. As defined by Dewey (1910) reflection is the "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). The U.S. Department of Education (2009) asserts that including opportunities for self-reflection in online courses is an essential component for increasing student achievement.

Reflection is a critical element of effective leadership education programs (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014). It helps students consider their perceptions of leaders/leadership and how they make subsequent interpretations (Densten & Gray, 2001). It also offers students an opportunity to connect course concepts to their personal lives (Moore, Boyd and Dooley, 2010, p. 5). By examining how leadership theories and models are evidenced in their own lives, students move from being passive to active learners. As active learners students engage in critical reflection which Harvey and Jenkins (2014) define as "an iterative process of returning to what one has studied, thought, experienced, done, and felt, and an autonomous but still relatively structured and disciplined process of synthesizing lessons, conclusions, uncertainties, and questions" (p. 79). Harvey and Jenkins go on to assert that by applying critical reflective practices students evaluate their experiences from a leadership perspective, and thus develop their own leadership abilities (p. 80).

Rainsbury and Malcolm (2003) explain how discussion boards help students learn course content and reflect critically. In their study students commented that posting on discussion boards made them read, research, think more for themselves and "generate new ideas and opinions" (p. 58). Meyer (2006) shared similar research findings stating that the use of discussion boards provided students with a chance to first analyze course content and peers' posts, and then develop meaningful, well written, grammatically correct responses. This process is especially helpful for students for whom English is a second language (Alvarez-Torres, 2001) and can serve as a means of inclusiveness (Dengler, 2008). Furthermore, if the topic being discussed is sensitive or challenges students to consider their own biases or beliefs, an asynchronous online discussion board can be a safe place for students to formulate and openly express their thoughts and opinions. Students reading each other's posts can then think critically and possibly create a deep learning that transforms their present knowledge into new knowledge (Lockyer, Gondocz, & Thivierge, 2004; Mauriano, 2006; Moon, 1999).

Smith (2001) cautions that the reflective process may be new to many students. Such students may default to trying to find the right answer in course texts or one which they deem will please their professor. Roberts (2008) makes a similar observation that without guidance and direction students might resort to merely providing "written logs or verbal narratives of

events with little critical thinking applied” (p. 118). To help avoid such shortfalls Huber (2002) asserts that leadership educators need to model for students what it means to engage in critical reflection.

This modeling, however, should not necessarily take place in the course discussion boards. When faculty refrain from directly participating in discussion boards, students tend to rely on each other’s comments and feedback rather than the instructor’s feedback (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009). Blackmon (2012) concurs noting that there was an inverse relationship between instructor presence and interactions amongst students in her research synthesis on outcomes related to chat room and discussion board use in online courses. She summarizes that while instructors should be accessible to students, instructors who intentionally minimize their social presence in online forums can help students begin to construct their own knowledge.

Instructors should also be aware that some students may feel isolated in online courses. If students do not feel connected to their peers (typically due to lack of peer reply to their discussion board posts), they might deem that their social presence and participation in the course is not valued (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Application Description

In this section I describe how literature findings are used to set up discussion boards in my introductory online leadership studies course. Students were assigned six discussions throughout a standard 15-week semester, which cumulatively equaled 30% of their grade. For each discussion board students answered two or three questions (from a choice of five or six). Questions were either derived from end-of-chapter questions already included in one of the course texts (e.g. Crawford, Brungardt, & Maughan, 2007) or based on other course materials, such as videos. Students were also asked to meaningfully respond to one or two of their peers’ posts. The discussion board questions typically asked students to identify and apply a leadership theory, model or concept in a case study or to draw upon situations or experiences from their own lives. Some examples of discussion board question prompts used were:

- Select and identify an organization in which you are a member. Does the organization operate under an industrial or post-industrial paradigm, or a mix of both? Give three specific examples to support your assertion.
- Using the concepts covered in class, describe someone you know who is a servant leader.
- What were your thoughts about the two gender and leadership related articles you read this week? Anchor your response on related course material.
- Select an organization (e.g. school, work, volunteer organization, church, etc.) in which you are involved. Describe its artifacts, symbols, language, heroes, leaders and values.
- Overall, how would you summarize the organization’s culture to an outsider?

Students were provided with a document containing examples of student posts and grades, a grading rubric and an opportunity to practice using the discussion board tool. Each of these components is described in detail in the Recommendations section.

Outcomes and Reflections

The privilege of reading student discussion board responses has truly been one of my greatest teaching joys. In fact, it rejuvenated my interest in teaching our introductory leadership studies course. No longer was the discussion of theories and models boring for both students and instructor alike.

Generally speaking, students made meaningful, personal connections to leadership theories and models in their discussion board posts. For example, here is a slightly paraphrased portion of one student's response to identifying and describing leaders in her life who displayed various leadership styles:

I was in a local chapter of the [name withheld]. The group's president used a laissez-faire approach. This chapter had been in existence for almost 20 years. One of the president's responsibilities was to assign leaders to all of the groups in this chapter; community service, education, and awards to name a few. The group leaders were assigned late in her presidency since the president felt each group would manage themselves and assign a leader. As a result, and without leadership in these groups, no community service was completed the year of her presidency, no educational classes were held, and at the awards meeting no awards were presented. In addition, membership plummeted that year to the point the chapter almost became non-existent.

