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Soft Assembling Project-based Learning and Leadership in Japan

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Abstract

In this article, we initially focus on how the conceptualization of leadership by Knight (2013a) in his leadership seminars became the basis for choosing a project-based learning (PBL) approach. We then consider how soft assembling can enhance the leadership project activities of student teams and group-work in general classes. Soft assembling refers to the assembling of elements during a process that is likely to be useful in conducting the process and achieving a goal. To be effective in soft assembling, students need to be able to adjust their *interactive sensitivities* in what Murphey (1990, 1996a, 2013a) refers to as zones of proximal adjusting (ZPAs). We conclude that instruction in soft assembling can facilitate the communications in student teams necessary to do what Knight (2013a) describes as the *leadership process*; that is, the creating of a vision and the achieving of that vision.

Introduction

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan is a private university with undergraduate students majoring in foreign languages and international communication. The graduates of KUIS pursue careers in a variety of fields. For the fiscal years 2012-2014, the majority of KUIS graduates entered the service and media industries (28%) followed by the trading, wholesale, and retail industries (23%), airline, transportation, and logistics (14%), manufacturing (12%), and the travel and hotel industries (8%). In the light of such career choices, an International Business Career (IBC) major was established in the Department of International Communication. A primary attraction of the IBC major for prospective students is that they can study both business and the English language. With the aim to prepare students in the IBC major for success and professional growth in their internships as students and in their international business careers upon graduation, four English for Business Career courses (EBC 1, 2, 3, 4) and leadership seminars were created (Knight, 2013b).

The creation of the four EBC courses was influenced by the needs-based principle of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach (Hutchinson & Waters, 1989). In this connection, Abrar-ul-Hassan (2012, p. 5) writes that "the overarching characteristics of a *true* ESP program include being needs-oriented and being related to the learner's academic or professional career." The EBC courses in the IBC major were designed to provide the students with professional communication skills and business content related to their internships and future business careers. However, the EBC courses differ from a "true" ESP program as the EBC courses do more than address the students' relatively *immediate* needs for communication (e.g., the interview for an internship or a job). The EBC courses also prepare students for successful communication as leaders *throughout their careers* in business organizations. Accordingly, in the EBC courses, the students experience a variety of business-related roles, which range from the role of *company employee* (in EBC 1) to the role of *business founder* (in EBC 4).

The leadership seminars were subsequently created and complement the EBC courses. In the leadership seminars, an ESP approach is utilized in preparing students to talk about their leadership accomplishments in response to behavioral-based interview questions using the S.T.A.R. (situation, task, action, result) format and similar frameworks found in university career manuals available online. Before describing a leadership accomplishment with the S.T.A.R. framework, the students need to consider their actions taken in their leadership roles to influence others and to achieve the desired results. Such a conceptualization of leadership as an influence relationship is widely accepted (Bass & Bass, 2008; Glynn & Dejordy, 2010). For example, leadership expert and professor Jim Kouzes, in view of extensive research and over 400 doctoral studies, defines leadership as "the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations" (Liu, 2010, pp. 30-31). Schnurr (2013) writes that leadership activities in the literature include communicating with others, and Knight, after conducting semi-structured interviews (Grindsted, 2005) with 20 leaders in the public, private, and academic sectors, also came to view leadership as involving communication aimed at influencing others for the purpose of creating and achieving visions (Knight, 2013a; Knight & Candlin, 2015).

In order to *provide* students with leadership experiences for internship/job interviews and business career development, a project-based learning (PBL) approach is utilized in the leadership seminars. The PBL approach integrates language and content learning, and it complements an ESP approach (Stoller, 2002). In the leadership seminars, the students must work in teams to achieve their own socially responsible and original visions, which requires the students to be creative and to effectively collaborate. Creativity in this case may involve finding new ways of responding to situations and to be willing to take risks (Richards, 2013). Risk taking is associated by Candlin (2002) and Benner (1984) with expertise. The expert intuitively knows what to do to get the desired result. Although an *expert* intuitively knows how to create, the students in the leadership seminars are not experts and need to struggle to create collaboratively.

