The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Volume 11 | Issue 2 Article 9

Fall 09-30-2020

Exploring Leadership Learning in an Undergraduate Kinesiology Course

Liam Laidlaw
University of Calgary, liam.laidlaw@ucalgary.ca
Cari Din
University of Calgary, csdin@ucalgary.ca

https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2020.2.10734

Recommended Citation
Laidlaw, L., & Din, C. (2020). Exploring leadership learning in an undergraduate kinesiology course. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 11*(2). https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2020.2.10734

Exploring Leadership Learning in an Undergraduate Kinesiology Course

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to explore and evaluate learning in an undergraduate leadership course in a kinesiology faculty. The research question driving this study was: What do students feel influences learning in this evidence-informed leadership course? We collected and analyzed 12 students' perspectives on their learning experiences over one semester by conducting focus groups at the end of term. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret and analyze responses. The influences on student learning shared by participants in this research included course design and learning activities, instructor behaviours, peers, project work, and student agency. The course was described as a valuable social learning space. Findings may be applied to improve leadership learning in kinesiology and similar disciplines in higher education.

L'objectif de cette étude était d'explorer et d'évaluer l'apprentissage dans un cours de leadership au niveau du premier cycle dans une faculté de kinésiologie. La question de recherche qui a motivé cette étude était la suivante : selon les étudiants et les étudiantes, qu'est-ce qui influence l'apprentissage dans ce cours de leadership fondé sur des données probantes? Nous avons recueilli et analysé les perspectives de 12 étudiants et étudiantes sur leurs expériences d'apprentissage au cours d'un semestre en organisant des groupes de discussion à la fin du semestre. Nous avons utilisé l'analyse thématique réflective pour interpréter et analyser les réponses. Les influences sur l'apprentissage des étudiants et des étudiantes, telles que partagées par les participants et les participantes à cette recherche, comprennent : la conception du cours et les activités d'apprentissage, le comportement des enseignants et des enseignantes, les pairs, le travail sur un projet et l'agence des étudiants et des étudiantes. Le cours a été décrit comme étant un espace d'apprentissage social utile. Les résultats peuvent être appliqués pour améliorer l'apprentissage du leadership en kinésiologie ainsi que dans d'autres disciplines semblables dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Keywords
student agency, instructor behaviours, social learning spaces, transformational leadership, project-based learning, undergraduate kinesiology students; agence des étudiants et des étudiantes, comportement des enseignants et des enseignantes, espaces d'apprentissage social, leadership transformationnel, apprentissage basé sur un projet, étudiants et étudiantes en kinésiologie au niveau du premier cycle

This research paper/Rapport de recherche is available in The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2020.2.10734

Context

The origin of this research project was our shared interest in how leadership learning is facilitated. The undergraduate researcher, and first author for this paper, studied leadership with the instructor, and second author, in a previous cohort of the undergraduate course we examined and document here. Felten's (2013) principles of effective Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) inquiry invite us to investigate leadership learning in a methodologically sound way through staying deeply contextualized, sharing our findings publicly, and partnering with students. These tenets guided this project.

After studying leadership with the second author, the first author began asking questions about how, when, and why leadership learning happens in this specific course. His questions led to discussions and the design of this Students as Partners research project. We invested in building a reciprocal and respectful partnership focused on discovering ways to deepen learning during the research process and in the course we studied (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Our SoTL partnership enabled ethical inquiry (Fedoruk, 2017). The second author's power as instructor was separated from recruitment, focus groups, transcription, and early analysis, because of our partnership. We are equally excited and nervous to make our work public through sharing our findings here, after a year spent thinking through, designing, and doing this SoTL project.

The SoTL question driving our work was: What do undergraduate students feel influences learning in this evidence-informed leadership course in kinesiology? Matthews et al. (2013) call for inclusion of student voice and explicit accounts of student learning in SoTL work. We were motivated to answer this call and invite student participants to reflect on and share their leadership course experiences.

Learning

This project is rooted in students learning through doing, rather than listening (Weimer, 2017). It is grounded in the belief that learning is an internal process which changes the learners' knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, or attitudes (Ambrose et al., 2010). This definition of learning values students' unique interpretations of their experiences and learning. "Learning results from what a student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks" (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 1). Instructors influence learning through designing and facilitating activities while students decide what they will do, grapple with, and think. The design and delivery of the leadership course we studied invites students to reflect on and do leadership in service of their learning. Learning is intentionally designed to be active.

The influence of instructor behaviour on learning has been examined across many SoTL projects (e.g., Rolfe, 2015; Vajoczki et al., 2011). Knowing student names, having a positive attitude, and engaging in frequent communication with students has been shown to positively influence undergraduate learning (Carroll & O'Donnell, 2010; Coehlo, 2012).

Leadership

Most undergraduate kinesiology students graduating from the institution where our study took place become healthcare professionals charged with performing daily acts of leadership. Leadership in this course and our study is defined as a dynamic relational process involving

influence and common goals (Northouse, 2016). Leadership is framed by research indicating 21st century leaders are most effective when they are inspiring and empowering followers to become self-determined leaders (Northouse, 2016). Leadership is taught as a body of specific evidence-informed behaviours and skills that students are exposed to using a variety of learning activities and assessments across their 12 weeks in the course.

Transformational Leadership Theory

The core leadership content students focus on in the course we studied is transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership has been empirically examined in business, education, healthcare, spiritual, and physical activity settings (Din et al., 2015). Transformational behaviours inspire commitment to shared goals through challenging followers to problem solve and develop their own "leadership capacity via coaching, mentoring, and provision of both challenge and support" (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 4).

