Enhance Student Engagement through Leadership Strategies

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Abstract:

Reflecting on her teaching experience with a graduate online course, the author argues that instructors sometimes need to develop a leadership mindset in order to engage the learners. The author discussed three strategies, which are often used by organizational leaders, including creating a vision of excellence, designing meaningful tasks, and building a community. The author explained how she made efforts to engage the learners by transforming these strategies into specific course design and teaching and identified a need for future research for evaluating the course effectiveness and student growth.

Key Words:

learning leaders, vision of excellence, meaningful learning, community of learning.

Introduction

In the summer semester of 2016, I taught an online course, Educational Technology Leadership, which was designed to help students develop leadership competencies to support technology planning, implementation, and evaluation in educational organizations. I feel the course was implemented quite successfully, as shown by the quality of student assignments and their feedback. In this paper, I'll reflect on the strategies that I believe contributed to the course design and outcomes.

A Leadership Analogy

The more I teach, the more I feel that teaching a class is like leading an organization. Course goals are like organizational goals. Instructors and facilitators (I call "learning leaders") of the class are like the leadership team of the organization. Organizational members are expected to deliver excellent products and services; students are expected to achieve excellent learning outcomes. Engagement plays a pivotal role in this process: Organizational leaders are responsible for engaging

members in long-term growth as professionals. Similarly, learning leaders need to engage students into continuous development as lifelong learners. There are two essential issues that both learning and organizational leaders should consider:

- It is the students or the organizational members who work on the tasks or projects. Nobody can, or should, get the work done FOR them. According to the Constructivism Theory, the responsibility of learning should reside with the learner (Glasersfeld, 1989), who should take an active role in the learning process. This leads to the second issue, posed as a question:
- What can learning and organizational leaders do to maximize an individual's engagement and productivity and cultivate their intrinsic interest in the subject or the field?

There are many different theories, strategies and models investigated by both learning scientists and leadership theorists. These tend to focus on at least one of the aspects: vision, task design, and people interaction. A few principles are often emphasized, such as establishing visions of excellence, designing meaningful tasks and creating a community.

I integrated these principles into a three-credit, graduate-level online course, Educational Technology Leadership. The course lasted six weeks with an enrollment of 21 students. Most of them are enrolled in the Master of Science in Educational Technology Program so they are quite comfortable with technology and had online learning experience.

Engaging Learners through a Vision of Excellence

I had very high expectations for my students. I developed the vision that they will take a leading role in technology planning, implementation, and evaluation in their own schools. This requires them to become critical thinkers, effective communicators, problem solvers, innovators, and scholars. There are two different ways to explain what I mean by "vision of excellence".

First, my course goals were designed around competencies (rather than the content topics), addressing multiple dimensions of learning. As an instructor, I find this strategy encouraged me to think about the learning outcomes first, which eventually guide the whole course design. Thinking about the competencies also "pushed" me to translate content knowledge into learning experiences and performance. We expect our students to engage with the content, but the engagement involves multiple dimensions: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional, etc. (Taylor & Parsons, 2011) My goals for the students were that:

- They are not only developing awareness and knowledge of certain topics and facts, but have in-depth understanding of the theories, the underlying principles, and/or the bigger context for those topics and facts (Cognitive).
- They can apply their knowledge and understanding to create tangible artifacts that could potentially enhance the practice at their schools or benefit their own professional development. This requires high-level cognitive skills, but also involves behavioral competencies, such as using computer applications and collaborating online. (Cognitive and behavioral)

- I emphasized the long-term professional growth and interest in the field, which require the learners to develop positive perceptions and emotions about the subject area. (Emotional)

The vision of excellence was also reflected by the rigor of the course assessments. To align with the course goals, many of the assessments were cognitively challenging, requiring in-depth analysis and real-world application. Eleven assessments spread across six weeks, which required the learners to complete two or three assessments per week in the first half of the course and one or two assessments per week in the second half. This frequency and intensity added to the challenge of the course, but encouraged the learners to manage time and tasks efficiently, which are essential leadership skills they need to develop.

Additionally, there were components of collaboration and peer review, which required extra time and efforts. These components, however, were critical to student development as technology leaders, providing opportunities for them to learn how to negotiate and establish collective learning goals, how to coordinate efforts within a limited timeframe, how to provide constructive feedback to colleagues, and how to digest and respond to the information shared by others in positive ways.