An example of such a struggle to create appears in the following description of a student team's project in the leadership seminar (Knight, 2015). Firstly, after much discussion in English and Japanese among themselves, the student team proposed a beach clean-up and barbecue event in which members of the local community and university students would

participate. In order to obtain permission from school officials, the local government, and the instructor, the team held over 20 meetings with these stakeholders and reduced event-related risk through acquiring insurance and undergoing voluntary health checks. In addition, the team promoted the event at a local high school and on the government website. On the day scheduled for the event, the team cancelled the event due to inclement weather but still cleaned the beach together with a government official and Knight. In class, the team made PowerPoint presentations in English about their project proposal and about the steps leading up to the event itself. Finally, in connection with interview practice, each of the team members had to use the S.T.A.R. format (in response to a behavioral-based interview question about a leadership accomplishment) to talk in English about his or her individual (not team) activities in the project.

In sum, a major challenge for the students in the leadership seminars is learning to work together in their teams to generate (and later to realize) ideas for their projects. In the next section, we begin to investigate how teachers can enhance incrementally such student teamwork in general, and the first step is to make the students aware of a process called *soft assembling* and improvisation.

Enhancing improvisation through an awareness of soft assembling

Soft assembling, which is a term used frequently in dynamic systems theory work (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Thalen & Smith, 1994), refers to the somewhat random assembling of elements during processes that are likely to be useful to the completion of a task (Kloos & van Orden, 2009). It is similar to the improvisation of musicians in a jazz group or stand-up comedians who do not completely know ahead of time what their partners will be doing (Barker & Borko, 2011; Nachmanovitch, 1990). Teachers in class, to an extent, do not know beforehand the reactions of students to their proposals for activities. Likewise, teachers do not completely know their students' needs at certain points in instruction. Both soft assembly and improvisation are usually done well when the participants have a wide range of experience in the tasks at hand and feel free (and have the agency) to improvise among an array of choices.

If we see students as softly assembling *learning* and *relationships* in the classroom, we recognize that the teacher needs to do more than just meet the students' intellectual ZPDs (zones of proximal development, Vygotsky, 1978; 1987). We need to help students develop their abilities to adjust and become comfortable improvising in diverse circumstances; that is, we need to develop their zones of proximal adjusting (ZPAs, Murphey, 1990, 1996a, 2013a).

How can teachers facilitate such soft assembling as described above? One suggestion is for teachers to ask students to do pair work and small group work and stimulate more interaction in the classroom (van Lier 1996, 2004; Lee et al., 2009). In doing so, we are in fact asking everyone to participate in the conversation, and thereby influence their partners, to a certain extent at different times (Nunan, 1992). If we see that one of the students in a pair work activity is not contributing actively, we can first make both students in the pair aware of what is happening. Then we can encourage the students to collaborate to achieve a *vision* (of the students both contributing actively to the pair work

activity). In doing so, we are asking students to engage in leadership on a small scale (McCafferty et al., 2006).

In contrast to the above, if a class is purely a teacher fronted lecture in which the students are only expected to listen and to take notes, there is no invitation for the students to engage in leadership or sharing or deeper participation (Rogoff et al., 2001). The lack of pair and group work activity in such classrooms eliminates the opportunity to be sensitive to partners and to enlarge ZPAs because they are only focused on the teacher with little obligation to adjust to another person's words in conversation. There is no need to soft assemble and to lead when communication is only coming at us from one place and we have no control over it.

Conversely, with interactive activities, students are given more agency to make improvisational decisions (i.e., have conversation). And research suggests that this makes students feel they belong, want to participate, and even lead through "assisted use" (van Lier, 2004, p. 223). Viewing one's learning and development, as well as a group's, as an incremental progression, instead of as a fixed conception (Dweck, 2006), greatly facilitates everyone's ability to change and soft assemble, including the teacher's.