Transformational leaders empower followers through role modelling their values and encouraging follower creativity and problem solving. They take the time to get to know their followers and tailor learning to the individual (Bass, & Riggio, 2006). Finally, transformational leadership includes sketching "a compelling vision of the future" (Bass, & Riggio, 2006, p. 7). Transformational leadership behaviours positively develop people and their performances.

Learning Leadership

Scholars and non-academic leaders agree it is important to develop leaders to improve the future of society (Dalakoura, 2010). More than 25 years of research reveals leadership development in non-academic contexts can improve organizations, communities, and society's capacity to achieve shared aims (Day et al., 2014).

In academic settings, there are a few good examples of leadership learning. Work by Lumpkin and Achen (2019) investigating a graduate-level sport management course suggests leadership can be learned when students use self-reflection and learning activities prepare them for the challenges and complexities of work outside the classroom. Similar findings and recommendations come from a study investigating MBA students which found learners struggle most post-graduation with the complexity and novelty of on-the-job leadership challenges. Course assessment often provides little evidence of the leaders students are becoming, and progressive educators are urged to build real world problems into course learning activities and project work (Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011).

At the undergraduate level, a study of the internship experiences of 15 students in different placements across a range of faculties found leadership growth and improvements in self-awareness happened in the field (Katsioloudes & Cannonier, 2019). Internship experiences are not always paired with academic course work or evidence-informed leadership learning. However, Lumpkin and Achen's (2019) research demonstrates the importance of students integrating academic knowledge with their lives outside the classroom to learn leadership.

Because of its use of transformational leadership theory and an undergraduate student sample, the closest example of evidence-informed leadership learning to our context is found in Nichols' (2016) investigation of business student learning. Nichols (2016) discovered students' greatest growth occurred when the instructor modeled transformational leadership behaviours, valued individual student's uniqueness, and invested in interpersonal connections with them.

A few additional studies have indicated that transformational leadership behaviours can be learned in non-academic settings where physical education teachers and sport coaches participated in professional development workshops focused on improving their transformational leadership (Arthur & Hardy, 2014; Beauchamp et al., 2011; Lawrason et al., 2019).

Social Learning Theory and the Value Creation Framework

Learning in the leadership course we studied is deeply social—students are engaged in a term-long team project and participate in small group learning activities during every class. Social learning theory provides a strong heuristic tool for exploring student learning in this course. It "shines a social perspective on the process of learning" (Wenger-Trayner, 2013, p. 2). A social learning space provides a crucible for learning between and within learners who care to make a difference in their discipline and apply learning in the real world.

The value creation framework was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of social learning spaces (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). It is a pragmatic framework which legitimizes the learners' voices and experiences. Value creation stories are participant narratives which tell us whether or not a learning intervention was useful (Wenger-Trayner, 2013). The value cycles in the framework we are examining in this study include immediate, potential, applied, realized, and enabling value. Immediate value is evidenced when people enjoy, feel engaged in, and find themselves contributing to the social learning space (Wenger et al., 2011). Potential value is any takeaway or learning a participant plans to implement outside of the learning space (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). Applied value is seen when a learner uses their learning outside the social learning space, while realized value is evidenced in changes to the bottom line, or for our purposes, when learned leadership behavior influences an outcome of interest in the student's real world. Finally, enabling value is found when the actions and design features of the learning space support social learning (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017).

Purpose

The purpose of our study was to discover what students feel influences their learning in an undergraduate leadership course in a kinesiology faculty at a large Canadian university. Through collecting multiple student perspectives and interpreting them, we sought to explore and evaluate leadership learning in this course. Our ultimate aim is to improve learning experiences in our context and support instructors interested in facilitating learning for undergraduate students in similar contexts.

Our research contributes to SoTL communities through developing a picture of student experiences in a specific context which has not received much scholarly attention. Through focusing on kinesiology undergraduate student experience in a leadership course, we add unique student voices and stories to contemporary conversations about enabling learning. Our inquiry sheds light on social learning and the effectiveness of specific learning activities in leadership—a discipline that is often lauded in higher education but not formally taught in for-credit courses (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016; Skalicky et al., 2020). Through applying a social learning framework to our findings, our analysis of student experiences in this course will improve future iterations of the course and ideally, social learning in many classrooms.

Method

Research Timeline

In the academic year prior to this research, the first author studied leadership with the second author and learned the same content students in this study did. In the summer prior to the start of our research project, we applied for and obtained ethical approval for research from our Institutional Review Board. During the fall term, the second author taught the course. The first author observed eight classes during the last three weeks of the 12-week fall term. In the last three of the eight classes he came to, the second author left the room a few minutes before class ended, so the first author could describe the research and invite students to participate. In these three instances, he answered student questions about anonymity and logistics, and described the focus group design.

Once the term ended and final grades were posted, the first author began scheduling and facilitating focus groups. Five focus groups were facilitated by the first author. Two of the focus groups became individual in-depth interviews because some students who volunteered to participate did not attend their scheduled focus group. The first author de-identified participants and assigned each a letter during transcription. Next, he uploaded all transcripts to NVivo 12 software for coding. Finally, he led the thematic analysis of the corpus of student responses.

Participants

Twelve undergraduate students, out of the 73 enrolled in the course, volunteered to participate in our study; all were over 18 years old. Participation included providing informed consent and doing one focus group. For a breakdown of which participant was in which focus group, please see Appendix A.

Focus Groups

Carefully designed and facilitated focus groups support rich discussion, sharing of multiple perspectives, and an iterative development of participant ideas and perceptions (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). Focus groups can range from two to 12 participants (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018); however, smaller groups enhance the inclusion of all voices and the sharing of individual perspectives, while retaining the collective impact of reflecting and responding in a group possessing a shared experience (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

We created a semi-structured focus group guide aimed at eliciting both depth and breadth in responses while facilitating discussion between participants (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This guide is included as Appendix B. The first author built rapport with participants through being a graduate of the course, actively listening, and participating in reflective discussions when appropriate (Saldaña & Omastas, 2018).