It took some time to communicate with students and support them to develop confidence in themselves for accomplishing all of these tasks. I will discuss in the remaining sections the main strategies used to help students understand and achieve the visions and goals. I was very satisfied with the high completion rate and high quality of the assignments. This confirmed my original assumptions: Students have the capacity and potential to achieve success! Create a vision of excellence. With the appropriate support, they will succeed with impressive results.

Engaging Learners through Meaningful Learning Tasks

Visions of learning need to be turned into specific tasks to engage students. One thing I particularly learned from my students is that learners don't like or need "busy work". Learning tasks need to be meaningful so that the students understand how their engagement with the tasks would help them develop new knowledge or skills that benefit their professional roles. I designed a few project-based tasks which were quite well received.

One of the projects was called *"Technology Plan Consulting"*. I asked students to work together as a consulting group, identify a technology plan from a real school district, and critique the plan to determine how well it meets the professional standards. In another project "*Hire the Right Person*", students worked as a search committee, identifying and justifying the need for a technology-related position for a school, developing the job post and interview questions.

Most of my students are K12 teachers or technology specialists in their schools. Therefore, both projects were connected with their current professional roles. For example, one of the responsibilities for K12 technology professionals is to review and develop technology plans for their school districts, which is exactly what my students were asked to complete in the "*Consulting*" project. Many schools and school districts have plans for hiring technology support staff. So the project outputs from "*Hire the*

Right Person" (e.g., job posts, interview questions) can be used to benefit the schools in the hiring process. I am quite confident that these projects are meaningful learning tasks due to the authenticity and relevancy.

There is, however, another dimension for meaningful learning tasks, which links back to the vision of excellence. Students are here to develop new knowledge and skills, to grow expertise, and to make improvement academically, professionally, and even personally. One of my philosophical beliefs is that growth and development are the major themes in learning. Therefore, one way to determine whether a learning task is meaningful is to look at how much it contributes to student growth. With that in mind, I try to ensure the learning tasks are cognitively challenging, but within the zone of students' proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978). Such tasks are meaningful because they require the learners to stretch themselves in order to reach high goals. Just like stretching strengthens the muscles, challenging tasks help students develop knowledge, skills, and competencies to a level they have never achieved before.

During the first few weeks, students might feel overwhelmed looking at the syllabus and the assessment plan due to their unfamiliarity and uncertainty with the learning tasks. In the end, however, every student left the course with a portfolio full of rich evidence of learning, including numerous papers, technology artifacts, collaboration documents, and peer feedback, which, perhaps, was due to the intensity and the “stretching exercises” in the course. The following aspects were helpful to ensure the "stretching" happened:

- As adult learners, my students have lots of working and life experiences. Asking them to share experiences would be a good starting point for them to establish connections with the content, but would not stretch them much further. I required learners to discuss the relationships between the specific real-world experience and the disciplinary theories and concepts. For example, after they shared stories about their school leaders, I asked them to interpret the stories using the leadership theories to determine what type of leadership practice they had experienced and/or what type of leadership should have been implemented in order to improve their experience.
- My students have no problem talking or writing in length. With the internet, learners can find and present a huge amount of information relevant to the course content. What might be challenging for them, however, is to synthesize the information and present it effectively and efficiently with limited space, time or tools. In several assessments, I provided opportunities for the students to explore, collect, and present the resources they found, along with their thoughts and analysis, as much as possible. After that, I required each team to create one artifact that pulled everything together and asked each individual to synthesize three takeaways and two implications that they learned in one or two pages. These requirements encouraged learners to use evaluative thinking to reflect on their learning experiences and focus on the components and information that are most relevant and helpful.
- Another strategy used in this course to challenge the learners was to directly emphasize the growth of their knowledge and understanding, as well as the notion of knowledge building (Scardamalia, & Bereiter, 1991). For the team

discussion assignments, for example, one of the evaluation criteria read "*The understanding of the topic is deepened and/or expanded.*" Also, according to the rubric, the students were expected to construct "*new knowledge or theories*", which means they critique the initial assumptions and ideas around the topics, develop new hypotheses or questions, and use authoritative sources to find answers. A summary of what they read or learned from others would not help them achieve the top level on the rubric. The learners would have to realize that learning should not be limited to the content from the textbook or from the instructor. Learning is a process: At the beginning, it might involve simple forms of knowledge sharing, but moving forward, students would need to go beyond the superficial understanding and information exchange to discover the underlying patterns, principles, or theories to form a more systematic or research-based conception about the topics. I was very straightforward about my expectations for this level of intellectual skills and performance, using explicit language in the evaluation rubric. In the future, I hope to find a more rigorous method to measure the learning growth demonstrated by my students.

