The Social Construction of Leadership Education

Jon Billsberry
Professor of Organisational Behaviour
Coventry University Business School
Coventry University
Coventry, West Midlands
United Kingdom
j.billsberry@coventry.ac.uk

Abstract

Most leadership theories assume that leadership is a quality of leaders (e.g., trait theory), or a response to environments (e.g., situational theory), or a combination of both (e.g., contingency theory). In all these approaches leadership is something knowable and definite. However, after years of research there is no agreed definition of what leadership is or any universal agreement about who might be regarded a leader. This paper outlines an alternative approach in which leadership is a contested construct and describes two engaging teaching techniques that align pedagogic approach with the underlying theory. In doing so this paper makes a case for the adoption of socially-constructed theories in leadership education.

The Social Construction of Leadership

Recently there has been increasing interest in theorizing leadership from a social construction perspective. One of the leading advocates of this perspective is sociologist Keith Grint. His analysis of the leadership literature highlights that two dimensions (the person and the situation) are central to most theories of leadership and that most extant theories have an element of certainty and knowingness about them (Grint, 1997, 2005; Yukl, 1994). For example, trait-based theories assume that it is possible to know which elements of the person contribute to their leadership success, situational theories assume it is possible to analyze a particular context so that particular leadership responses can be tailored, and contingency theories assume it is possible to determine the leadership characteristics of both the person and the situation so that adaptations can be made to both to enable leadership to thrive.

Grint's (1997) approach questions the notion that it is possible to analyze these two dimensions and produce a definitive assessment of the leadership characteristics of either the person or the situation. Moreover, drawing from social

constructivist ideas, he builds an argument for leadership being based in people's perceptions. Adapting a common proverb, his argument is that just like beauty leadership is in the eye of the beholder. By making leadership a product of the observer, he explains many leadership riddles such as why people regard people differently as leaders. It also explains why no common definition of leadership can be agreed upon or why completely different approaches to leadership work in similar situations.

A socially-constructed approach to leadership is more than simply placing leadership assessments in the eye of the beholder. People are not free from social influence and this allows for the "truth'" of someone's leadership to emerge over time; truth emerges from a competition between various accounts and interpretations. He says that these interpretations do not have equal weight. Some are more dominant than others and become the accepted view, regardless of the "reality" of the person or the situation. Hence, "we may never know what the true essence of a leader or the situation actually is and must often base our actions and beliefs on the accounts of others from whom we can (re)constitute our version of events" (Grint, 1997, p. 6).

Grint's (1997) social constructionist approach to leadership is typical of the literature. Within his conceptualization he captures four features that Sandberg (2001) argues are common to all approaches.

Dualistic ontology (Sandberg, 2001) is the idea that there are two entities, the subject and the object, that are separate and independent of each other. When leadership is the issue, the two entities are usually a person perceived as a leader and the person perceiving the individual. The separation of the two entities allows the researcher to explore independent qualities or attributes of both parties.

Objectivistic epistemology is the notion that beyond human consciousness there is an objective reality. Hence, social construction is not the completely illusory approach that it is often misrepresented to be. Social constructionists believe that there is a reality and that it is through people's interpretation that meaning comes (Sandberg, 2001).

Assuming that the individual is the prime creator of knowledge about reality in this way is termed *individualistic epistemology*, which is Sandberg's (2001) third common feature.

The fourth common feature of social constructionist approaches is the *role of language as a mirror of objective reality* (Sandberg, 2001). Put simply, this is the idea that language can represent or mirror reality in an objective fashion. All of these are embodied in Grint's (1997) approach.

Aligning Theory and Teaching

Although there is considerable agreement that leadership can be taught and learned, there is considerable disagreement on definitions and approaches to the subject (Doh, 2003; Gill, 2006; Middlebrooks & Allen, 2009; Nahavandi, 2006). One major advantage of a socially-constructed approach to leadership is that it dodges many of these problems and its underlying principles offer instructors an opportunity to align their teaching methods with their theoretical approach to leadership.

Dualistic ontology gives validity to students as valued observers of leaders. It gives them the "right" to view, analyze, and critique the leadership of others. Their views reflect their approach to leadership. Moreover, this theoretical approach makes it essential that instructors acknowledge and incorporate the students' own backgrounds when discussing leadership. Crucially, dualistic ontology compels instructors to provide independent contexts and people for observers to discuss (and contest) leadership. Conversely, allowing students to discuss their own leadership situation violates the rule that object and subject must be kept separate. Also, if it is assumed that students inhabit different arenas, when talking about their own environments observers occupy a privileged position as the only observer of the events and a meaningful debate cannot occur (Posner, 2009). Individualistic epistemology gives value to students' interpretations and assessments of leaders. More than this, students' thoughts on leadership are their truths. Helping students find their own understanding of what leadership is and applying this to their own situations becomes an important goal of leadership development.