Research Conversations and Reflective Journaling

We kept reflective journals during the project and jotted down what we were noticing and wondering over time. Our journals were entry points to the weekly conversations we had about this SoTL project and leadership learning. This integration of our reflections, questions, and

understanding of the research process structured our check-in conversations over the year we were designing and doing this work. Our conversations and journals are not data sources subjected to analysis in this study; however, they enriched each step in the research process and our development of practical recommendations.

Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a well-known data analysis approach applied across diverse qualitative studies. Braun and Clarke (2019) have clarified and defined their approach to interpreting themes in qualitative data recently and crystallized the role researchers enact in unearthing thematic structures in qualitative data.

Reflexive thematic analysis positions the researcher at the centre of interpreting and assembling the thematic structures of their data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Our experiences and beliefs about learning leadership contextualize the purpose, questions, data analysis, and dissemination process. They strengthen our interpretive work and thematic findings.

In the first author's initial coding, he identified "anything and everything of interest" (Clarke, & Braun, 2013, p. 206) using NVivo 12 to create draft codes representing salient patterns in student interview responses which helped us answer our research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Inductive codes were developed through an iterative and recursive process where the first author brought draft codes and ideas about emerging themes to the second author who acted as a critical friend (Burke, 2016). Together, we worked through the interpretive process of developing themes from the initial codes which represent the 12 students' stories of learning leadership through critical discussions and peer debriefing.

Deductive analysis was guided by the value creation framework (Wenger et al., 2011), explained in the Introduction section of this paper. Our deductive thematic analysis illuminates the relationship between student responses and the perceived value of the course as a social learning space (Wenger, 2013).

Quality Criteria

Qualitative research "produces context-dependent knowledge that is fluid and layered" (Burke, 2016, p. 333). This research was designed and completed from a constructivist stance embracing ways of seeing and knowing which view experience as subjective and constructed (Saldaña & Omastas, 2018). No universal criteria for judging the quality of constructivist research is effective in assessing the credibility, value, nor worth of inquiry designed and carried out from an ontological stance holding that "truth" is not objectively housed outside of people's unique, subjective ways of being and knowing (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). Peer debriefing, that is, reviewing and assessing initial codes, critiquing codes and theme development, enriches the data analysis phase of this project (Burke, 2016). In addition, transparency, where we each assume the role of critical friend scrutinizing the design, execution, analysis, and writing up of the research (Burke, 2016) enhances the quality of this inquiry.

We sought coherence (Burke, 2016) in this study and feel it is the criteria this specific research should be assessed against. Coherence is the degree to which the data and our

interpretation of it fits together to produce a detailed and nuanced portrait of learning leadership in this specific context.

Results

Our inductive analysis and interpretation of interview responses reveals eight key influences on leadership learning in the undergraduate course we studied. The first four influences on learning are aspects of the course design and delivery. The next four are created by students themselves. These influences are communicated as themes in the first section of our results. The second section of our results is a deductive analysis of student focus group responses using the value creation framework (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). This framework helps us assess the impact of the course as a social learning space.

The Influence of Course Design and Delivery on Learning Leadership

Design features of the course and the way it was taught strongly influenced student leadership learning in our study. These influences are detailed below.

Early Morning Class Time

The class was scheduled Monday-Wednesday-Friday from 8:00 to 8:50 AM over 12 consecutive weeks. Many students said, "If you're willing to get up for an 8:00 AM class then you're probably going to be willing to put in the effort [this course demands]" (Participant B). During focus groups, discussion of the early start time as a potential strength of the course was common; however, participants also imagined the early start could act as a barrier to learning because most undergraduates do not like 8:00 AM classes.

> First author: Do you think 8AM was a barrier for your learning at any given time?
> Participant F: Some days I was just trying to still pull it together…the first 15 minutes of class I was still waking up…like in the first few classes you're just like, *Oh my god, this is early,* but then you get into it.

While three students described struggling with being alert at 8:00 AM, there was strong consensus among the participants that the active learning environment the instructor created engaged and energized them early in the morning. One summarized this in saying,

> [The instructor] does a good job of activating us right away in class, like getting us into a group situation so that you can just wake up. You're walking around, getting the blood flowing, is very intentional the way she designed it (Participant G).

Intentional design and learning activities aimed at supporting learning in this specific context are described further in the next theme.

Design and Facilitation of Learning Activities

The first author took this course one year prior to our project and observed eight classes during our study. He saw very little traditional lecturing and when the instructor lectured, it was kept under 20 minutes. All 12 interviewees explained how important it was to attend and actively participate in classes. They said this was not a regular class. Without much text on slides, several lectures delivered without slides, inclusion of whiteboard drawings, and frequent small group discussions, students found the learning environment unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable.

> It's not just like you're reading lecture slides and writing down notes. I didn't really write down notes that often in the class to begin with. So having a class that reinforced discussions, that reinforced having the communication between students, something that reinforced actually applying the learning, practical learning rather than just memorizing it. That was really important (Participant I).

All twelve students in this study described the positive and high-impact influence of peer discussions on their ability to apply leadership learning.

Project-based Teams

Early in the semester, community impact project (CIP) teams of five were created and charged with using transformational leadership behaviours (Bass & Riggio, 2006) to positively influence a community outside of the class. Teams had 10 weeks to develop, do, debrief, and present their CIPs. In the final week of term, each team presented their group's process and learning.

