Learning Global Leadership via Liberation Projects: An Interdisciplinary Application

Shelbee Nguyen Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Arts and Sciences
P.O. Box 28282
Dubai - U.A.E.
+971 4 318 3507
+971 4 399 9000 Ext. 507
snguyen@aud.edu; Shelbee.Nguyen@gmail.com
www.aud.edu

Abstract

Global leadership programs framed within singular cultural contexts do not promote authentic leadership. Unilateral methods may exclude individual multicultural experiences or identities, and further, encourage a one-size fits all approach to leadership. An interdisciplinary global leadership course aims to promote authentic unlearning and inclusive leadership education via learning for liberation projects which address a global social justice issue. Student groups direct their own journey and inspire unlearning by interacting with others who are culturally and ideologically different. The project is supplemented by research, frequent reflexivity and intercultural dialogue in order to transform students into authentic and empowered culturally relevant leaders.

Introduction

The current state of higher education leaves students ill-prepared for leadership in the global context (Brown, Whitaker & Brungardt, 2012; Zapalska, Shuklian, Rudd & Flanegin, 2012). Aimar and Stough (2007) discussed definitions about effective leadership are constantly evolving and changing to match increased globalization and migration. As such, defining global leadership becomes difficult with an ever-more interconnected and expanding society. Montuori (2010) appropriately stated, "in an age of transition, one of the key dimensions of leadership education is not just learning but *un*learning" (p. 6). Consequently, leadership educators are tasked to design/facilitate curricula and instructional approaches to match complexities associated with the practice of quality global leadership (Brown et al., 2012).

Leadership education within the United States and across the world meets challenges of teaching and practicing global leadership through a variety of strategies including international programs abroad. However, Schild and Holmes (2011) discuss that authentic leadership must involve more than simply context and being abroad. Additionally, offering authentic global leadership education means that "teacher leaders create activities aligned with the curriculum; engage students; provide exceptional, varied teaching strategies; and integrate rich resources and the necessary tools for affecting the learning experience" (Schild & Homes, 2011, p. 205). And so,

teachers and students of global leadership should resist singular definitions and applications of leading in a global society. Instead, global leadership education should aim to offer personal, student-centered learning utilizing tools and resources of most value to promote transformative and authentic leadership (Boyd & Willams, 2010).

The discipline of adult education has long utilized varied interdisciplinary strategies to offer student-centered, rich tools and resources to encourage self-directed (Cafarella & O'Donnell, 1987), experiential (Kolb, 1984), transformative (Mezirow, 1991), and reflexive learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985) in order to empower lifelong learners and inspire leaders (Brookfield, 2005; Candy, 1991). Teacher leaders employing what Brookfield (2005) referred to as *learning for liberation* encourage personal, relevant, experiential, and reflexive education. Learning for liberation challenges ideologies in order to offer the learner exceptional authentic leadership education for the global world.

This paper discusses how Learning for Liberation Projects (LFLP) can be utilized to teach and apply global leadership by rejecting finite definitions and employing critical unlearning within an international context. Student learning outcomes reveal personal and unique experiential perspective transformations in leadership style and practice within a dynamic intercultural context. A brief literature review and conceptual framework outlines some of the recent conversations on the topic.

Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework

Fixed assumptions defining effective leadership are problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, effective leadership can embody different meanings across cultures depending on values, attitudes and beliefs (Hofstede, 1984). Secondly, meaning made about effective leadership in practice and application can vary depending on any number of theoretical approaches like behavioral, contingency, goal, situational, relational, transformational, or other approaches (Aimar & Stough, 2007; Al-Suwaihel, 2010; Western, 2005). The value placed on each dimension of leadership practice also varies according to the specific culture and its history (Hofstede, 1984).

Montuori (2010) described four key dimensions of curricular design for authentic, inclusive and liberating leadership education: (a) ways of being, (b) ways of knowing, (c) ways of relating, and (d) ways of doing. Each dimension utilizes tenets of adult education theory underscoring self-directed and reflexive examinations of the learner's abilities, constructions of knowledge, connections to others, and execution of task. Collectively, each dimension encourages unique transformative unlearning experiences. Mezirow (1991) defined transformations as cognitive and/or behavioral reordering, or perspective changes, as a result of new learning or unlearning. Thus, a central aim for global leadership educators should facilitate students' unlearning which encourages perspective transformation and culturally inclusive authentic leadership

Montuori (2010) posited unlearning involves a critical breakdown of students' perceptions and beliefs about leadership and competence. Because perceptions and beliefs are often rigid, rooted in one's own cultural practice, learners find it difficult to see how authentic leaders can embody different qualities and characteristics across cultures. Global competencies can include sensitivity, diversity, reflexivity, and understanding of differing beliefs and perceptions to liberate stagnant ideology (Brown et al., 2012; Montuori, 2010). However, Brookfield (2005)

contended, stimulating unlearning is difficult because students encounter hegemonic processes of power and conformity running in opposition to liberation. Students who embrace conformity tend to simulate or mimic dominant leaders in their own culture/society and use these individuals as models for what leadership means or what leadership should be like. To create global leaders it becomes necessary to encourage unlearning which abandons fixed assumptions about leadership, and thus, liberates the practice of global leadership as a distinct reflection culture and experience for the individual.

