

How Students Learn to Lead: The Importance of Role Models in Pre- and Early-Career Experiences

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Abstract

The impact of the recent Covid-19 pandemic as well as other significant global issues such as sustainability and gender inequality are just few of the numerous serious problems that business leaders are currently grappling with. To address these challenges, organisations will need more effective leaders, i.e., individuals that possess the leadership experience, skills, and qualities necessary to thrive in such a complex environment.

Hence, gaining a deeper understanding of how people learn to lead, and how this can be facilitated, is arguably crucial. Particular attention should be given to the leadership learning of young people such as business students as they are bound to assume key leadership roles in the near future. This is what this study set out to do by researching the leadership experiences of 13 undergraduate business students on a placement year.

The importance of experience in leadership development has been widely researched and acknowledged (Conger, 2004; Janson, 2008; Kempster, 2006, 2009; Kempster & Cope, 2010; Kempster & Stewart, 2010; Longenecker & Insch, 2019; McCall, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are aspects of learning from experience that are still under-explored and under-theorised. An aspect that seems to have been overlooked so far is observational learning, (i.e. learning by observing other people's behaviour). Kempster and Parry (2014) have referred to observational learning as the 'Cinderella' of leadership learning implying that it is indeed a neglected element of leadership development.

Furthermore, whilst most research (e.g., Kempster, 2006, 2009) has focused on the leadership development of managers, i.e., people who are already in leadership roles, relatively little is known about the leadership learning of business and management students. Therefore, it can be argued that previous studies of leadership learning within the field of management have somewhat underestimated the relevance of pre- and early-career experiences to the leadership development of future business leaders. In other words, they have failed to capture the leadership learning that occurs throughout their personal and

academic life as well as during their first career experiences like work placements. The importance of such experiences should not be disregarded as they could have an important impact on an individual's leadership identity development, and thus, their willingness to become leaders in their future careers.

Semi-structured interviews and reflective journals were used to explore the students' leadership experiences. Each student was interviewed twice, i.e., before and after the work placement. The pre-placement interview was used to explore students' generic understanding of leadership in the pre-career stage. The post-placement interview was designed to investigate the acquisition of contextual leadership knowledge during the placement (early career). Prior to the second interview, students were asked to draw a timeline from the beginning to the end of their placement to identify experiences and notable people that may have influenced their understanding of leadership. A similar type of exercise was used by Kempster (2009) in the study of how managers learn to lead, and has proven particularly successful in extracting interviewees' tacit leadership knowledge.

During the placement, students were also asked to record their thoughts, observations, and learning from leadership situations (critical incidents) in two reflective journals. Through reflection on these experiences, students were able to make sense of their leadership learning as well as develop their own leadership identity.

The results of this study suggested that students learnt to lead by interacting with others as well as by taking on leadership roles and responsibilities in various contexts such as home and family life, education, sport, and work. Witnessing major changes and challenges in the workplace, like the ones brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, was also identified as a crucial leadership learning opportunity.

Whilst on placement, students refined their own definitions of leadership as well as grasped a better understanding of the differences between leadership and management. Furthermore, data analysis revealed that most students regarded becoming a leader as an important career goal, and that their leadership identity was strongly influenced by observed role models such as more senior colleagues and line managers.

This study holds important implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical point of view, it has contributed to the literature about leadership learning through

lived experience as well as identity development. From a practical point of view, it may benefit multiple stakeholders including students, staff working in business schools, and employers.

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Title of Abstract:

***Student leadership in the South African post-apartheid context:
Sense-making of "born-free" student leaders' leadership identity.***

The finding of a shared humanity among victims, perpetrators and beneficiaries of privilege (and their children in post-apartheid South Africa) is needed for the sake of a transformed conception of society (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2020:146).