Rich leadership learning occurred within CIP teams for ten of the 12 participants in our study. These five-person teams were perceived as a safer place to share experiences than the full classroom. One participant said, "Instead of talking in front of 75 people just in front of five people is very supportive because you were more willing to speak about different things" (Participant G). The students in our sample represent seven of the 15 different CIP teams in the class.

Students described the influence of CIP team activities on personal and peer learning. One said, "So you had to really work towards doing it [transformational leadership] cause it was like, it's not only my learning but it's also other people's learning" (Participant B). Students also reported trying to use course content such as active listening and providing meaningful feedback in their CIP groups to support their peer's leadership learning.

Instructor Behaviours

One of the first things the instructor does each semester is learn every student's name. She also encourages students to get to know their peers' names. Every participant said her knowing and using student first names "shows that it's a personal relationship that she's building" (Participant B). These relationships began with her knowing their name and using it.

Students tied feeling known by the instructor to their commitment to attending class, trusting the instructor, and becoming comfortable with showing vulnerability in the course. Participants also said being in this class increased their respect for the instructor-student relationship. Feeling the instructor cared for their well-being strengthened this relationship and

their respect for it. “I think for me it was kind of like, [the instructor] almost cares about me more than I care about myself” (Participant C). Her caring was described as the enactment of the leadership behaviours she teaches. One student summarized this finding when they said, “I also feel that unlike other profs, she acts on her own teachings. She's constantly trying to better herself” (Participant K).

Because this course focuses on leadership behaviours, interviewees said it was very important for the instructor to model what she was teaching. One interviewee said when the instructor did not initially provide good feedback in class, she emailed later to provide more detail. This kind of individual follow up was linked by three students to the specific transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) behavior of individualized consideration. Individualized consideration is seen when a leader gets to know each follower and spends time coaching and helping them learn. Individualized consideration was referred to as one of the instructor’s strengths.

> [The instructor] read my core values reflection paper, it was very personal and she literally right after class she was like, *Yes, is everything okay?* I'm like, *Yeah, everything's fine now*. Just being human with us and asking us to be that way with each other is very different from other profs (Participant K).

Participant I described how being individually considered changed the way they received criticism,

> With the critical feedback, I still felt like it was...there's that bit of reinforcement there because even though it's not always nice to read and it's not always negative either. It's being written specifically for me. Specifically, because there's a professor out there who recognizes me as an individual who knows who I am and my strengths (Participant I).

The instructor’s caring for students was coupled with a strong excitement for course content: “[The instructor’s] enthusiasm was very supportive and kind of made you think like if you weren’t that enthusiastic it was like, well, why am I not putting energy into this because [the instructor] is” (Participant G). Students said her passion catalyzed their choice to actively engage with course content, “I think if I had a prof who I didn’t feel was as passionate about their class and so obviously was giving so much to [our learning], it would have been totally different” (Participant C). This comment was echoed in different ways and supported non-verbally by participants across focus groups.

Together, the instructor’s enthusiasm, caring individual relationships and feedback positively influenced leadership learning for the students in this study.

The Influence of Student Agency on Leadership Learning

Students in this study repeatedly described their agency as not only an influence but a gateway to their learning. They said, to learn leadership, “You have to be willing to learn and interested in [leadership]” (Participant I). When a student buys-in and actively engages in the learning process, we see learner agency. The first two themes in this section reveal agency linked explicitly to course design while the third theme reveals autonomous student agency.

Reflective Practice

Interviewees said buying-in to learning leadership meant doing near-constant reflection. Reflective practice is tightly woven into every layer of the course. Reflective conversations and writing are central learning activities. The first reflective writing assignment, focused on unearthing core values, was universally described as uncomfortable. Students said this assignment sets the tone for the course. They found distilling their values down to 500 words required deep reflection and great agency.

Students described reflection as an important influence on their learning and an actual takeaway from the course. One interviewee captured this in saying, "The most important part of learning that I've done in that class was step back for a second, figure out what happened, why that happened and just question myself and then from there you can get better" (Participant C). The stop-and-reflect action this student describes is a core component of each lecture and half of the assessments. Nine interviewees reported reflective practice was positively impacting their personal relationships outside of the class during their interviews.

Embracing Discomfort

Students described how the design of learning activities and assessment challenged them to change their learning process for this course. The instructor introduces Nottingham's (2017) metaphor for learning as moving down into a Pit, where discomfort and confusion are worked through for learning to occur. We emerge from the Learning Pit with new knowledge. She shares the Pit metaphor on the first day of class and tells students the Pit is navigated best with trusted peers.

> After the first few weeks of class when I was feeling like uncomfortable, not angry or mad but just like, uh, the class is based on that discomfort. So I had to think and reflect on why I was feeling that (Participant H).

During focus groups, students listened to peers describe different CIP team experiences. Two of the 12 participants realized their CIP team did not embrace the uncomfortable yet generative experience of being in the Learning Pit together. Students felt being in the Pit was a requirement for CIP learning to occur, which is captured in this exchange:

> Participant K: But then the problem comes in if they [CIP teammates] want to be that vulnerable with you. I don't know, it's also like, this is what the course is about. It's a safe space. Let's be open with one another. But some people just don't want to fall into it at all.
>
> Participant J: They don't want to go in the Pit.
>
> Participant K: They don't want to go in the Pit, and it is frustrating. And so those people make negative experiences. I don't know. Some groups when they were presenting their CIP, I felt so jealous…I wish I'd had that [openness and vulnerability] in my group.

After the above exchange, Participant E went as far as to say, "I just wished low key that we failed so that they [CIP teammates] all would have learned you actually have to buy-in to this stuff and

take it seriously. I really wish that we didn't get a good grade." This comment reveals the strength of this student's agentic commitment to trying to learn leadership through experience and their disappointment in peers who did not embrace the discomfort and openness students felt learning in this context required.