Brown et al. (2012) extended global leadership education should engage students in how they might change the world. This is done by offering comparisons across cultures, challenging ways of knowing, self-directing service opportunities, reflecting on international experiences and engaging in communication to make meaning of the individual's role in transnational issues. Collectively, this type of global leadership education liberates students to alter the status quo.

Background

Interdisciplinary Applications in Global Leadership (IDS 3330) is a three credit-hour undergraduate course in interdisciplinary studies emphasizing the application of global leadership competencies including diversity, inclusion and sensitivity. Learners to date come to the United Arab Emirates from 21 different countries (Russia, Palestine, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, United States, Canada, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Oman, Turkmenistan, Ivory Coast, China and France) and can enroll in the course as an elective or a core course depending on major. The interdisciplinary course promotes unlearning through curricular design, instructional approach and relevant tools/resources to cultivate authentic global leaders. While this course is comprised of international students in the UAE, it could easily be applied to multicultural student groups in a variety of domestic (U.S.) and international settings.

Learners critically compare/contrast their own constructions of knowledge with their peers in a rich intercultural context as a strategy to support diversity, inclusion and sensitivity. In addition, learners connect with individuals across cultures in support of a global social justice issue to change the world by identifying and completing a group learning for liberation project (LFLP). Students gain experience as researchers, global leaders and interculturally sensitive communicators providing marketable skills applicable to a continuum of professional paths. Student leaders continuously engage in reflexive thinking as a group and an individual to make sense of their learning/unlearning in an effort to emphasize the importance of critical lifelong learning practices.

Description of Practice

The central objective of the learning for liberation project (LFLP) is to apply global competencies through an experiential global social justice issue with two-three peers enrolled in a 30-person course. This project aims to have students reflexively examine a global social justice issue in an effort to achieve two goals: 1) discover socially constructed knowledge about leadership to unlearn stagnant definitions and 2) challenge assumptions to transform their own unique, authentic leadership style. The first goal is achieved through three practices to encourage unlearning: a) reflection, b) intercultural dialogue with peers and c) research guided by a global social justice issue. Unlearning within each of these practices involves questioning both

preconceived notions and sociocultural influences which shape ways of being, knowing, relating and doing in leadership. The second goal is achieved by integrating unlearning practices into application to generate awareness and support of a global social justice issue via a collaborative student organized event. Learners are placed in practical and real life leadership roles to think creatively about ways to create change in the world while keeping in mind each of the unlearning practices. As a result of critically applied reflection, dialogue and research, learners are able to take on new culturally inclusive perspectives about authentic and individual leadership styles and practice in the completion of their group learning for liberation project.

Learners, with assistance of the instructor, are in charge of selecting their own groups and directing their own project ideas from start to finish in the LFLP. This process involves: 1) intensive research and information seeking to identify a global social justice issue, 2) generation of an action plan and 3) development of a proposal for their ideas and final event. They are permitted to access government agencies, non-profit government organizations, grassroots and/or community efforts, knowledgeable professionals, and any other resources offering insight to their proposed idea and action plan.

At the start of the course students are shown a sample LFLP action plan, proposal, budget, and audio-visual recording of a LFLP final event from a previous group project. Students are also offered a list briefly describing efforts done in the past and are given a full week to think critically about a global social justice issue impacting their world. Learners are encouraged to collectively think about and detail how this issue connects personally to each of their lives in a two-page abstract. This abstract also includes how their approach to this effort meets the most recent demands of the issue. Each member of the group must contribute to the timeline for the project, list any individuals/resources involved with the project, and develop a budget (not to exceed 200USD) for costs associated with the project and final event. Each person must keep an individual journal log of their efforts and a separate group journal log on the project to encourage individual and collaborative reflexivity.

The instructor plays an active role in facilitating learning and unlearning for each group and their LFLP. Encouraging open and honest dialogue about their home countries, cultures, values, interests and beliefs enables students to find common ground in the selection of a project idea. In the first weeks of brainstorming on the project the instructor offers support with the timeline, ways to format or challenge thinking for individual/group reflection logs, and aids in resource identification. In week three, students should have an approved proposal and action plan for organizing the final event, including the budget, so that work may begin on their LFLP. Students turn in weekly reports on their progress so that the instructor may assist or encourage learning in any way possible

The final group LFLP projects assessment includes five components: 1) an evaluation of their final event to raise awareness or bring attention to their selected global social justice issue by the instructor, 2) a 5-7 minute speech at the event detailing important new insights challenging their thinking on any given ideology, 3) individual and group reflexive journal logs, 4) 15 weekly progress reports, and finally, (5) a two page summary about how the experience shaped their leadership philosophy.