In this process language becomes an essential medium. It is through discussion and debate that perceptions of leadership contests are established. Grint (1997) argues that "the ancient study of rhetoric provides one significant element of leadership training since it may be persuasive powers that hold the key to leadership success. Political networking, interpersonal skills, material wealth, and negotiating skills are the hallmark of this approach" (Grint, 1997, p. 6). He further contends that "this does not mean that leadership is whatever anyone wants it to be; it is what certain powerful 'voices' make it. All voices may be equal but some are more equal than others" (p. 9).

Accordingly to this approach, the foundations of leadership education are about helping students understand their own definition of leadership and understanding leadership in their own environments. They do this through debate and contest by analyzing leadership subjects from similar knowledge bases. Leadership development is likely to focus on skills that help students' develop their ability to

persuade and inspire people in their own leadership arenas. Crucially, it will address the way that students appear to other people.

Constructed Leadership Teaching

The remainder of this paper outlines two teaching approaches that abide by the principles set out above. Both of these approaches focus on helping students surface and define their own understanding of leadership.

Films

Over the past 20 years many papers have been published advocating the use of films for management and leadership education (Billsberry & Edwards, 2008; Billsberry & Gilbert, 2008; Bumpus, 2005; Champoux, 2006a, 2006b; Huczynski, 1994; McCambridge, 2003; Serey, 1992). Advocates of using films for teaching management and leadership have, by and large, justified the approach by appeals to their utility because their students report that they both enjoy and learn from the films. This is not unexpected. Films are designed to engage the audience quickly and to swiftly form a bond between the audience and the characters. The narrative arc of a film creates tension, interest, and drama. In effect, many films are multilayered and multidimensional case studies that focus on a key issue.

A particularly useful quality is that often the filmmaker allows the audience to develop their own understanding of subject. A good recent example is the depiction of the work and life balance (and related topics) in *The Wrestler* (Aronofsky, 2008). In this film, a wrestler (Randy "The Ram" Robinson, Mickey Rourke) is juxtaposed with a lap dancer (Cassidy, Marisa Tomei). Whereas Cassidy has imposed strict rules upon herself to keep work and non-work separate and will not take work home with her, The Ram has become his work persona, both at work and outside of work. When The Ram falls ill and has to retire from wrestling he is forced to confront his non-existent private life. Both the roles of Cassidy and The Ram are richly depicted and the contrast and interplay of the two provides a rich tableau upon which to base discussions on the work and life balance. Such detailed, subtle, and realistic occasions lie at the heart of the utilitarian justification for the use of film in management and leadership education.

Beyond this utilitarian justification of films in education, the social constructionist approach provides a theoretical reason for the adoption of film in leadership education. First, film separates object and subject. Students are the observers and film gives them a common reference point, or objective reality, around which to discuss leadership. Students are the prime creator of their reality and their discussions about the way that leadership is portrayed gives language a prime

role. When using films to teach leadership through a social constructionist perspective, the instructors' goal is to help students find or develop their own understanding of leadership. For example, what do they acknowledge as leadership? What qualities of leaders do they respond to? In what sort of situations is leadership required? By analyzing and discussing films with their fellow students, they will develop their own objective reality and this, in turn, becomes a tool that they can use to analyze leadership in their own environments.

Films can be used in all manner of ways in teaching depending on the time available, the resources of the students, the teaching environment, and goals of instructors. The approach to leadership outlined in this paper suggests an alternative approach to showing the film in either its entirety or short sections as described by Billsberry and Gilbert (2008) and Huczynski (1994), where film is primarily used for illustration. Instead, students need to study their chosen leaders with the ability to view scenes as many times as they need in order to disentangle the complexity and subtlety of the way leadership is portrayed. The most suitable technology would be DVD or digital clips viewed on personal computers, thus suggesting a laboratory or home setting.

Clearly there is an almost limitless list of films in which leadership is portrayed. Any film with a narrative arc is likely to contain characters that people may perceive to be leaders. Hence, there is little point producing such a list. Instead, there are several films worth mentioning because they have interesting elements of social constructionism interwoven into the depiction of leadership. In *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962) the actions of the lead character were largely invisible to his bosses and his home nation. Hence, his recognition as a leader, except to the Arabs with whom he worked closely, comes from third party reported accounts and is clearly socially-constructed. A similar point can be made about *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), where reports of the lead character's actions struck fear in the hearts of distant Romans.

The Great Leader Project

Many leadership teaching techniques involve debates about leadership. Most of these align well with a social constructionist approach to leadership given the centrality of rhetoric and "powerful voices" to it. To demonstrate how, this paper will briefly outline a well-elaborated technique called The Great Leader Project (Burton, 2009).