Developing Self-awareness and Confidence

All students described becoming more self-aware and conscious of course learning during interpersonal exchanges because of this course. One summarized their growing self-awareness this way,

> I think [the instructor] definitely makes me feel like I have the potential to change the bits that I'm aware of that I want to get rid of. So and then also it's just really, it's making it clearer for me…I guess it's basically just she lets me see I can have the potential to do something that I would like to do [in relation to others] (Participant B).

Many students said their learning increased their confidence when talking with bosses, co-workers, roommates, friends, and family. For example, Participant H said, "I think I just gained more confidence in myself and I guess being more proud of what I had to offer and being proud to show it" because of participating in this class. Another linked confidence and speaking up to feedback from their CIP team, "I'm practicing speaking out more at work based on the mid-point feedback from my [CIP] group, when really it was just getting comfortable with being confident to speak up and then now, I feel like I'm doing it."

Each participant said they wanted to continue improving their leadership behaviours and, ultimately, themselves despite the course ending. One described how the course inspired them to change their major and went on to say:

> I definitely think I'll take this class and whatever I learned. It's kind of made me somebody else kind of in a way. It's kind of pushed me in a different direction already. So by virtue of that, it's going to continue. I'm going to take a bit of it, at least with me to the future (Participant C).

When probed for an example, Participant C described interacting more confidently and positively with people across contexts.

Applying Learning Outside Class

Every participant described trying to use their class learning, to some extent, in their lives outside of the course. Student comments are summarized by these quotes: "I realized that anyone can be a leader, you don't have to have a leadership position…even with peers, like I can do this" (Participant G) and "I am one of the newest people at work, but I feel comfortable like stepping up, hey I know something about this [leadership] stuff, I can contribute" (Participant D).

Three students reported changing specific behaviours at work because of course learning. Participant A described how their learning helped them understand why their co-workers may have behaved in certain negative ways, "I don't want to...I don't assume things about them. I don't try and provoke them in manners, and I don't dismiss them. I try to be sensitive to their emotions as

well." They shifted the way they interact with people at work because of their learning. Two additional students described improving relationships with physical activity participants they teach because of their leadership learning.

Evaluating the Social Learning Space

We used Wenger-Trayner et al.'s (2017) value creation framework to explore and evaluate course learning. Participants said they enjoyed class and felt welcome and cared for there. These feelings encouraged attendance and a willingness to learn. Students also described the enthusiasm the instructor brought to the content and the room. Finally, two students reflected on the practical experiences learning in this class, one summarized this in saying, "Everything we were learning we practiced right away, like when we learned active listening, then she made us turn to the person beside us and do it" (Participant E). These features demonstrate the immediate value students derived from being in class.

Potential value is learning a participant plans to implement when they leave the social learning space (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). All students described their intentions to use leadership and reflection skills learned in this course after it ended. One specifically said:

> I'd love to incorporate what I learned into my lesson plans [for dance classes], I guess. Which I think I could do if I sat down and thought. Once you have time, with school. I'm free from school for a sec. I would love to do that. Definitely. And maybe ways that I could teach what I learned in leadership to my dancers (Participant H).

When learning is used outside of class, we see applied value (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). All of the students said they became more self-aware in their lives outside of class and many described specific applications of their learning outside the course. One said, "I could always apply stuff we were learning right away with my dance students so that was fun" (Participant H), and another said, "I used what I was learning and put it into practice. It really helped the kids who showed up every day and made them super good swimmers" (Participant F). Finally, nine mentioned using reflective practice to improve interpersonal relationships. These are concrete examples of applied value.

Realized value (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017) is evidenced in changes to the bottom line, or for our purposes, when learning influences an outcome of interest in the students' real world. Students did not share stories of realized value in this study.

Finally, when the design of a social learning space supports learning, we see enabling value (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). We believe students' descriptions of the instructor's interpersonal behaviours and enthusiasm are evidence of enabling value; her influence positively impacted study participants' learning experiences in the course. Another source of enabling value described by ten of the 12 participants in the study was the deep respectful relationships with their CIP teammates, which is captured in this comment:

> I think I just felt that I wanted to do it [work hard in the project] for them [my CIP team] at first. It was showing them [my CIP team] that I was listening to what they said and respecting them in wanting to apply it [transformational leadership] (Participant C).

Students enacting transformational leadership in this project created enabling value for their CIP peers.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to discover what students feel influences their learning in an undergraduate leadership course in a kinesiology faculty at a large Canadian university. Participants in this study said specific design features, course delivery, and their own agency influenced their learning.

The leadership course we studied was structured by discussion-based pedagogy, where students were active agents, co-creating learning with their instructor and peers (Sibold et al., 2017). Students in our study found the small-group discussions and learning activities enriched their learning. Pollock et al. (2011) found small group discussions were effective, even in a large class, at making students feel engaged in the topic and satisfied with their experience.

Peer engagement and openness added great value to students' learning in this social learning space (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2017). Students did not tell stories of realized value, when learning influences an outcome of interest in a learner's real world; however, we believe more time may need to elapse for this type of value to be perceived by learners. Focus groups happened shortly after classes ended.

Students in this study were charged with applying the leadership behaviours they were learning in class to positively impact a community their project team collectively cared about. Project-based learning (PBL) has been found in other contexts to improve students' capacity to self-reflect, begin forming a professional identity, and a sense of self beyond university student (Vande Wiele et al., 2017). Every participant in our research described the vital role self-reflection played in their leadership learning process.