How can we encourage our students to be more interactive and collaborative? We address these issues in the next section.

The interactional imperative

SLA has proposed that interaction is indeed one of the main drivers of acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Long, 1983; Long & Porter 1985; Murphey, 1989, 2011; Swain, 2000) with Schumann's (2009) group of researchers calling it the "The Interactional Instinct" and Murphey (2011) referring to it as the "interactional imperative" for foreign language learning. However, students should also have "some say" (investment) in how the class is conducted, and when they have such influence, they usually want to participate more and feel more belonging (Baumeister et al., 2007). Such student collaboration with the teacher is a mirror for student collaboration with each other. So, in what ways can students be granted agency to influence how the class is taught? (i.e., from a leadership perspective, how can students be encouraged to shape the *vision* of what a class should be?)

We propose the provision of some simple tools to offer students input into their learning processes. Such tools include initial surveys of students' interests and perceived needs and student reports on their past learning (e.g., what they liked and did not like in that connection). For instance, many teachers are now requiring students to write their language learning histories (LLHs) at the beginning of courses so teachers and classmates can read them in order to adjust better to individual students. Note that these are immensely more valuable when the data-set is given back to the students for their consideration and further comment (Murphey & Falout, 2010; Falout et al., 2015). For on-going "say" about class activities, action logs (Murphey, 1993; Murphey, Barcelos, & Moraes, 2014), in which students list all the activities done during the class and evaluate them, allow the teacher and classmates to see what individuals like and don't like. Also, when the teacher creates class newsletters from the action logs, made from students' comments, and distributes them in the class for all to read and discuss, students can see that their own comments are being used and considered. The feedback from the students

allows them to feel as though they do have some say and that their opinions count and are even used for further learning.

Further to the above, Knight and Candlin (2015) shows how 'giving students some say' can be done with online collaborative communities created through online forums, enabling students to report on leadership-related research and comment on the reports of others. The threaded discussions in such forums are evidence of present and past collaboration and also serve as the basis for future discussion and learning. Furthermore, the students' interactions in class carry over to their online discussions and vice versa.

If interaction does indeed play a crucial role in acquisition (Lee et al., 2009), then making sure the students want to interact and are sensitive to each other and want their classmates to learn as well is extremely important in the classroom. Again, if this is also demonstrated by the teacher, it is often mirrored by the students. How can we help students, and teachers, be more sensitive to one another? Traditional group dynamics suggests "icebreakers" and getting-to-know-you activities are very useful. Thus, students go through certain stages in the GD literature: formation, transition, performing, and dissolution (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). While it looks very neat when said, it is often very chaotic in a real classroom, with students at different stages needing different things from the class at different times. Thus, group dynamics 2.0 activities (Murphey, in progress) aim to enlist the students in activities that help students become more sensitive to their partners and allow them to adjust; that is, create effective zones of proximal adjusting.

In the next section, we look at ways to increase the sensitivity of students to the points of views of others.

Making students aware of others' points of view

What is the advantage of understanding other points of view from a soft assembly perspective? By understanding their peers, students know *what* they can *create* with their peers. For example, asking students to write their LLHs (Murphey & Carpenter, 2008) is a way of bringing the past into the present in order to create a better vision of the future, and when students read each other's LLHs in class publications, they can become more sensitive to their possible collaborations in the classroom.

In regard to a second example of the benefit of LLHs, it is assumed by many students in Japan that a *returnee* (i.e., a Japanese student who has returned from living abroad in an English-speaking country) knows perfect English. Accordingly, the other students are afraid to participate in a pair work activity with the returnee. But when they read about their classmate's problems studying and living abroad, and the frequent ostracism they encounter, they become more sensitive to their plight and befriend them more. The LLHs also create possibilities for near peer role modeling (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Singh, 2010) in which students read about others' ways of learning and assume that since they are similar that these ways are also possible for them. For example, when students read or hear another student's saying, "I don't care so much about mistakes, I just like to talk a lot and I think I learn more," they may allow themselves to make more mistakes and learn more through increased interaction; that is, improvising and softly assembling learning.

