

Killing Two Birds with One Stone: Using Book Reviews to Teach Leadership and Foster Community in an Online Class

Lori L. Moore

Assistant Professor

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications

Texas A&M University

LMoore@aged.tamu.edu

Abstract

The academic community is more fully integrating technology into the business it conducts. Online courses are becoming more and more popular. Popular culture can be a source of commonality among students that can be used to more effectively teach leadership in an online environment. This manuscript outlines the use of a group book review assignment to teach leadership while simultaneously fostering a sense of community among students learning about leadership in a primarily asynchronous environment.

Introduction

It is a proven fact that the students in our classrooms today are different from those who occupied those same seats just 10 or 15 years ago (Taylor, 2005, 2006). They have very different beliefs about what “an education,” and therefore school, should look like and have a much more developed set of skills related to technology. These students bring with them an entertainment orientation in that they expect everything, including their education, to be entertaining, easy, and fun (Taylor, 2006). They have grown up with computers and technology of all kinds and are impatient with a lack of technological sophistication in others, including teachers and schools (Taylor, 2005). “Effective pedagogy with postmodern students requires that students be engaged at all times” (Taylor, 2006, p. 2:52). The shift in the expectations of students has forced educators to reexamine teaching methodologies and integrate more technology into the learning environment.

The above description is accurate concerning what we think of as traditional college students. These students typically enter college straight out of high school or shortly thereafter. However, there are some students in our classes today that are what we consider nontraditional. These students are typically older and returning to school for a variety of reasons. Unlike their younger counterparts, many may be newcomers to the technological arena (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). As

teachers, it is our responsibility to meet the needs of both the traditional and nontraditional students in our courses.

The presence of both traditional and nontraditional students in our classes coupled with the fact that some of the seats in our classes are “occupied” only in the virtual sense requires new teaching tools and strategies to effectively and efficiently teach course content. Online courses and hybrid courses are becoming more and more popular. According to the Sloan Consortium, nearly 20% of all higher education students were enrolled in at least one online class during the fall 2006 term, equating to almost 3.5 million students nationwide (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Such enrollments reflect a 10% increase just since the previous year. Regardless of delivery method, students need personal contact with the instructor and interaction with other students (King & Deorfert, 1995; Miller & Crawford, 1990). According to a whitepaper by Blackboard (2007), to be successful in the 21st century, a university must be unconstrained by time and place and student centered.

While our students’ expectations and physical locations may be unusual, the use of book reviews in both the research arena and the classroom is not. Many scholarly journals, including the *Journal of Leadership Education (JOLE)*, include book reviews within their submission categories for publication (see Fritz & Giesecke, 2005, as an example). A Google search of book review assignments for the classroom yields page after page of assignment descriptions and guidelines. The use of book reviews as college course assignments has been well documented in several disciplines including library and information sciences (see Peroni, 1984), teaching with technology, history, and literature. They have been used as individual assignments and to foster cooperative learning (see Keller, 1993). Within the context of leadership education, Borgese, Deutsch, and Winkler (2004) noted the fact that participants in the Institute for Virtual Enterprise Leadership Program (IVELP) at the City University of New York (CUNY) were required to read a book of a well-known leader to address the situational component of leadership, one of the four approaches within their program. While the authors mentioned that participants were able to discuss what they read in virtual classrooms in Blackboard, they did not mention if this was a requirement and whether students were allowed to read the same book.

Lundy (1990) defined a leader “as anyone who has followers” (p. 20). Just as leadership does not exist, in most situations, without the presence of others, leadership cannot be taught and learned in a vacuum. The question must be asked, “How can we as leadership educators teach leadership to students in 21st century universities in an online environment, which without considerable effort on the part of both students and teachers, can be isolating?”

Developing Leaders Course

In the spring of 2004, I taught my first leadership course at a land grant university in the Northwest. It was described in the course catalog as a combined undergraduate and graduate class designed to excite students about becoming leaders in schools, homes, and communities through a participatory examination of various aspects of leadership. The course addressed concepts including (a) leadership definitions and theories, (b) personality, (c) motivation, (d) mission and vision, (e) goals and values, (f) ethics and integrity, (g) consensus building, (h) creative problem solving, and (i) team leadership.

I had experience teaching leadership courses as a graduate student, but this course was different in that it was taught via videoconference to on-campus student and at remote sites all across the state. On the bright side, this meant a variety of students. Many of the students at the remote sites were nontraditional undergraduate or graduate students and brought with them a variety of experiences and perspectives the more traditional, campus-based students did not have. However, I questioned whether my students, especially those at the distance sites, were actually learning the content covered in class and putting it into practice.