We found the instructor's enthusiasm and her focus on getting to know students and support them compelled attendance and active engagement for students. Similarly, in a large study of good teaching in higher education, students said instructors were effective if they demonstrated enthusiasm and care for the topic and the students (Anderson et al., 2020). The positive influence of knowing students' names in post-secondary classrooms has been supported in other SoTL inquiry (e.g., Carroll & O'Donnell, 2010; Nichols, 2016).

In transformational leadership theory, the core content underpinning the course we studied, getting to know students is akin to individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Similar to Nichols (2016), we found the instructor's modeling of transformational leadership supported student learning. Weimer (2013) describes the combination of instructor caring with high expectations in higher education classrooms as a potent influence on student learning. This combination was present in the course and enriched learning.

The vital role of student agency in learning is woven through our findings. Research indicates formal leadership training in non-academic settings often fails because learners are not "purposefully engaging in an autonomous and self-regulated growth process" (Walker & Reichard, 2020, p. 27). This suggests learner agency. Klemenčič (2015, 2017) has investigated student agency in higher education extensively. We see links between the power students are afforded in the class, the effort many invested in the course, and Klemenčič's (2017) conceptualization of agentic students in higher education. Students in our study described the essential role buying-in to active learning, reflection, and being vulnerable played in the course. They described student agency as a success factor for leadership learning.

Klemenčič (2017) emphasizes the influence interpersonal relationships make on student agency in higher education classrooms. Supportive peer and instructor-student relationships positively impact student agency, and by extension, learning. Facilitating undergraduate student agency has been shown to increase student sense of belonging and community (Pym & Kapp, 2013). As one participant in our study put it, "being human with each other," was an expectation in the course. Creating a sense of connection and shared humanity between students is part of the instructor's teaching philosophy and an enabler of learning in the course we studied.

Students described actively deciding to experience discomfort and enter a space where they would struggle with something in order to learn it; Nottingham (2017) labels this the Learning Pit. Going into the Pit can be linked with effortful learning, which has been shown to promote deep learning (Brown et al., 2014). The instructor introduces the Pit concept in her opening lecture and marvels at how useful students find this metaphor in each cohort of this class.

Closely linked to the Learning Pit and noteworthy in our findings was the affective work of linking one's emotions to learning in this course. In their focus group research investigating psychological safety in a post-secondary social work classroom, Gayle et al. (2013) found respecting students, peer learning, risk taking, and time spent practicing skills each contribute to creating a safe learning environment. Our findings dovetail with and support the instructor-determined structures recommended by Gayle et al. (2013), despite the different faculty and course content we investigated.

Limitations

Only 12 of 73 students in the class participated in this study, so our findings cannot represent the perceptions of every student. We do not know what 61 of the students experienced or perceived as influences on their learning in the course.

We are unsure why a few students who signed up did not attend their focus group or why only 12 students volunteered for the study. Waiting until final grades were tallied was ethically essential, but we wonder if the end of term break hindered participation. Students were in a new term when the focus groups were scheduled.

In addition, because two of the focus groups were in-depth individual interviews, the opportunity to engage in conversation and build upon peer ideas was absent from these two data collection moments; however, during analysis we found individual responses were similar in content and openness to the larger focus group participant contributions.

Future Research

We learned some students did not invest deeply in project-based learning team relationships and peers felt they missed learning opportunities because of this. It would be powerful and revealing to collect perspectives from students who do not embrace the Learning Pit (Nottingham, 2017) or feel comfortable being open with peers in PBL teams. These voices could help us discover, understand and improve leadership learning in this course and similar ones in higher education. Research exploring in great detail the specific barriers and supports for psychological safety in classes will extend findings from our work.

It will be important to investigate instructor identity, beliefs, and philosophy in the future to build on our findings; for example, Keiler (2018) found STEM teachers without strong learning facilitation skills and constructivist beliefs about learning, face barriers to supporting student

agency. A deep dive into facilitators of agency is warranted given what students in this project shared.

Finally, the CIP was a meaningful PBL activity and quite similar to what Canadian universities are calling curriculum integrated experiential learning (McRae & Johnson, 2016). Investigating the specific use of curriculum integrated experiential learning models in courses like this one, where undergraduates are expected to apply learning in the real world, will enrich our capacity to teach in ways that improve experiential learning.

Practical Implications for the SoTL Community

Our project was possible and ethical because we collaborated as partners to discover what influenced learning for undergraduate kinesiology students in this specific 12-week leadership course. The undergraduate researcher learned numerous things as the study progressed; most notably, he wrote two core learnings in his journal near the end of the thematic analysis phase of the project:

> My views on the course have changed in that I actually believe more strongly in the instruction and the way that we truly can teach leadership. I felt as though through hearing student experiences I was ensured that my own experience was not a singular event, but a reality that is created for all students who buy-in to this class…I learned a lot about the actual process of conducting research and have fundamentally changed the way that I see qualitative research – in a good way.

These comments suggest our partnership deepened his understanding of both facilitating leadership learning and doing qualitative research. His experiences in a previous cohort of the same leadership course and as a research assistant in a quantitative lab served as starting points for our partnership and his learning across our project.

We strongly encourage future scholars employ the Students as Partners approach (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) to SoTL inquiry and consider a similar design. The second author was able to teach the full course, mentor the undergraduate student (first author), and remain completely removed from recruiting, focus groups, and any contact with the data before it was de-identified. Careful planning supported our different roles and kept the work ethical.

During the research process, we discovered the intersection of student agency, interpersonal connection, reflective thinking, and affective involvement is where learning took place for the students who participated in this research. A commitment to PBL where students collaborate, solve problems, and actively reflect on their experiences (Kokotsaki et al., 2016) was designed by the instructor. We encourage a careful exploration of PBL opportunities across higher education because of the deep impact this style of learning can make.

