

Art in the Dark: Using Adaptive Leadership Pedagogy for Undergraduate Leadership Development

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Charged with the task of training young female leaders to engage in acts of leadership across industries, educators are challenged to foster strengths and face liabilities. Pairing theory with experiential methods for undergraduate education, Adaptive Leadership is presented as a modality that allows for a high impact educational experience. This article illustrates how students learn increased accountability and self-possession of their authority in order to deploy it, ethically and responsibly, for a greater purpose. Risks and challenges of using this method are offered.

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.
Shakespeare, As You Like It

“Adaptive leadership takes you out of your daily routine into unknown territory, requiring ways of acting that are outside your repertoire, with no guarantee of your competence or success...you cannot take on an adaptive challenge without making some changes, some adaptations, yourself” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 231).

The current pedagogical premise in Adaptive Leadership theory is that it offers a salient model for making progress on challenges in the face of no known solutions. When current methods and authority’s attempts at resolution fail, the usual intervention is to look up and out for someone else to save the ship without removing constituents too far adrift from their comfort zone and the need to sacrifice precious artifacts of the status quo. This fantasy gets enacted daily across organizations. The gap between expectations for authority to fix what is wrong and the role of stakeholders needing to shift to a culture of accepting the losses in order to make progress is not how undergraduate students are typically educated. The common fantasy of our 18-year old students arriving in a classroom on day one of a leadership class is that they will leave equipped to be that heroine/hero to salvage the wreckage of a previous leader and restore harmony and order. They wish to depart looking and feeling more polished, with a canned set of successful, fail-proof strategies. In a world that rewards experts for generating quick solutions with finesse, Adaptive Leadership offers a counter-cultural alternative requiring an increased tolerance for ambiguity, diagnosing challenges and devising interventions with an experimental mindset.

We caution students away from the primed seduction of constantly looking to authority as someone to herald or assassinate, and instead toward adopting a stance of looking inward first, to address default patterns that could obstruct meaningful progress on the most vexing systemic challenges. As might be expected, this is not a popular request for it requires intrapersonal and interpersonal shifts in thinking, confronting competing values, and behaving. The purpose of this article is to outline the potential risks and benefits of utilizing adaptive leadership principles in an undergraduate classroom setting.

HAZARD #1: THE GREAT PROFESSOR LETDOWN

The environment in which students learn is a critical element of consideration. Typically, the instructor wields power from the front of the room. Even in a flipped classroom, students are expected to engage and take ownership, and yet the professor never fully abdicates her or his position of being the ultimate, if implicit, authority. The mere suggestion that students look inward for authority, and then address peers directly around unspoken issues present in the room, heightens ambiguity. Students resent when professors are not always acting as if they are in charge, dispensing test prep knowledge from the front of the room. They most definitely struggle when someone is not handing them an answer. In later debrief, these experiences are discussed in context of the concepts for the day. Weeks go by in a term, sometimes half of a semester, before a student can really move beyond the disappointment of not being handed quick answers. On day one, the professor inquires about student perceptions and expectations of the class and then illustrates briefly, how each student wants something a bit different and can plan on being disappointed at some point in the term. By week two, the professor begins to offer weekly tasks in which students rotate through the authority role at the front of the room. Inevitably, tasks illustrate dependence on authority and collusion for harmony. Such dependence that extends from parental authority to teacher authority can shake initial perceptions of what success in the class might look like. Collective dependence on authority quells the mobilization of the people who need to be engaged in order to make progress on the challenges. The specific type of progress that will sustain itself requires shifts in the hearts and minds of those people, or in this case, students. Instructors must be willing to disappoint students' expectations that they will be kept safe and comfortable in order to create a practice field so learners can actually live out the concepts they are learning about in the room. Engaging in acts of adaptive leadership—actions with the potential to narrow the gap between current and aspirational reality—requires an experimental mindset. When students and instructors increase their tolerance for ambiguity, risk-taking, conflictual interpretations, and public failure, new possibilities emerge.