Since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, significant changes have been observed in the South African higher education sector. These have ranged from institutional mergers (Banda & Mafofo, 2016; Jansen, 2004; Wawrzynski, Heck & Remley, 2012), rebranding of institutional identities (Barnes, 2006; Bryson, 2014; Goduka, 1996), inclusivity and equity in terms of student access (Cross, 2004; Cross & Carpienter, 2009; Waghid, 2003), and an increase in first-generation students and the impact of that on through-put rate (Fourie-Malherbe, 2013), to changes in the student body and student leader demography at historically white institutions (HWIs) (Jansen 2003; Singh, 2015; Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz & Morris, 2019). Historical legacies, however, remain visible at HWIs (Metcalfe, 2022). Given South Africa's race-based history and the growing diversity of the student population, student leadership *through* good governance and stakeholder relations are more complexed than a formalised higher education constitution (Mugume & Luescher, 2015). These complexities as it relates to identity and student leadership identity were evident in the analysis of recent student movements e.g. #FeesMustFall² and furthermore alludes to the diffusion within a group and the broader social system (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007) and the role of social interaction in the leadership identity construction process (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe & Carsten, 2014).

This paper aims to elucidate how "born-free" student leaders negotiate their roles as "facilitators" in a multi-cultural context while being cognisant of the contributing factors to their identity, leadership identity and role identity as a leader. Employing a social constructionist view of leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003; Carroll & Levy, 2010; Fairhurst, 2007;

¹ "born-free" refers to South Africans born after 1994 (after South Africa's first democratic election).

² #FeesMustFall refers to the 2015 national student movement (the biggest student protest since the 1976 Soweto Uprising when students protested the use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction at schools) when students protested for equal access to higher education.

Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Gergen, 1999; Grint, 2001, 2005; Hall, 2011; Sjöstrand, Sandberg & Tyrstrup, 2001), and based on the findings of this qualitative study (the first of its kind in South Africa) with a 3-phased triangulation process of a series of in-depth interviews with 10 student leaders, followed by two focus groups with student leaders and senior Student Affairs Practitioners at 5 higher education institutions in South Africa, the paper will explore three themes; how “born-free” student leaders

- 1) through a process of self-reflection and self-awareness, make sense of reconciling intercultural and interpersonal dilemmas related to their intersectionality, i.e., their lifeworld (Patzner, Voegtlin & Scherer; 2018) and life stories (Pless 2007) of role acceptance and role rejection in a post-apartheid South Africa student context;
- 2) perceive their role to utilise their power and influence in dealing with moral complexities by shaping the structure of social influence;
- 3) perceive their role as facilitator in a multi-cultural context.

The paper will illustrate the direct influence of South Africa’s historical context to “born-free” student leaders’ identity, leadership identity, group identity, social identity, and role identity. It will furthermore allude to how student leaders with a strong sense of self-concept, as referred to by Uhl-Bien, (2006:657) – “the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of their relationships and with two distinct constructs: relational self, which emanates from relationships with significant others, and collective self, which is based on identity with a group or social category”, are more likely to acknowledge the impact of their intersectionality (as it relates to the historical context) and social identity on their identity and leadership identity formation.

Based on the abovementioned themes and with reference to the “Roles model” as theoretical framework (Maak & Pless 2006a, Maak & Pless 2006b, Pless 2007), the paper will firstly discuss how a process of reflection contributed to their understanding of their role identity in a post-apartheid student context, i.e., how do they integrate various roles into the Self. Secondly, the paper will highlight examples of internal contestation of role identity acceptance and rejection. The paper will share findings supporting Maak & Pless’ (2006) argument that (responsible) leaders should demonstrate the ability to integrate people with different cultural backgrounds, to understand issues from different perspectives, to solve conflicts of interests and to reconcile intercultural and interpersonal dilemmas, and furthermore Maak’s (2007) argument that (responsible) leadership and social capital are indeed an emerging vista as leaders are relying on social structures to allow for facilitation of responsible action.