Analysis

The Learning for Liberation Project (LFLP) has had four successful semesters and serves to attract students from a variety of majors (global business, business administration, secondary education, elementary education, architecture, engineering, international studies, humanities, history, interior design, etc.). A total of 29 LFLP projects have been successfully completed. All five components of the learning for liberation projects (LFLP) are copied (with the permission of the students). Qualitative methods were utilized in the cross-case analysis of each project using the constant comparison technique "to group answers…to the common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). Central issues for this educational activity were 1) discoveries relevant to sociocultural influenced knowledge about leadership 2) valuable unlearning related to definitions about leadership and 3) perspective transformations about individual leadership style and practice. Constant comparative method allows side-by-side evaluation of reflection logs for groups and individuals, leadership philosophies, and student speeches to isolate major themes and patterns within central issues (Glaser, 1965).

Outcomes

Learners responses reveal "new ways of thinking," "different point of view" and "different understandings" from directing their own research, reflections and dialogue with peers and individuals involved in the LFLP. Learners suggest "shifts" or "differences" in "thinking" and "perspectives" come from critically engaging in dialogue about why "things are the way they are." One learner notes, "I take it for granted (home culture) and I do not realize how much it effects my thinking about women in leadership roles." Montuori's (2010) position on the rigidity of cultural perspectives is echoed in this particular students' reflection as well as other students' reflections on gender roles and expectations. Several private reflections allude to how gender roles in their own culture play a part in perceptions about leadership. Females who lead are "supportive," "uplifting," "generous" or "courageous" whereas their male counterparts are "commanding," "powerful," "strong" and "confident. Some females have shared there are limitations about "ability," "family duties" and "power" when it comes to leadership. One learner privately reflects on her project choice " ..it was my mom's idea and she had volunteered there (Women's Literacy Now) before, but then maybe it is because these are other women and that's all she knows about." Some students begin to uncover how their own leadership style is connected to Montuori's (2010) 'ways of knowing' or definitions about leadership and uncover individuals in their lives who influence these ideas.

Evidence of transformative learning was identified in at least one of the five components from 27 of the 29 final projects. One individual learners' reflection log provides an illustration of his perspective transformations (Mezirow,1991) with reference to influential leaders and role models. He shared:

> … You don't have to be the guy who defied all odds in a racist country, or the adolescent girl abused for her voice (Malala Yousufzai)… you can be YOU. You make the choice every day to stand up for what is right, celebrate peace and *never* give hate a chance" (Peace in the Middle East)'

This student also uses a similar anecdote in his final event speech where he spoke to 150+ college age students across adult and higher education in Dubai. This student echoes

Brookfield's (2005) claim about mirroring other leaders and provides evidence that it may be difficult for some students to embrace individual authentic leadership style. Further, as Brown et al. (2012) stated, global leadership must offer students ways to encourage change on the world stage. Over the course of the semester some students were able to shift from a position where they emulated a leader, to a position where they embraced/appreciated their own unique leadership style. Students report learning about themselves and about the world that they live in by making the educational journey personal (Boyd & Williams, 2010) and reflexive. Students group journal reflections indicate empowerment and extend Brookfield's (2005) *learning for liberation* ideas. Some learners begin to see themselves as change agents using phrases like "feeling useful," "making a difference," "doing something for change," and "contributing to something better" to combat dominant ideologies rooted in their global social justice issue.

A selection of successful LFLP completed to date is offered below:

- Women's Literacy Now Project: Raising awareness, increasing volunteer support and fundraising for the International Women and Family's Education Center
- Peace in the Middle East: Generating dialogue, participation and volunteer support for the Annual International Collegiate Peace Talk Summit
- Immigrant Alliance Project: Community effort to provide awareness, information and support to union rights for immigrant contract workers (construction, sanitation, groundskeeper, and government support) across Africa and Asia
- Sustainable Now: A project aimed at educating and facilitating sustainable education practices to reduce paper, fossil fuel and styrofoam waste across higher education institutions in the Middle East, Southern Asia, Africa, and Southern Europe

18 LFLP's revealed initial resistance about the notion of unlearning. Here students felt that their own perceptions were not negative. For example, "I have a pretty open viewpoint" suggesting no real reason to think differently because the current way of thinking was "fine." In ten of these cases the group experienced transformation towards the end of the semester noting powerful realizations about social constructions of knowledge with specific attention to gender roles. Some learners related to sisters or brothers of the opposite gender and note "different realities," "expectations" and "jobs." Both male and female learners report a profound empathy for how social constructions within cultures create rigid roles not easily violated. Some learners who come from privileged backgrounds find themselves more understanding of class and ethnic limitations as well by identifying factors "outside of your own control" and the idea "you cannot help the system you are born into." Increases in self-worth and confidence to create change on a global scale were also shared in some students' journal log reflections. Some students remain committed to their social justice issue and continue to participate in raising awareness and support for the cause after the course is complete. One student shared "it feels good to do something good, I hope to take on more of a leadership role within the organization next year for my internship."