HAZARD #2: QUESTIONS OF COMPETENCY

Students are very concerned with “getting it right”, never failing, and being told the right answer. A way to create disequilibrium for the sake of new understanding is to invite a student to function as the Designated Authority in the room and perform a task where time is as much a pressure as is mobilizing others to engage in the task. Even though they volunteer to come to the front of the room and take up authority for the five minute assigned task (which is unknown to them at the time they volunteer), once there, under spotlights, they experience other pressures on the system in terms of how to manage their own anxiety, how to appear competent, how to meet expectations, and how to be liked. Even though they can intellectually connect to the concepts that curiosity and being in the position of learner is necessary when faced with challenge, it is difficult to own these concepts with 35 sets of expectant and judging eyes on them. The reality is that those who do not connect well to the collective will likely get marginalized. The creation of this swampy environment, while intentional, is laced with snares disguised as opportunities, and opportunities disguised as snares. Casualties can and will occur. But this happens in every room we ever enter. We simply surface it in the classroom for the sake of gut-level learning, and we aim to help our students increase their relational awareness and capacity. Leadership cannot be studied/learned/practiced in a vacuum where relational currency is ignored.

HAZARD #3: PRIVILEGING SURVIVAL AND SAFETY OVER LEARNING

Casualties occur in every system and classroom, as students disengage or simply go through the motions. Though rare, a student might also drop the class. More typical is a student who elects to stay quiet in an attempt to preserve self by avoiding the spotlight. To the degree they stay invisible, they can't be wrong or look stupid or confirm any other perception they assume classmates may harbor. Casualties may also result as students attempt to discredit those students who dare disagree, or even instructors who "give the work back" by highlighting their impact on the system. To ignore this fact, or avoid shining a light on it, is detrimental to developing the capacity to mobilize self and system to make progress on an adaptive challenge. In fact, noticing when we lose students gives us the opportunity to better understand the adaptive challenge we face in the classroom. When we lose their trust because they cannot tolerate the loss they would endure if they were to privilege making mistakes in service to new learning, we have the opportunity to reinforce our relational currency with our students, as well as grow our own capacity around competency issues and the desire to be well liked.

HAZARD #4: RISK OF THE ALMIGHTY STUDENT SATISFACTION EVALUATION

Depending upon the larger system of stakeholders to which the instructor must answer, students completing satisfaction surveys at the end of the term get to exercise the power of their pen regarding various aspects of the course. As evaluations are for public consumption in many schools, they serve as a tool for a prospective student deciding whether or not to risk taking that course with that professor. Additionally, instructors within departments have supervisors and peers who may show low tolerance for complaints, either on satisfaction ratings or grumblings that are typical during the early weeks of a course. These can all present significant pressure that can undermine the resilience of the instructor going against the typical grain.

HAZARD #5: RESILIENCE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

Add to the mix the instructor's complicated relationship to her or his own authority, unique tuning, and default behaviors, and this method becomes a challenging and exhilarating way to teach as the method serves to surface tensions in the room, rather than adhering to an agenda for diagramming a chapter. Content and concepts are brought to life through students' conflict as their resistance to and dissatisfaction with the few voices dominating the work emerges. We deliberately attempt to peel back the curtain to see how the system colludes in maintaining the status quo for the sake of collective learning; in this classroom both student and instructor have blind spots, as well as moments of insight. Parallel to the adaptive challenge of disrupting systemic collusion, this mimics the risk we are asking our students to take to grow *themselves* in order to develop responses that go beyond their default assumptions and behaviors, and ensures we are taking those same risks. Adaptive challenges stick around because the collective keeps them in place by maintaining the status quo. As long as instructors privilege equilibrium in their classrooms they cannot strengthen students' capacity to create new possibilities for self and system:

In mobilizing adaptive work, you have to engage people in adjusting their unrealistic expectations rather than try to satisfy them as if the situation were amenable primarily to a technical remedy. You have to counteract their exaggerated dependency and promote their resourcefulness. This takes an extraordinary level of presence, time, and artful communication, but it may also take more time and trust than you have. (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p.15).

Among the more difficult concepts we have found in the classroom is holding steady through the temperature rise in the room and assessing when and how to intervene. Asking a question to assess how

the system is functioning can spark a clear divide, both raising and lowering the temperature for the various factions present. More challenging still is the technique of becoming the silent authority figure when students beg to be told what to do and say. Asking the question, “Of all the things I could do, what should I do?” creates tension and requires the instructor to remain steady when all eyes are turned to her to provide the answer because she should—because she is the *authority*, not they.