The overall conclusion of this study is that identity formation factors were a strong underlying factor for leadership identity formation. In this, the country’s history and intergenerational dialogue, and the impact of apartheid on their families, evidently played a significant role in the selected students’ understanding of their role as “born-free” student leaders in post-apartheid South Africa. Identity salience and malleability permeated in the social context, further informed their leadership identity, group identity, social identity and role identity. **The practical implication of this study and link to the conference theme will give insight into contemporary leadership challenges within student leadership such as collective sensemaking for “born-free” student leaders in building bridges in a post-apartheid context and how intergenerational trauma could potentially contribute to student leadership identity formation – a new vista in the leadership studies discipline.**

Keywords: leadership identity development model/LID model, student leadership, leadership identity formation, identity, social identity, group identity, role identity, social identity theory of leadership, South African student leadership, post-apartheid

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**Advancing Systems Change through Doctoral Education:
Leveraging Publicly Engaged Leadership Scholarship**

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This presentation explores the connections between publicly engaged scholarship and contemporary leadership practice, development, and research trends, particularly emphasizing its potential for fostering systems change. To do so, we offer a case example of a doctoral program at a mid-west U.S. land grant institution launched in 2018 in response to the need for interdisciplinary approaches to solving complex challenges. The curriculum integrates experiential, theoretical, and applied approaches to understand leadership communication. The program began with an expectation that graduates of this program would “use community-engaged research to transform the academic, nonprofit, government, private, and civic sectors in which they live and work” (Tolar et al., 2017, p. 73). Since its inception, our program graduates' work has addressed issues of peacebuilding and intercultural humility in interracial families, youth development in agricultural education, global service-learning programs, and the role of local journalism within rural communities. Thus, the research degree focuses on the theories and practices to lead change, advance communication, and work to address the world's most complex problems.

To contextualize our case, we draw from concepts advanced by the engaged scholarship movement in American higher education, in which the terms “civic” or “community” are used synonymously with “public.” Saltmarsh & Hartley (2016) describe the emergence of a civic engagement movement in pursuit of democratic purposes of higher education. The assumption of democratic purpose directs the core activities of higher education institutions – teaching and learning and knowledge generation – toward “addressing the pressing issues that face society locally, nationally, and globally (2016, pp. 34-35). *Civic* refers to reclaiming “the importance of political and democratic participation as a cornerstone of what being a citizen means and as a central purpose of higher education” (p. 34). At the heart of *engagement* is “authentic reciprocity” – or partnerships between those working at colleges and universities and those in the wider communities in which non-academic expertise is equally valued in generating new knowledge aimed at solving public problems (p. 34). Similarly, the Carnegie Foundation defines *community engagement* as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, and global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (as cited in Driscoll, 2008, p. 39).

At the heart of community-engaged research are community-driven priorities, shared and equitable decision-making, co-creation of knowledge, and a purpose of social or cultural change (Jacquez et al., 2016). Of particular interest for our presentation is the role of democratic civic engagement in advancing change. The Kettering Foundation & New England Resource Center for Higher Education *Democratic Engagement White Paper* (Saltmarsh, Hartley & Clayton, 2009) distinguish democratic civic engagement as more than a focus on activity and place, but on purpose and process. In a democratic-centered framework, the university is part of an ecosystem of knowledge production addressing public problem-solving. Engagement is asset-based, inclusive, and collaborative. Democratic forms of collaborative engagement include deliberative dialogue, storytelling, participatory action research, and service-learning (Longo & Gibson, 2016). Community-based participatory research frameworks create the conditions for collaboration between academic and community partners across all stages of the research process (research done *with* versus done *for* the public).

Against this backdrop of public engagement as a scholarly movement, we seek to illustrate graduate leadership education's role in developing systems-oriented scholars *and* advancing systems change through engaged research activity. Across the field of leadership studies, scholars have been advancing theories, practices, and methods of inquiry rooted in democratic principles and collective leadership practice. For example, Crosby and Bryson's (2005) leadership for the common good framework emphasizes creating the conditions for power-sharing practices to engage in ethical public problem-solving. Raelin (2011) suggests that the leadership-as-practice framework lends itself to democratic practice through leaderful practice that privileges the co-creation of social organizations. Pares, Ospina, and Subirats (2017) advance a model of social innovation and democratic leadership that pursues and fosters social change, challenges hegemony, and co-emerges new frameworks and solutions. They emphasize practices of equality, inclusiveness, and transformation. Guthey, Kempster, and Remke (2019) offer "collaboratories" as a model for multi-stakeholder leadership development and a co-created, collective experiment through which to address complex community and societal challenges. Thus, community-engaged scholarship invites systems thinking, innovation, and the development of more inclusive and participatory practices through which to develop and study leadership.