It is important to clarify expectations early for reflective work and relationship-building between students in classes where student agency, reflection, and openness between peers are success factors for learning. We suggest knowing student names and striving to build caring instructor-student relationships, despite growing class sizes, is needed in future iterations of this course and perhaps leadership courses in general.

Instructors interested in nurturing student agency should invest in professional learning focused on creating a sense of belonging and psychologically safe learning spaces (Gayle et al., 2013). Prior research has demonstrated caring instructors who set and maintain high expectations

for students contribute to classroom climates which enable student agency and responsibility (Weimer, 2013). We suggest reflection on Weimer's (2013) recommendation to express caring in ways which fit one's unique personality could strengthen an instructor's capacity for enabling student agency across disciplines.

Students told us the course was, for the most part, a valuable social learning space where activities and discussion-based experiences supported their leadership learning. Instructors aiming to enable undergraduate learning in similar contexts should consider using a variety of relevant discussions and daily small group learning activities. Scaffolding links between these activities and learners' lives could promote skill practice and transfer of learning into students' lives.

References

Ambrose, S., Bridges, M., Dipietro, M., Lovett, M., Norman, M., & Mayer, R. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. John Wiley.

Anderson, V., Rabello, R., Wass, R., Golding, C., Rangi, A., Eteuati, E., Bristowe, Z. & Waller, A. (2020). Good teaching as care in higher education. *Higher Education, 79*(1), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00392-6

Arthur, C. A., & Hardy, L. (2014). Transformational leadership: A quasi-experimental study. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *35*(1), 38-53. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-03-2012-0033

Bass, B., & Riggio, R. (2006). *Transformational leadership*. Lawrence Erlbaum. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095

Beauchamp, M. R., Barling, J., & Morton, K. L. (2011). Transformational teaching and adolescent self-determined motivation, self-efficacy, and intentions to engage in leisure time physical activity: A randomised controlled pilot trial. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, *3*(2), 127-150. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2011.01048.x

Benjamin, B., & Reilly, C. O. (2011). Becoming a leader: Early career challenges faced by MBA graduates. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *10*(3), 452-471. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2011.0002

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 6778,* 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Brown, P., Roediger, H., & McDaniel, M. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning.* Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674419377

Burke, S. (2016). Rethinking 'validity' and 'trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry: How might we judge the quality of qualitative research in sport and exercise sciences. In B. Smith & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 330-340). Taylor & Francis.

Carroll. N., & O'Donnell, M. (2010). Critical factors in student learning. *International Journal of Education Research, 5*(1), 59-69. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1058308.pdf

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017) Thematic analysis, *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12*(3), 297-298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Chunoo, V., & Osteen, L. (2016). Purpose, mission, and context: The call for educating future leaders. *New Directions for Higher Education, 174*, 9-20. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20185

Coelho, D., Tesch, F., & Drozdenko, R. (2012). Instructor behaviors that distract or enhance the learning process phase 1. *International Journal of Education Research, 7*(2), 86-96. http://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=86890233&site=ehost-live

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*. John Wiley.

Dalakoura, A. (2010). Differentiating leader and leadership development. *Journal of Management Development, 29*(5), 432-441. https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711011039204

Day, D., Fleenor, J., Atwater, L., Sturm, R., & Mckee, R. (2014). Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory. *The Leadership Quarterly, 25*(1), 63-82. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.004

Din, C., Paskevich, D., Gabriele, T., & Werthner, P. (2015). Olympic medal-winning leadership. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 10*(4), 589-604. https://doi.org/10.1260%2F1747-9541.10.4.589

Fedoruk, L. (2017). *Ethics in the scholarship of teaching and learning: Key principles and strategies for ethical practice*. Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/resources/guides

Felten, P. (2013). Principles of good practice in SoTL. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, *1*(1), 121-125. https://doi.org/10.2979/teachlearninqu.1.1.121

Gayle, B., Cortez, D., & Preiss, R. (2013). Safe spaces, difficult dialogues, and critical thinking. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 7(2), article 5. https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2013.070205

Katsioloudes, V., & Cannonier, N. (2019). Investing in critical leadership development with undergraduate students: A qualitative examination of a semester-long internship. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *18*(4), 50-67. https://doi.org/10.12806/V18/I4/R5

Keiler, L. (2018). Teachers' roles and identities in student-centred classrooms. *International Journal of STEM Education,* 5(34). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0131-6

Klemenčič, M. (2015). What is student agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement. In M. Klemenčič, S. Bergan, & R. Primožič (Eds.), *Student engagement in Europe: Society, higher education and student governance* (pp. 11-29). Council of Europe.

Klemenčič, M. (2017). From student engagement to student agency: Conceptual considerations of European policies on student-centered learning in higher education. *Higher Education Policy, 30*(1), 69-85. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-016-0034-4

Kokotsaki, D., Menzies, V., & Wiggins, A. (2016). Project-based learning: A review of the literature. *Improving Schools, 19*(3), 267-277. https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480216659733

Lawrason, S., Turnnidge, J., Martin, L. J., & Côté, J. (2019). A transformational coaching workshop for changing youth sport coaches' behaviors: A pilot intervention study. *The Sport Psychologist*, *1*(aop), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2018-0172

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2019). *The constructivist credo*. Routledge.

Lumpkin, A., & Achen, R. M. (2019). Leadership education assessment of learning in a leadership course. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *18*(2), 95-110. https://doi.org/10.12806/V18/I2/R7

Matthews, K., Divan, A., John-Thomas, N., Lopes, V., Ludwig, L., Martini, T., Motley, P., & Tomljenovic-Berube, A. (2013). SoTL and students' experiences of their degree-level programs: An empirical investigation. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry 1*(2), 75-89. https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.1.2.75

McRae, N., & Johnston, N. (2016). The development of a proposed global work-integrated learning framework. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 17*(4), 337-348. https://www.ijwil.org/files/APJCE_17_4_337_348.pdf

Morgan, D. L., & Krueger, R. A. (1998). *The focus group kit*. Sage.