HAZARD #6: A DIVIDED CLASS AND FIGHTING FACTIONS

Offering a conflictual interpretation such as, “This class continues to privilege comfort and politeness over growth—you have 15 minutes,” raises the heat while allowing the class to see their default behaviors present in the system. Over the course of the 15 minutes the collective either comes together to orchestrate needed conflict or divides into factions without the capacity to bridge the divide created by the various default responses in the room. All the while, instructors are silent, recording observations. When questions are posed to instructors, no response is given, not even eye contact. The task will unveil and land well or poorly with various students who long for someone, the designated or elected authority, to take responsibility for providing a POD (Protection, Order, and Direction) of safety.

While we follow this intervention with a debrief seeking to understand the impact and the pressures on the authority volunteer and the system, students can and do become suspicious of faculty members. De-authorization is something we count on, and we are mindful to use our formal and informal authority to intentionally create a holding environment to help withstand the rising temperatures in the system. Student trust in instructors, peers, and self, waxes and wanes as they authorize and de-authorize others based on how well their hopes and expectations for comfort and validation are met or not. Some are truly curious, others want edutainment (to be educated and entertained, simultaneously), but few want to be disappointed in self or us in a way that leaves them feeling unsure, swimming in ambiguity with no clear way out.

BENEFITS: WORTH THE RISKS

In order to learn to lead through adaptive challenges, students must learn to renegotiate their relationship to their own authority by disrupting their exaggerated dependence on authority to solve the challenges they themselves must face. That is why we risk; on behalf of the work they must do. That is why we predict we will disappoint them and that they must learn to disappoint the expectations of others, so they can create new possibilities for themselves and the causes they care about.

And what of the elephant issue regarding student satisfaction with the instructor? Where does that leave us, who do not have tenure and also have a commitment to grow students? Where is our sense of safety outside of the classroom when our approach sounds cutting edge to marketing and simultaneously incites discomfort across our own administration? It is a game of risk with the most serious intent. When the instructor is under pressure to perform, say, or solve, is she able to privilege what the system needs over her own need to appear competent? Sometimes yes and sometimes no, and yet that below the neck practice is the only way we know for increasing the instructor’s capacity to bridge the gap between teaching about leadership and engaging in acts of leadership.

We do not attempt to undertake this work alone. Turning up the heat to shake something loose that authentically moves the majority of the room to a productive space is challenging. Sometimes the heat is turned up too high, sometimes not high enough, and a second instructor serves the purpose of discerning the pulse of the room, along with students who rotate to the top back row each class and offer interpretations from the “balcony” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 53). Authority is constantly cycling back and forth from front of room to large group, with highest temperatures occurring when students take authorship of a collective movement. From an instructor perspective, anxiety, hope, trust, trepidation and hesitancy are all part and parcel of this approach.

Holding steady is akin to treading water and is often counter to our instinctual urge to sprint freestyle in gold medal fashion in front of our students and our colleagues whom we invite into the room on a

regular basis. Anchoring ourselves with awareness of our hungers for power and control and affirmation and importance (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), becomes the instructor's work so we don't perpetuate our students' dependence on authority to solve their challenges while modeling an ability to let go of ego so we can *learn*. Leadership development is "we work". Adaptive challenges require the people with the problem to become the people with the solution. Dependence on authority figures for solutions to our intractable challenges, those that require a shift in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and behaviors, serves as a diversion from the work we must all share. Why would we perpetuate that dependency on instructor as authority in our classrooms if our aim were to foster in our students the skills necessary to authorize *themselves* to find new possibilities for moving the collective forward toward change? And if our students are going to become change makers they benefit from seeing us model holding steady as we give back the work, locating it in the collective where it belongs.

As students are constant observers, another skill they watch us develop is allowing disagreement to emerge in the room between instructors regarding ripe issues, or elephants in the room, and a willingness to flex based on data being offered from the back of the room. Being willing to show our students that we are learning and growing beyond our need to leverage the appearance of competency over the greater good requires a level of vulnerability that is counterintuitive for instructors and students who also privilege appearing competent. When we are willing to embody the skills we want to grow in our students our own understanding of the theory grows deeper, which ultimately benefits them.

Doing this head/heart combination work in service to growing leaders continues to be our passion as we experiment with pedagogy in the classroom to create a heightened, real-world educational experience. Student evaluations overwhelmingly indicate they find the experience shifts how they perceive and behave. Many students not only continue in the program for the remainder of the 4-class sequence in the Institute, they proclaim it among their most formative classes in college. Following graduation, they cite using the skills often, if not daily and extol the virtues of the work they embraced as a student. Pairing theory and experiential opportunities is exciting work that works.

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