

A Laboratory to Teach Leadership to Undergraduate Students

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How to teach leadership within university courses? Obviously, there are plenty of answers to this question and lecturers adopt various approaches to teach leadership to students. Our impression is that, particularly within undergraduate programmes, the pedagogical delivery of leadership often familiarises students with the academic knowledge (i.e. theory, concepts and principles) that has been accumulated within the long history of leadership research (Allio, 2005). Where leadership development courses (e.g. trainings) are provided, the primary focus is on developing and sustaining leadership skills (e.g. Eich, 2008; Allen & Hartman, 2009; Skipton Leonard & Lang, 2010), or more precisely leader skills (Huber, 2002; Perruci, 2014). However, according to Jenkins' (2012) recent review of instructional forms employed in classroom-based undergraduate leadership courses, the "sparse use of highly experiential skill-building activities such as simulation, role play, and games" (p. 48) is surprising. Hence, although there is a growing interest in the role that experiences play in leadership development (Stead & Elliot, 2013), the review of Jenkins suggest that to experience how leadership works as a social phenomenon (Perruci, 2014) and to learn from these experiences seems to be an approach that is not yet used to its full potential in university programmes.

Therefore, the second author was particularly pleased to learn about the first author's idea to offer a so-called leadership laboratory as an elective within the Bachelor degree programme in Business Administration. The core understanding of this laboratory was that people can learn leadership (Allio, 2005; Parks, 2005). Moreover, the laboratory built on the assumption that an experienced-based approach to learn about leadership offers many advantages to leadership novices, in our case students without prior work experience.

The assumption to develop the laboratory was that learning about leadership needs emotional involvement. Students need to engage at an affective level in order to learn from their experiences. Furthermore, playful and dialogic learning processes constitute an effective basis for their learning progress. Playful group experiences support students' learning. Moreover, the intentional usage of reflection and feedback promote individual and collective learning. Guided reflection and feedback provided by a lecturer, who works as a consultant and has high expectations about her own role, enable students to make sense of their experiences beyond textbook knowledge. Finally, an atmosphere of trust and safety increases the learning potential. Students need to feel confident that mistakes are tolerated and that the learning environment is supportive.

The leadership laboratory was designed around a particular business case. Prior to the laboratory, students received a description of an international family business in industrial

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Topic	Succession in family business	Employee appraisal	Strategic leadership	Goal agreement	Change
Daily momentum	Definition of leadership and management	Personnel development and importance of employee appraisals	Strategy	History and importance of leading by objectives	Models and approaches towards change
Group-work	About family business	Effective behaviour of executives during employee appraisals	Preparation of a strategy workshop – researching future potential for production	Types of goals within the company	Understanding the important aspects of change processes
Reflexive tasks	None	Biographical work about students' individual experiences with leadership	None	Tower construction-exercise to make leadership tangible and observable (work in pairs)	None
Role-play	Moderated family conference to discuss succession	Emotional employee interview	Strategy workshop (upper and middle management)	Goal agreement discussion	Change meeting: Dealing with resistance after restructuring
Reflection	Written individual reflection: One's own role and the dynamics of the family conference	Written reflection (in pairs): Manager and employee behaviour during the employee appraisal	Written reflection (in pairs): Factors of success and failure for strategic work in businesses	Two stages: Orally reflecting the goal agreement discussion based on an observation sheet Written individual reflection: My learning achievements during the goal agreement discussion	Two stages: Dialogical reflection and evaluation of the whole leadership laboratory. Written individual reflection and evaluation of the whole laboratory.

Table 1: The five-day leadership laboratory

production with about 5000 employees. This description constituted the framework for all leadership-related topics addressed during the laboratory. To this extent the business case provided the central themes for the five days of the leadership laboratory. During each day the students received specific tasks and participated in various role-plays (see Table 1). This week of intensive individual and group work was followed by individual term papers. Within the paper, students had to address particular leadership topic, for example leading change, leadership and gender, 'bad' leadership, the latter defined to them as coercive, unfair and self-seeking leadership. Within the term paper students had to compose a literature review about the agreed topic and to connect this academic leadership knowledge to the experiences made during the leadership laboratory.