Bandura (1997a) suggests "seeing or visualizing people similar to oneself perform successfully typically raises efficacy beliefs in observers that they themselves possess the

capabilities to master comparable activities" (p. 87). This begins with the observation that "we are similar" and then thinking that what the "other" can do should be possible for me. The opposite can also happen as Bandura (1997b) says, "Given large perceived disparities in experiences, children are likely to view skills exemplified by an experienced model as beyond their reach and are thus disinclined to invest the effort needed to master them fully" (p. 234). In SLA, this calls into question the "native speaker" model (see Cook, 1999) and favors peers.

Another example is a video that works well in the Japanese environment showing university students talking about their junior high school and high school English education and asking the government to change things (The Real Voice of Japanese Students, 3 minutes) (Murphey, 2010). At the same time, the video not only says what a lot of the students are thinking themselves, it also gives them a sense of agency that they can at least speak up and let others know about the problems in education and their lives, thus producing a potential sense of agency; that is, control over their lives (Murphey, 2013b; Murphey & Inoue, 2014). This is tightly linked to the previously cited research on near peer role models and their impact on learners.

We have also started to use short videos that can sensitize students to the lives of others. For example, the video Paradigm Shift (Fellowship Bible Church, 2005) at first shows an angry young man going through his day and we hear his self-talk about how everybody seems to be against him; that is, taking his parking place, breaking in line, and so on. Then, for the latter half of the 4-minute video, he receives some special glasses that allow him to see a subtitle under each person's face, such as "just lost his job", "fighting addiction," or "grieving best friend's death." Realizing that others have problems and emotional trajectories that are not caused by him, he becomes more proactive in wanting to help others, rather than selfishly thinking the world is against him. Students are somewhat shocked, as most viewers are, through identifying with the young man's selfishness and realizing how others may be struggling much more than they are. Many ask for the title of the film to view it again out of class.

While the Paradigm Shift video above helps students to shift on the individual level of empathizing with others, the Real Voice video sends students the message that they can possibly change the world as a group. A third video, The Girl Effect (2 minutes), produced by Care International (Girl Effect, 2008), is at the global level of processing and sends the message that we can change the world internationally with the small gesture of buying a girl a uniform so she can go to school, and she can do the rest. This video has only words flashing up on the screen extremely fast, and it becomes a challenge to read it all quickly which students come to enjoy doing collaboratively.

The collaborative point of these three videos is that we can shift students away from a sometimes overbearing self-focus and instead move towards empathizing with others (Paradigm Shift), and recognizing our group agency (Real Voice) and finally to seeing that we can even have a global impact in small ways (Girl Effect). We believe that these videos, when discussed in class, open the possibilities for many students to experience more sensitive relationships, feelings of agency in their world, and the creation of hopeful global futures.

Personal stories told by the teacher or by students can also greatly help to sensitize students to each other and get them to bond more strongly to enhance future collaborations. For example, telling simple mistake stories in class allows participants to show that they are not perfect and that we all make mistakes (Murphey, 1996b) and will continue to do so. This probably should be demonstrated by a teacher's mistake story first (NFLRC Hawaii, 2010). The students can then be given homework to write a short mistake story to tell in the next class.

Most recently, Murphey (2014) has been experimenting with asking students to teach what they are learning in class to people they know out of the class and to write up case studies of their teaching. They have to make leadership decisions, to decide the person, place, and time; they do follow up teaching and quizzing; and they write up a case study reporting and reflecting on what they did. They obviously have to cooperate with their "students" and to improvise, soft assemble, while teaching something that they are perhaps still learning themselves. This push toward agency seems to be extremely helpful for their own learning and seems to have opened up many to the joy of altruism, as this quote from one student attests:

> *I realized that teaching what I've got is helpful for not only me but also the others and remains stuck in my head. I'm spending productive days after taking this class because [it] teaches us to have a better life and encourages us to teach others. The best information in the world cannot help people unless we tell them about it. Our actions make better lives for others." (Shohei Okubo, p. 14)*

Getting students to report (tell a story) on their collaborative learning and actions takes them to a deeper level of processing, that is evaluation, analysis, and synthesis (cf. Bloom's taxonomy) and creates near peer role models for the whole class (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Singh, 2010).