In our presentation, we will also share lessons learned as doctoral engaged scholars and faculty mentors to students within the doctoral program. Participants in this session are invited to consider the implications of community-engaged research on systems change within their institutions, organizations, or communities.

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A Systems Approach to Ethical Leadership Development and Student Success

“The deep changes necessary to accelerate progress against society’s most intractable problems require a unique type of leader—the system leader, a person who catalyzes collective leadership.” (Senge et.al., 2015, Pg 28)

Summary

A systems approach to leadership is critical to the success of both individuals and organizations. The systems approach is, therefore, critical to instill early in the educational and developmental process. Senge, et al., (2015) held that system leaders share three main capabilities to foster collective leadership. The first is to develop the ability to see the larger system. The second is to drive personal and group reflection. And the third capability of successful system leaders is to shift the group focus from one of reactive problem-solving to a proactive creation focus.

These three capabilities of system leaders must be taught to students. One theoretical framework that strives to help students understand a systems approach to leadership is the social change model for leadership development (SCM) (Higher Education Research Institute, 1997). While predating the term the SCM is certainly designed for system leadership.

The social change model for leadership development was developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in 1997 as a way to teach leadership to students and successfully bring about social change and improve their lives, as well as those of others (Higher Education Research Institute, 1995; Komives et al., 2017). This systematic view of leadership development provides a model to help build successful students, productive citizens, and sustainable communities.

The conceptual framework designed for the study being presented groups the leadership development process into seven distinct competencies or “C’s” that are then grouped into three domains. These domains are the individual or student, the group or school, and the world (or community/society)

. The competencies in the individual/student domain include the ability to develop a consciousness of self, the practice of congruency between thoughts and actions, and to develop commitment. The group/school domain further develops the individual’s ability to collaborate with others, work towards a common goal, and handle conflict with civility. And lastly, mastering the first two domain competencies leads to a sense of community and the ability to see the world in which we live, and the plight of others.

This development evolution repeats itself and allows a person to become a leader and create social change. The three domains are also quite similar to the three capabilities that system leaders must develop to be effective system leaders as described above (Senge et.al., 2015, Pg 28).

This presentation will explore a recent study that showed a strong relationship between the systematic view of leadership development and positive student outcomes. A conceptual model based on the social change model for leadership development was created in this study to aid in the assessment of leadership development in students and measure their sustainable engagement. The SPACS-Q instrument was used to measure sustainable engagement (Olsson et al., 2020). Particular focus was placed on comparing the outcomes of students from marginalized backgrounds that those students that do not come from marginalized backgrounds.

This US-based mixed-methods study examined the role of ethical leadership development in the sustainable engagement and academic achievement of 12th-grade students who were 18

years or older at four private high schools in the state of Texas. A specific lens was applied to study whether any differences existed among student participants based on marginalization. Existing research points to an apparent overall academic advantage found among students from non-marginalized backgrounds.

However, there is little research on the potential influence of ethical leadership development on the academic performance and sustainable engagement of students from marginalized backgrounds. Therefore, this study collected: (a) student SPACS-Q survey instrument data to measure sustainable engagement, (b) student archival achievement data provided by each school, and (c) educator interview and student open survey response data. The study then compared the converged data analysis results from the: (a) quantitative student survey and archival data, and (b) qualitative educator interview response as well as student survey open response data. The study found that following exposure to ethical leadership development, there was no difference between students from marginalized and non-marginalized backgrounds, in terms of their sustainable engagement and academic achievement.

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