The Great Leader Project uses rhetoric to improve students' understanding of leadership theory, their knowledge of leaders, and to develop leadership skills by engaging in competitive debate. The technique works in the following way. Students are allocated to a team of four to six and they are given a randomly-

assigned leader by the instructor. They spend time analyzing the leader with the purpose of using leadership theories to explain why they think the individual is an effective leader. They use this analysis to prepare a presentation explaining to other students why their allocated person is, or was, a great leader. The next stage of the process is for the groups to compete against each other to persuade an audience of their classmates that their leader is the greater. They are not allowed to refer to the other groups' leaders and may only advance their own and do so using course ideas. The classmates vote based on the quality of the advocacy and the use of course ideas. The level of competition (i.e., how many teams they compete against) is determined by how large the class is. The goal is to have a few teams go through to a second, or championship, round a week later. This promotes deeper learning and a chance to improve debating skills.

This approach encourages students to use multiple sources from which they develop their views of their leader. Through team processes they form their collective reality and such discussions are rehearsals for their public advocacy. In many ways, it is natural follow-up to the initial study of leadership through the studies of films and other media and the two methods combine to give students a comprehensive immersion in the social constructionist approach to leadership.

Conclusion

This paper has considered leadership education from a social constructionist perspective. It began by describing the social constructionist perspective with an elaboration of the underlying principles. The paper then described two teaching methods that align the theoretical approach to leadership with the teaching method. These two approaches are the use of films in an analytical, rather than illustrative, manner and a debate framework that embodies the role of rhetoric in shaping leadership perceptions.

In outlining these two techniques, this paper does more than just highlight two teaching methods that align with a socially-constructed approach to leadership. It also advocates social constructionism as a valid approach to leadership. The fact that the underlying theoretical approach to the subject can be mirrored in the teaching approach should improve the quality of teaching because students will be internalizing the theory both from what is said and what they do.

References

Billsberry, J., & Edwards, G. (2008). Toxic celluloid: Representations of bad leadership on film and implications for leadership development. *Organisations and People*, *15*(3), 104-110.

Billsberry, J., & Gilbert, L. H. (2008). Using Roald Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory to teach different recruitment and selection paradigms. *Journal of Management Education*, *32*(2), 228-247.

Bumpus, M. A. (2005). Using motion pictures to teach management: Refocusing the camera lens through the infusion approach to diversity. *Journal of Management Education*, *29*(6), 792-815.

Burton, J. P. (2009). The great leader project. *Organization Management Journal*.

Champoux, J. E. (2006a). European films as a management education teaching resource. In T. Torres-Coronas, M. Gascó Hernández and A. Fernandes de Matos Coelho (Eds.), *Changing the way you teach: Creative tools for management educators*. Oviedo: Septem Ediciones.

Champoux, J. E. (2006b). At the cinema: Aspiring to higher ethical standard. *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 5*(3), 386-390.

Doh, J. P. (2003). Can leadership be taught? Perspectives from management educators. *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 2*(1), 54-67.

Gill, R. (2006). *Theory and practice of leadership*. London: Sage.

Grint, K. (1997). *Leadership: Classical, contemporary, and critical approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grint, K. (2005). *Leadership: Limits and possibilities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Huczynski, A. (1994). Teaching motivation and influencing strategies using 'The Magnificent Seven.' *Journal of Management Education 18*(2), 273-278.

McCambridge, J. (2003). 12 angry men: A study in dialogue. *Journal of Management Education*, *27*(3), 384-401.

Middlebrooks, A., & Allen, S. J. (2009). The education of leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *8*(1), viii-xxii.

Nahavandi, A. (2006). Teaching leadership to first-year students in a learning community. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *5*(2), 14-27.

Posner, B. Z. (2009). From inside out: Beyond teaching about leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *8*(1), 1-10.

Sandberg, J. (2001). The constructions of social constructionism. In S. E. Sjöstrand, J. Sandberg, and M. Tyrstrup (Eds.), *Invisible Management: The Social Construction of Leadership* (pp. 28-48). London: Thomson Learning.

Serey, T. T. (1992). Carpe Diem: Lessons about life and management from 'Dead Poets Society.' *Journal of Management Education*, *16*(3), 374-381.

Yukl, G. (1994). *Leadership in organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Biography

Jon Billsberry is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Coventry University Business School. He is the author of many journal articles, chapters, and conference papers. He has written two books and edited three more. His third edited book, *Discovering Leadership*, was published in 2009 by Palgrave Macmillan. It is an up-to-the-minute collection of critical and seminal papers on leadership designed for both undergraduate and postgraduate use. His research interests are in the fields of organizational fit, recruitment and selection, leadership, management and leadership education, and the cinematic portrayal of work and working life. He is Program Chair of the Management Education and Development division of the Academy of Management, Chair of the Organisational Psychology division of the British Academy of Management, and Co-Editor (Teaching and Learning) of *Organization Management Journal*. Further details are available at www.jonbillsberry.co.uk.