In the spring of 2006, I was asked to convert the class to a hybrid class that met via videoconference several times throughout the semester, but was accomplished primarily through online learning modules using Blackboard. Blackboard is a web-based software platform that supports online teaching and learning. Registered users, both students and teachers, can access the site, submit (students), and grade (teachers) assignments asynchronously from anywhere they have access to the internet. When preparing the class, not only did I have the difficulty of teaching leadership to students at remote sites, but now I had to do that in an online environment as well. The last time I had taught the class, most of my students were two-dimensional pictures on a television screen at the back of the room. I did not especially like that fact, but at least it was in a synchronous environment. Now I was faced with teaching the majority of the course in an asynchronous environment. I was genuinely concerned with how to effectively teach leadership in this situation. So I decided to incorporate a group book review assignment as one of the course assignments not only to provide an opportunity for students to interact with the content in the class, but also interact with each other.

This semester I am again teaching the class in the hybrid format using the Blackboard platform for the online portion of the course coupled with videoconferences approximately once a month. I am still using the book review assignment as both a teaching tool and as a strategy to foster student to student interaction.

Group Book Review Assignment

The purpose of this book review assignment is two-fold. First, it provides students an opportunity to identify key elements of a noteworthy leader's leadership style by reading about that person's life. I want students to first be able to recognize that course concepts, such as the use of power, motivation, ethics, problem-solving, negotiation, are evident in the situations, challenges, and successes described in the book they selected. However, I want students to go beyond just reading about a leader. I want them to also identify strategies for using what they have learned about those course concepts in their own leadership roles and responsibilities. The second purpose of the assignment is to encourage students to interact, and hopefully develop relationships, with students they might not usually meet.

In order to accomplish these purposes, I assign each student to a book review group consisting of three to five students, depending on enrollment. In assigning groups, I make sure each group has a balance of on-campus and off-campus students as well as undergraduate and graduate students to capitalize on different perspectives and experiences.

Once assigned to a book review group, I post a list of approved books each group can read. This semester the book list included *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell* by Oren Harani, *Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times* by Donald Phillips, *Patton on Leadership* by Alan Axelrod, *Leadership* by Rudolph Giuliani and Ken Kurson, *Greatness: Reagan, Churchill and the Making of Extraordinary Leaders* by Steven Haywood, and others. I also allow groups to identify and propose a book not on the list. However, if I approve it and have not read it, I make sure to read it as the semester progresses.

Students review the list of books and decide as a group which book they would like to read. Once they decide on the book, they set up a reading schedule and correspond through a discussion board set up within Blackboard for their group on a weekly basis. While they are waiting for the book they ordered to arrive, they are to introduce themselves to their group members and get to know each other.

Throughout the semester I read the postings of each student within each group. If students are missing important concepts or struggling to communicate with each other, I pose leading questions to stimulate discussion. In total, the assignment is worth 150 points which is 20% of the course grade for undergraduates and 15% of the course grade for graduate students. In the overall evaluation of the assignment one-half of the points are based on participation in the weekly discussion postings. I try to convey to students the importance of truly discussing the book with each other as opposed to simply posting a random thought here and there about something they read.

At the end of the semester each student is responsible for writing a review of the book which is worth the other one-half of the total assignment. They are to include a brief synopsis of the book before spending the majority of the paper discussing the application of what can be learned from it. I ask them to discuss the major leadership concepts they took away from the book, how those concepts tie to the leadership concepts learned in class, and especially the application of the concepts into their role(s) as a leader in their personal and professional lives.

Discussion

As universities continue to offer more online classes to increase their pool of students and make their programs available to larger audiences, leadership educators will be faced with how to effectively teach leadership and course content with less and less interaction, including both student to teacher and student to student interaction.

As Palloff and Pratt (1999) noted, active learning is important in an online learning environment. “Buy-in from the participants is essential” (p. 19). I give groups the opportunity to choose the book they want to read in order to help create buy-in of the assignment. Buy-in is also achieved by letting the groups set their own reading schedule. I do require that they start communicating as a group early in the semester, but I do not require them to read a certain number of pages or chapters each week. Groups are free to read as much, or as little, each week based on the time available to each group member, as long as they can get the entire book read and the report written by the end of the semester. I also require that they make weekly discussion postings for at least eight weeks during the semester. In other words, they are not allowed to read the book over a weekend and make a single posting to their group’s discussion board.

Interaction throughout the group is equally important (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). In an effort to encourage such interaction, I weight the points such that one-half of the value of the assignment is based on participation in the discussion postings related to the book. Initially I thought it might be difficult to get students to post more than just a single entry per week consisting of a basic thought tied to something specific in the book. I was pleasantly surprised to see that as the assignment progressed, students embraced the postings and often posted extremely articulate, in-depth discussions of particular factors contained in the book. Furthermore, they often posted responses to the postings of other group members stimulating even more discussion.