Reflections and Recommendations

The multicultural group dynamic plays a significant role in learning and facilitating perspective transformations. I do not think the practice of global leadership can exist without a collaborative intercultural dynamic. Exposing learners to different viewpoints and ideas in an authentic, real

world, experiential setting reinforcing accountable and meaningful education (Kolb, 1984). Learners make reference to unlearning and how perceptions about leadership have transformed (Mezirow, 1991) throughout the completion of their LFLP. However, discoveries relevant to sociocultural influences, definitions about leadership and perspective transformations about individual leadership style and practice are highly interconnected. Research and reflection can offer theoretical understandings about a particular social justice phenomenon, but dialogue and interactions with family, friends and other group members can translate that theory into practice. Research, reflection and dialogue encourage individual connections manifesting differently across learners depending on what they identify as meaningful and important. For future LFLP's, I think it would be helpful to have students identify particular events or interactions encouraging transformations, rather than simply discussing the general changes in perspective.

 The LFLP is structured using cornerstones of adult learning such as self-directed (Cafarella & O'Donnell, 1987), experiential (Kolb, 1984), and reflexive learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). One student echoed the value of Kolb's (1984) experiential education theory stating, "it is not something you can read about and know; you have to really do it to get it." I believe this is also key to teaching global leadership. If students are not engaged in active learning-by-doing than it may become difficult to make apply the knowledge and personalize the experience (Boyd & Williams, 2010). Students is this course are able to think about a social justice issue which connects to their own lives, and it is possible this gives them an increased stake in learning outcomes engaging them in a way that would not be possible inside the classroom alone. Through the process of action-oriented education and collaborative group work some learners begin to discover how their own culture and identity shapes ways of knowing and relating to others. I believe the introspective process of reflection encourages a better sense of self for the learner so he/she can identify his/her unique qualities as an authentic and inclusive leader.

References

Aimar, C., & Stough, S. (2007). Leadership: Does culture matter? Comparative practices between Argentina and United States of America. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal, 11*(3), 9-43.

Al-Suwaihel, O. (2010). Kuwaiti female leaders' perspectives: The influence of culture on their leadership. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 3*(3), 29-39.

Boud, D., Keogh, R. & Walker, D. (1985). What is reflection in learning? In D. Boud, R. Keogh & D.Walker (Eds), *Reflection: Turning the experience into learning.* London, UK: Kogan Page.

Boyd, B. L., & Williams, J. (2010). Developing life-long learners through personal growth projects. *Journal of Leadership Education, 9(2),* 144-150.

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/John Wiley.

Brown, L., Whitaker, B., & Brungardt, C. (2012). A proposed framework for global leadership education: Learning objectives and curricula. *Journal of Leadership Education,11*(2), 214-224.

Caffarella, R. S., & O'Donnell, J. M. (1987) Self-directed adult learning: A critical paradigm revisited. *Adult Education Quarterly, 37*, 199-211.

Candy, P. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning. A comprehensive guide to theory and practice.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems, 12,* 436 - 445.

Hosftede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* New Jersey, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lane, J. E. (2011). Global expansion of international branch campuses: Managerial and leadership challenges. *New Directions For Higher Education*, *155*, 5-17. doi:10.1002/he.440

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimension if adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Moran, J. (2002). *Interdisciplinarity: The new critical idiom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Montuori, A. (2010). Transformative leadership for the 21st Century: Reflections on the design of a graduate leadership curriculum. *Revision*, *30*(3/4), 4-14.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schild, V., & Holmes, G. (2011). The Kenan Fellows Program for curriculum and leadership development: Teaching students to think outside the book. *The International Journal of Knowledge, Technology, and Society,7*(1), 201-207.

Western, S. (2008). *Leadership. A critical text*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Zapalska, A. M., Shuklian, S., Rudd, D., & Flanegin, F. (2012). Global and international issues in college education. *Culture & Religion Review Journal*, *2012*(4), 146-156.

Author Biography

Shelbee R. Nguyen teaches across the disciplines of Multicultural Education, Leadership, Business, International Studies, and Communication as an Assistant Professor at the American University in Dubai. Her academic background is in Communication and Interdisciplinary Adult Education with specialization in international settings. The focus of her research examines sociocultural influences on adult and higher education with emphasis on how study abroad and international learning promote transformative learning and leadership.