Scaffolds are necessary to engage students in challenging tasks. Without the appropriate scaffolding techniques or resources, students might fail to see the authenticity and relevancy of the tasks or fail to achieve the goals even after they stretch themselves very hard. In either case, learning tasks become less meaningful and would not be able to contribute to learner growth because students might simply disengage due to frustrations. I designed a variety of scaffolds, including video demonstrations, collaboration and process guides, and plenty of opportunities for peer support, which brings up the next topic.

Engaging Learners through Community Building

Learning communities are important especially for the online learners. Creating a community could potentially increase a sense of belongingness and ownership and help facilitate learning more effectively. In their book *Building Online Learning Communities*, Palloff and Pratt (2007) introduced many strategies for community building and I have used some of them:

During the first week of the course, students were asked to introduce themselves and greet each other. They were also divided into small teams and their first project was to establish the identity of the team, which was a graded activity. They would need to collectively think of a name and find a picture or symbol that represents the team; they were asked to introduce the team members by briefly describing the individual's personality or professional experience. To help them with the process, I provided a few ice-breaker activities for them to complete when they met virtually with their team for the first time.

Peer review was another strategy. Four of the 11 assessments were peer evaluated. Students were assigned to grade at least two assessments from their classmates, providing both numerical and qualitative feedback. It was the first time for me to implement peer review online. The implementation went smoothly, but I did not have sufficient evidence to understand in-depth the student experience with the process, as well as its impact. This also raised a research questions, which will be discussed later.

Similar to peer review, peer sharing was a critical feature of this course. For all the team projects, an activity called "*Sip and Chat*" was designed so that all the project outputs were posted on the class forum. Everyone was encouraged to comment on or ask questions about the posts. "*Sip and Chat*", although developed as an ungraded activity, had a fairly high completion rate, suggesting that many students felt a need to revisit and reflect on the previous submissions from both themselves and their peers.

Concluding Thoughts

I had a great experience teaching this course and was very satisfied with the level of student interactions and the learning outcomes. One of the biggest takeaway for me is that instructors may need to develop a leadership mindset sometimes, taking a leading role in creating an environment that is engaging to students, helping them realize their capacity and potential to grow, and "liberating" and maximizing their learning. I integrated the principles of "visions of excellence", "meaningful learning tasks", and "a community of learning" in my teaching. I explored what it would look like when we translate these principles into specific content, instructions, activities, or assessments. Applying these principles, the instructor can promote active learning (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995) in the class. These principles, particularly visions of excellence and meaningful learning tasks, also help students develop high-level thinking, make executive control decisions and move forward in the direction of knowledge building (Scardamalia, & Bereiter, 1991). For example, as described earlier, students were not only provided opportunities to elaborate on the content topics through discussions and writing activities, but were also required to synthesize information and identify the most relevant and meaningful pieces to their own professional roles. The latter encouraged the learners to engage in evaluative thinking and build connections between the course and their real-life experiences. Without this final step of synthesizing information, students might only have acquired discrete knowledge facts or developed superficial understanding, instead of forming a more comprehensive view of the topic and how it can apply to authentic contexts.

I hope to build on this experience to investigate the strategies, models, and factors that contribute to student growth and use the findings to inform teaching. I have two potential future research questions.

First, does peer review have any impact on teaching and learning, especially on the development of a learning community? Peer review was implemented to support community building in this online course, with the assumption that it helps learners establish online social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) as they review and respond to their peers' works. It's worth studying whether students perceive more social presence in the online course and to what extent they feel a sense of belonging to a learning community after the peer review experience.

The second question relates to the vision of teaching excellence, which is a current emphasis in higher education (Abbas, Abbas, Brayman, Brennan, & Gantogtokh, 2016). Although excellent teaching is multi-faceted and complicated (Abbas et al., 2016, p. 4), I focused on learners' continuous growth and improvement and emphasized the notion of knowledge building (Scardamalia, & Bereiter, 1991). To achieve excellence, several strategies were incorporated into my course, such as encouraging conversations

around authentic problems and the constructive use of authoritative sources (Zhang et al., 2009). The next step is to explore whether and how much students' conceptual understanding has evolved during their engagement with authentic conversations or problem-solving. Findings to this question will help us understand the patterns, if any, of the learning process and identify the strategies that might be effective for promoting higher-order thinking and excellent learning outcomes.

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