Knight has had success by providing students who have travelled abroad with the opportunity in class to share their success stories of teaching others overseas in professional roles during their internships in English. For example, one student reported how she had used English to befriend hotel maids before training them to provide better service to Japanese customers. The other students in class could identify with the challenges that the speaker had faced and were motivated to ask questions and to make comments.

Such improvised and softly assembled activities as we have described above result in experiences that can be labeled as "creative success." In other words, the students are learning what they need to do in order to collaborate and to create together successfully.

In the next section, we address the issue of positive interaction. Such positive interaction is a key component of creative success.

The explicitly stated caring imperative for positive interaction

Along with the interaction imperative, we have found that communicating and showing a "caring imperative" is also crucial to fostering a healthy interactive group learning environment. While most people think that it should go without saying that we care about someone's health and well-being, we have found that it is effective to make it explicitly

clear that we are first and foremost concerned with students' health, then their happiness or well-being, and finally with their learning. Without their health and well-being, learning does not have much of a chance, and effective learning interaction with partners is not very likely. When this priority on students' well-being can be stated at the beginning of a course by the teacher, it seems to clear the way for more caring communications between participants and more sympathy when conditions are not ideal.

In sum, the teacher's role is extremely important in soft assembling as it involves creating an environment in which students feel secure and empowered to exchange ideas. In the final section, we consider how such an environment can enhance the leadership seminars of Knight.

Discussion and conclusion

Taking the stance of Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner and Burn's (2016) practitioner research, we see that cooperation among students is enhanced when students clearly understand the visions to be achieved and their roles in achieving such goals, but getting *there* usually requires extensive social interaction; that is, communication and soft assembly. In the leadership seminars, the students are empowered to create socially responsible visions, and the instructor provides guidance in navigating the constraints. The beach clean-up and barbecue event described in section 1 of this paper shows that the students were actually *required* by various stakeholders (e.g., the student affairs office, the government, the instructor) to exhibit socially responsible behavior (i.e., soft assembly). Knight was in a position to help his students to understand and to address the concerns of the stakeholders; that is, the risk of food poisoning, the possibility of physical injury, the need for insurance and a waiver form, and so on. A focus on soft assembly in the leadership seminars can help the students to gain confidence in their ability to be sensitive to and to interact effectively with stakeholders. Further, it can help them to consider how best to frame their leadership stories in job interviews.

As we have explained in sections 2 to 5 of this paper, the teacher has a leadership role in creating and achieving the following vision: teams of students who can continually learn to communicate more effectively on their own and take action with or without the instructor's assistance. In order to achieve this vision, the teacher can choose to control and micro-manage classroom communication, but we argue that the most important role for the teacher involves pushing the students out of the nest and off the branch at the right time, to allow them to take flight agentively. The teacher can and should model the types of positive interaction and communication that can facilitate the creation of the vision (flying to the next tree, landing without getting hurt) and action-steps to accomplish them (talk to others, spread your wings, flap and flap and flap!!!). At the same time, the teacher must be willing to provide students with moments in which they assume the agency necessary to create, and radically back off and let go! It is in these ways that expert teachers who excel in soft management provide students with active-agentive opportunities, without which there is no collaborating, and no student leading.

Authors' Postscript: This article itself is a good example of collaborative creative leadership, improvised and softly assembled from editors, readers, and authors, and negotiated over time. We hope it spurs your own visions, actions, and agency to create such learning environments and lead in your own networks of interaction.

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