Nichols (2016). *An ethnographic study on undergraduate business students' perceptions of transformational leadership modeling in the classroom* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Brandman University. https://digitalcommons.brandman.edu/edd_dissertations/43

Northouse, P. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Sage.

Nottingham, J. (2017). *The learning challenge: How to guide your students through the learning pit to achieve deeper understanding*. Corwin Press.

Pollock, P. H., Hamann, K., & Wilson, B. M. (2011). Learning through discussions: Comparing the benefits of small-group and large-class settings. *Journal of Political Science Education, 7*(1), 48-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2011.539913

Pym, J., & Kapp, R. (2013) Harnessing agency: Towards a learning model for undergraduate students, *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(2), 272-284. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.582096

Rolfe, A. M. (2015). *Instructor behaviours that enhance student-instructor rapport in undergraduate e-learning*. [Unpublished Master's thesis]. http://hdl.handle.net/10791/168

Saldaña J., & Omasta, M. (2018). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life*. Sage.

Sibold, W., Mueller, R., Lind, C., McCaffrey, G., & Ewashen, C. (2017). *Enhancing critical thinking through class discussion: A guide for using discussion-based pedagogy*. Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/resources/guides

Skalicky, J., Pedersen, K. W., van der Meer, J., Fuglsang, S., Dawson, P., & Stewart, S. (2020). A framework for developing and supporting student leadership in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(1), 100-116. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1522624

Vajoczki, S., Savage, P., Martin, L., Borin, P., & Kustra, E. D. (2011). Good teachers, scholarly teachers and teachers engaged in scholarship of teaching and learning: A case study from McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2*(1), 1-27. https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2011.1.2

Vande Wiele, P. V., Morris, D., Ribière, V., & Ermine, J. L. (2017). Project based learning for professional identity: A case study of collaborative industry projects in Marketing. *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning, 12*(2), 44-6. http://iiespace.iie.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11622/179/Philippe%20Vande%20Wiele%20et%20al%20Project%20Based%20Learning.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Walker, D.O.H. & Reichard, R.J. (2020), On purpose: Leader self-development and the meaning of purposeful engagement. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 14,* 26-38. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21680

Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centred teaching: Five key changes to practice* (2nd ed.). John Wiley.

Weimer, M. (2017). *Active learning: A practical guide for college faculty.* Magna.

Wenger-Trayner, E. (2013). The practice of theory: Confessions of a social learning theorist. In V. Farnsworth & Y. Solomon (Eds.), *Reframing educational research: Resisting the "what works" agenda* (pp. 105-118). Routledge.

Wenger, E., Trayner, B., & de Laat, M. (2011). *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities of practice and networks: A conceptual framework*. Report 18, Ruud de Moor Centrum, Open University of the Netherlands. https://wenger-trayner.com/resources/publications/evaluation-framework/

Wenger-Trayner, B., Wenger-Trayner, E., Cameron, J., Eryigit-Madzwamuse, S., & Hart, A. (2017). Boundaries and boundary objects: An evaluation framework for mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689817732225

Appendix A

Participant Focus Group Breakdown

Focus Group One: Participants A, B, C, D, E.
Focus Group Two: Participants F and G
Focus Group Three: Participant H
Focus Group Four: Participant I
Focus Group Five: Participant J, K, L.

Appendix B

Focus Group Guide

Introduction

Welcome and thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group.

I am going to audio record our discussion. The recordings and transcripts of our conversation are confidential, as outlined in the consent form. I cannot guarantee that other people in the group will not repeat what you say. So you are encouraged to only share things that you are comfortable sharing with others. But I will ask that once the discussion over, you keep it confidential. Information and quotations that emerge from our analysis will be used in publications and presentations of this research; however, any information that could be used in any way to identify you will be carefully removed from the data.

My aim and purpose is to understand your thoughts, experiences and feelings about learning leadership in (Course name). I am here to learn from you. There are no correct answers or points I hope to hear. I want to understand your unique perspectives and experiences.

1. Looking back on your experiences, what has helped your leadership learning most?
2. What has inhibited your leadership learning?
3. Did you find a specific leadership lesson boring, not worth attending?
4. Do you plan to continue trying to learn leadership in the future? If so how? Why?
5. Tell me about your experience in class? What was it like to be in (Course name) this fall?
6. What were the key takeaways, if any, from the course for you?
7. Did you apply any of your learning outside of the classroom? If so, can you provide examples.
8. What do you think supported your learning in (Course name) – what enabled it specifically? This may take a while to reflect on
9. Has your leadership made any impact in the roles you play outside of class? For example at work, in your sport, etc.
10. I think it might be too soon to ask this, but do you see any of your learning influencing your identity, the way you see yourself?

In this part of our discussion, I would like you to think about more specific experiences that relate to how people learn.

1. Did your instructor do anything to link your experience with the theories she was teaching? If so, what worked/didn't work from your perspective.
2. Experiential learning happens when we bridge our knowledge with experience and use critical reflection. Can you think of times you did this in (Course name), inside or outside of class?
3. Tell me about the role of reflection in this course.
4. What role did your peers play in your learning across the course?
5. Did your experiences influence your self-perception in any way?

Those are all of my questions. Does anyone have anything else they would like to add to the discussion? If you think of something after today, please email me, those later thoughts are often super helpful!

Thank you for participating in this focus group.