In this example I was pleased the student clearly articulated an understanding of laissez-faire leadership and the negative implications such a style can have for organizations. The student went on to make further course connections by discussing maturity levels, expertise and power roles, particularly as they pertained to the followers. She expressed regret that she did not believe at the time she could do much about the situation and seemed determined to not be a passive follower in the future.

In another discussion board students were asked to discuss their own leadership strengths and weaknesses. One student responded to his peer's post by saying:

In reference to your belief that you can do everything on your own, I know where you come from. For me I began my career wanting no help in anything I did. I wanted to be the one to control all things which bore my name. However, I learned very quickly, especially when I moved into management, that delegation is key to being successful. Sure you can do it all yourself and be successful, but with great success comes more responsibility...doing it all yourself is impossible, and if you try you implode.

The students continued their discussion well beyond what was required for the assignment. This same level of authenticity and meaningful exchange may not have occurred had the students not been completing an online discussion board assignment.

I believe it is the somewhat anonymous nature of an online discussion board that helps students feel more comfortable openly communicating with one another than when they are face-to-face. For example, two students in a recent introductory leadership studies course held an

animated discussion board conversation about whether or not leaders were born or made. Rather than taking a stance that their position was right and their peer's was wrong the students made comments such as "I really enjoyed reading your post, but I think you misunderstood..." and "That is a point I did not consider." In another discussion board exchange a student commented "I have to agree with your response to part one but I suppose my view regarding part two is slightly different. I am not so sure from how I read and interpreted your response that I agree with you." The student who made the original post then replied with detailed clarification. It is extremely gratifying to see students respectfully disagree and respond to each other in a mature, thoughtful and professional manner, as well as be genuinely interested in understanding one another's positions. I believe the asynchronous aspect of discussion boards allows students the time needed to reflect and carefully consider how they might reply to a peer with whom they disagree.

Recommendations

As Jarosewich et al. (2010) share about discussion boards, "If tasks, prompts, and instructor feedback are not properly structured, and students do not engage in higher-order thinking, then the potential for this useful tool will not be realized" (p. 120). Having used asynchronous discussion boards in online introductory leadership course for several years, there have been many opportunities for reflection and trying out techniques designed to maximize discussion board use.

My first recommendation for other practitioners is to develop a discussion board grading rubric. Depending on the length, number of replies expected, etc., consider carefully the corresponding point value. Well-written discussion board posts require time and effort which should be rewarded accordingly. Roberts (2008) suggests the following criteria be considered when grading reflective assignments, "...depth and clarity of discussion, application of course content to experiences, personal insight and learning, logic of conclusions, quality of examples, and technical aspects (e.g. format, grammar)" (p. 120).

Second, share examples of discussion board posts and what type of grades the posts received. Students need to get an idea about the appropriate length of the assignment to help them avoid extremes (e.g. very short, elementary type responses or overdone, long essay posts). Example posts also show students that online discussion boards are an academic assignment and they should avoid making casual responses that might be used in other online interactions (i.e. various forms of social media).

Also, if teaching an introductory undergraduate course I suggest creating and encouraging students to participate in a non-graded practice discussion board near the beginning of the semester. Not all students have had online courses or they may incorrectly assume the expectations and discussion board grading criteria used by a professor in another course also apply in your course. It is equally important that students understand the assignment is a discussion board, not just an assignment in which they are to answer questions and submit responses. After the practice discussion board has concluded provide general feedback to the entire class anchored on the grading rubric. Students who do not score well should receive an

individual email suggesting ways to improve their next post. Providing students with detailed feedback at the beginning of the course helps ensure future quality posts and student interactions. Continuing, make sure students have a good understanding of how they should and should not communicate with one another online, often referred to as netiquette (Shea, 1994; Strawbridge, 2006). It is incumbent upon the instructor to foster and create an online environment in which students can trust one another and feel safe and respected (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Fifth, refrain from participating in the discussion unless you need to intervene because of a netiquette violation. As was discussed in the literature review, instructors who minimize their social presence will help facilitate deeper student learning. If students share something highly personal on a discussion board, follow up with them privately.

Sixth, some students may feel isolated in online forums if they do not receive replies to their posts from peers. When students make original posts immediately preceding the posting deadline and other students have already finished the assignment requirements, I privately email the late-posting students to comment on their posts and encourage them to consider posting earlier on the next discussion board.

Another suggestion is to ensure that students do not grow weary of reading lots of long posts by splitting the class in half, or even thirds. Many online course platforms offer this group feature which can be used throughout the course or only on particular assignments.

Eighth, use the online course platform discussion board setting to restrict students from being able to read posts until after they have created their own original post. This forces students to connect to and reflect on the course material themselves.

As a final recommendation, leadership educators should consider how they might use asynchronous discussion boards in their face-to-face and hybrid courses. Some colleagues have shared that they use discussion boards to start a conversation online and then continue the conversation in class. Thus, students who might not initiate or participate in classroom conversations have their voices heard. When students have time to reflect and meet together they reportedly have much more engaging conversations than when the professor first introduced the topic in the classroom.

For leadership educators teaching introductory survey courses, getting students excited about and engaged by definitions, theories and models can sometimes be daunting. As Densten and Gray (2001) state, “teachers are faced with the challenge of presenting underlying theories in a way which will demonstrate the relevance of theory to their students” (p. 3). In general, instructors who design online courses which require students to use in-depth learning techniques such as integration and reflection show higher course achievement (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2009). A well-designed discussion board fosters both critical reflection and student engagement.

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