So-called guided role-plays constituted the central active learning technique (DeNeve & Heppner, 1997) during the laboratory. Almost all roles had a preparation sheet in order to properly prepare the students. The students had the possibility to choose which role to take. Within the leadership laboratory role-playing constituted a method to connect leadership reality to playful actions. The daily role-play was related to the particular leadership topic of each day, such as succession, strategy or change. Even though role-plays do not provide real leadership experience, they do offer the possibility to focus on particular aspects of leadership in staged situations, to try out forms of behaviour and new social roles, to learn about different perspectives and to collectively reflect on them. In general, role-playing aims at highlighting, broadening or changing the perspectives of social processes taking place in leadership reality (Sogunro, 2004; Guenther & Moore, 2005). Even though the students may have been less emotionally engaged during the role-plays due to the laboratory setting, our experience shows that they strongly identified themselves with their role. During the leadership laboratory students could and should adopt both leadership and follower roles in order to better reflect on their own actions as well as the actions of others. To this extent, role-play enabled students to experience other perspectives and to analyse both their own and observed leadership behaviour.

Forming the central experiential element of the laboratory, role-play reflects the intended effects of the leadership laboratory, in particular that students are provided with the opportunity to experience leadership. During the role-plays students had the opportunity to experience various leadership settings, hence, situated leadership, instead of consuming academic leadership knowledge, which is often provided in a rather context-free manner, or acquiring a predefined set of leader skills. Students experienced themselves in different social roles, e.g. the role of a leader or follower. Hence, they learned how it feels to act as a leader or follower for example during an emotionally laden employee appraisal. The students had to adopt different social positions and therefore experienced 'both' sides of the leadership interaction. This enabled them to explore to what extent they see themselves as a leader, as someone who is willing to take on a formal leadership position. Beyond adopting leader and follower roles, students experienced leadership as social interaction. To this extent, they constituted the particular meaning of leadership within the role-plays and understood that leadership can have different meanings depending on the participants and the situation. Therefore, the laboratory and particularly the numerous role-plays facilitated students' experience of the situatedness of leadership, which in turn made them more sensitive for the collective and relational construction of leadership (Yip & Raelin, 2012).

During the first days of the laboratory, some students articulated concerns about becoming involved in role-playing. However, their attitude changed soon. On the third day, all participants of the leadership laboratory were open to this form of learning activity and able to clearly formulate their individual learning experiences within the particular role.

After each role-play the students were asked to provide feedback about their individual role, while other students and the lecturer feed back about their perception of the leadership behaviour observed during the role-play. Since the role-plays were embedded in a particular business context and the participating students came from different countries, the influence of both national and organizational culture on leadership was discussed as well. Additionally, the students reflected on the fact that during the role-plays they realized how much they had already learned with regard to leadership, organizational development and project management.

During the final evaluation, which took place at the end of the laboratory, the students argued that it might be interesting to take the same role during all five days. This would enable them to deeply immerse themselves in the role. Staying with the same role during the laboratory has an advantage. It would enable the students to learn to what extent their behaviour and their perception of right and wrong become influenced by the social context (Brady & Logsdon, 1988). However – and we consciously decided against staying in one role – the multiple perspectives gained by playing different roles would suffer in case students played only one role.

The individual assignments during each day focused on different aspects. The reflecting discussions concentrated on various topics relating to organizational behaviour, on cultural aspects in industrial companies, and students' beliefs about work and success learned during their socialisation. Much time – about one fifth of the total time – was allotted to individual written reflections and dialogical reflections within plenary sessions. The goal of the written reflections was to visualize the learning process for the students and for the lecturer. The students should learn to observe their own learning. The goal of the dialogical reflections was the exchange and interpretation of various aspects that have been observed and experienced during the day.

Overall, we believe that the leadership laboratory was a success. This was the first time we applied this method within academic teaching at one university and therefore general conclusions cannot be drawn. However, similar to the experiences reported by Skipton Leonard and Lang (2010), our impression was that students appreciated this form of action learning within the classroom. For the students “academic theories introduced in the classroom become interlaced with the raw ‘practicality’ of engaged social practices” (Yip & Raelin, 2012, p. 348). More importantly, the laboratory had an effect on the students. Not only were they invited to experience the social phenomenon of leadership, rather they learned about the various facets of this phenomenon from their own experiences. This does not necessarily make them ‘good’ leaders, but probably constitutes a first step of a development during “which leadership becomes a process of thinking more critically and reflexively about ourselves, our actions, and the situations we find ourselves in” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 88).

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