The last video conference of the semester emphasizes leadership in teams. The content of the lesson includes a discussion of the stages of group development. The book review assignment provides a concrete experience from which students are encouraged to reflect upon and use in the discussion. The first time I taught the Developing Leaders class as a hybrid class I noticed stronger discussions related to leadership in groups during this videoconference than in any of the

discussions about any topic when I taught the class completely with videoconferences. This suggests to me that the student to student interaction taking place in the book review groups was equal to, if not more effective, at fostering a sense of community among students in the class than in the videoconference environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several studies have shown that the use of popular media can be effective tools to teach leadership (Graham, Ackermann, & Maxwell, 2004; Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackermann, 2003; Johnson, 2003). In fact, Graham, Ackermann, and Maxwell (2004) stated that, “Our learners construct personal meaning through this medium on their journey of leadership development” (p. 54). The group book review has helped me achieve the same outcome using books as opposed to movies.

While the use of the group book review assignment has been successful in my classes, it does come with additional work on my part. Selecting the books requires significant reading time to review each book and ensure that each does contain content that can be tied to course concepts. Monitoring the discussion postings throughout the semester is time consuming, but I often find myself learning new things each semester. Although I have read all of the books before, I find the comments of the students often cause me to re-read particular sections and I often see things differently.

This group book review assignment has given me a tool to foster a sense of community within the online course while at the same time emphasizing course concepts. It has provided students with the opportunity to incorporate more personal experiences with a smaller group and more effectively interact with the content as opposed to just reading articles and viewing presentations while completing each online module. Perhaps one of the students who participated in the book review assignment stated it best on the end of course evaluation, writing “The book group and report took some time, but I learned a lot from it and it was nice to share ideas with other students.”

References

- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2007). *Online nation: Five years of growth in online learning*. The Sloan Consortium. Retrieved January 28, 2008 from http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/online_nation.pdf.
- Blackboard. (2007). *A view from the top: Building the 21st century campus*. Unpublished Manuscript. Retrieved January 31, 2008 from <http://www.blackboard.com/clientcollateral/21st%20Century%20-%20View%20from%20the%20Top%20White%20Paper.pdf>.
- Borgese, A., Deutsch, J., & Winkler, C. (2004). A multifaceted approach to leadership education: CUNY's Institute for Virtual Experience. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 3(3), 38-43.
- Fritz, S., & Giesecke, J. (2005). Book Review. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 4(1), 104-105.
- Graham, T. S., Ackerman, J. C., & Maxwell, K. K. (2004). Reel leadership II: Getting emotional at the movies. *Journal of Leadership Education* 3(3), 44-57.
- Graham, T. S., Sincoff, M. Z., Baker, B., & Ackerman, J. C. (2003). Reel leadership: Hollywood takes the leadership challenge. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 2(2), 37-45.
- Johnson, C. (2003). Enron's ethical collapse: Lessons for leadership educators. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 2(1), 45-56.
- Keller, C. (1993). Using book reviews for cooperative learning. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 26-28.
- King, J., & Doerfert, D. L. (1995). Interaction in the distance education setting. *Proceedings of the 22nd National Agricultural Education Research Meeting, Denver, CO*.
- Lundy, J. L. (1990). *Lead, follow, or get out of the way: Invaluable insight into leadership style*. San Marcos, CA: Avant Books.
- Miller, B. E., & Crawford, H. R. (1990). Participant motivation in off-campus agricultural credit programs at Iowa State University. *Proceedings of the 17th National Agricultural Education Research Meeting, Cincinnati, OH*.
- Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
-

- Peroni, P. A. (1984). A book review assignment to introduce freshmen to the college library. *Exercise Exchange*, 30(1), 26-28.
- Taylor, M. L. (2005). Generation NeXt: comes to college: Today's postmodern student – meeting, teaching, and serving. In *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement*, 2, 99-107. Chicago: The Higher Learning Commission.
- Taylor, M. L. (2006). Generation NeXt: comes to college: 2006 updates and emerging issues. In *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement*, 2, 2:48-2:55. Chicago: The Higher Learning Commission.

Biography

Lori Moore is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications at Texas A&M University. Prior to working at Texas A&M University, she spent five years at the University of Idaho where she taught an undergraduate and graduate leadership course and conducted research in collegiate leadership programming. Dr. Moore has degrees from the University of Florida (Ph.D.) and Texas A&M University (B.S., M.S). Her professional experience began as a high school agricultural science teacher in Texas, where she taught for four years.