Innovative Teaching and Learning Strategies for Leadership in Context: A Rural Example*

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Abstract

The paper describes a graduate course deploying innovative instructional materials (e.g., the use of novels to provide context for theoretical constructs) and learning activities (e.g., community asset mapping) to engage issues of leadership in rural settings. Prior to describing the course itself, the paper develops a rationale for the importance of leadership approaches that emphasize cultural responsiveness and attentiveness to place and context (Johnson, 2007; Johnson, Thompson, & Naugle, 2009). In addition to a review of relevant literature from various academic disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, economics, political science) to provide background and develop a shared vocabulary and conceptual frameworks, the course combines academic texts engaging salient issues of policy and practice in rural education with appropriately positioned fictional representations of rural contexts to provide a common foundation for discussing the interrelationships between rural communities and rural schools.

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1 Sumario en espanol

El papel describe un curso para graduados que despliega materiales instruccionales innovadores (por ejemplo, el uso de novelas para proporcionar contexto para constructos teóricos) y actividades de aprendizaje (por ejemplo, ventaja de comunidad que traza) comprometer asuntos de liderazgo en ajustes rurales. Antes de describir el curso mismo, el papel desarrolla una base para la importancia de enfoques de liderazgo que acentúan la receptividad y la atención culturales colocar y el contexto (Johnson, 2007; Johnson, Thompson, & Naugle, 2009). Además de una revisión de la literatura pertinente de varias disciplinas académicas (por ejemplo, la sociología, la antropología, la economía, las ciencias políticas) proporcionar fondo y desarrollar un vocabulario compartido y armazones conceptuales, el curso combina textos de académico asuntos notables que simpáticos de la política y la práctica en la educación rural con representaciones ficticias apropiadamente posicionadas de contextos rurales para proporcionar una base común para discutir las interrelaciones entre comunidades rurales y escuelas rurales.

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2 Introduction

Educational leadership happens within particular *places*—i.e., within the intersecting and layered geographic and cultural contexts of school, community, and region. Traditional leadership models tend not to be attentive to culture, context or place (English, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2007; Ryan, 2005), and can be problematic for that reason—particularly in rural communities where place embodies a *land ethic* (Leopold, 1949) and where the legitimate authority of leaders (Weber, 1924/1968) is embedded in the history and culture of the place (Johnson, Hess, Larson, & Wise, 2010; Johnson, Shope, & Roush, 2009). Rural communities contend with many of the same challenges faced by their urban and suburban counterparts (e.g., fiscal stress, recruiting and retaining quality teachers and leaders, demographic shifts in the student population, high stakes accountability pressures); those challenges tend to be exacerbated in rural communities, however, due to (a) rural characteristics like remoteness and population sparsity that make it difficult to implement the kinds of programs and services that are typically deployed in the service of improving schools and (b) one-size-fits-all policy contexts that make it difficult for leaders to utilize the attributes and resources that rural contexts afford.

To work effectively within rural communities, educational leaders need a broad operational definition of *community asset* and must be able to identify and engage human as well as institutional assets within their local communities (Beaulieu, 2002). As operationalized here, a community asset is an existing element of the community (a natural environment, a physical structure, an organization, an individual, etc.) that offers the potential for benefitting both the element itself and those who engage it. An example would be a wetlands that offers the school an opportunity to do outdoor science projects that include water quality testing that can ultimately provide benefits to community well-being (while engaging students in authentic learning). In other words, leaders must be attentive to *place*. Leaders who utilize a place-conscious model of leadership emphasize responsive practice (as opposed to best practice), engage community members in decision-making and governance, increase stakeholder capacity, and ensure sustainability (Johnson, Thompson, & Naugle, 2009), resulting in positive educational outcomes for students.

This paper presents a conceptual/pedagogical model for a recently developed graduate course deploying innovative instructional materials and activities to examine leadership in rural settings. The course explicitly considers the nature of and potentiality for relationships between schools and rural communities, and construes educational leadership as a vehicle for contributing to the well-being and vitality of both educational institutions and the communities they serve. The following essential questions provide structure for the teaching and learning activities.

- How do rural schools and communities influence each other in terms of their organization, operation, and outcomes?

- What are the challenges facing both rural schools and communities? What assets do rural communities and schools possess with which they can confront the challenges they face?
- How can (or should) educational leaders marshal the resident resources (or assets) of schools and communities to confront the challenges facing each and to move forward individual and shared goals?

The course content and conceptual underpinnings are interdisciplinary, with material drawn from across the social sciences: education, sociology, anthropology, geography, and political science.

3 Course Format

In terms of sequencing, the current iteration of the course follows a survey course engaging leadership theory and another course exploring organization theory and organizational change. Positioned as such, the course operates under the assumption that students have a solid grounding in traditional approaches to leadership in educational organizations, and is intended to prompt critical reflection and re-investigation of common assumptions and understandings.

As a required course in a doctoral program (Ed.D.) in educational leadership that primarily enrolls practicing educational leaders, the course is presented in full-day sessions held over several Saturdays as part of a weekend cohort delivery model. In addition to the face-to-face class meetings, the course engages students through multiple avenues to build upon the sense of community that develops within the cohort of Educational Administration doctoral students. For example, students participate in structured conversations outside of the class through the use of Blackboard in three ways: (a) discussion of formal questions and discussion topics posed by the instructor (b) discussion of topics and prompts initiated by other students that reflect issues of policy, practice, and context directly and indirectly related to the course content, and (c) discussion of topics and shared materials (e.g., outside readings, current news items) posted to Blackboard by individual groups prior to group presentations to encourage reflection and function as an advance organizer for class discussion.

The course includes some fairly traditional learning activities designed to reinforce knowledge acquisition and application (readings, a book review, leading a class discussion about one of the shorter readings), along with innovative activities designed to engage students in the kind of contextual approach to leadership that the course seeks to promote and support. The section of this paper describing course activities highlights two primary learning activities: (a) community description and policy analysis, and (b) a community asset mapping activity in order to call attention to their innovative application in a course on rural leadership.

4 Course Content

Course content draws on varied social sciences (e.g., sociology, anthropology, economics, political science) to develop a multifaceted theoretical framework through which students can consider leadership that is responsive to rural contexts and seeks to overcome uniquely rural challenges by building on uniquely rural opportunities. The approach is not limited to rural contexts, however, and has application to other settings—particularly in low resource communities. In addition to engaging relevant empirical works that provide a general grounding for understanding rural community dynamics, the course combines the use of texts engaging salient issues of policy and practice in rural education (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; DeYoung, 1995) with appropriately positioned fictional representations of rural contexts (Berry, 2001; Drury, 2006; Proulx, 1999) to provide a common foundation for discussing the interrelationships between rural communities and rural schools. The following sections offer descriptions of the readings comprising each of the three categories, with an emphasis on how the pieces fit together to build a cumulative learning experience and encourage a layered perspective on leadership in a particular context.

4.1 Background Empirical Works

To provide a foundational-conceptual understanding and a common language through which to discuss leadership issues in the rural context, the course draws largely on selected readings obtained from a rural

sociology course developed by Schafft (2006). Preliminary readings engage fundamental questions about the characteristics and operationalization of rurality (Atkin, 2003; Bell, 1992; Brown & Cromartie, 2003; Fitchen, 1991; Halfacree, 2003; Lobao, 1996) and of community (Bell & Newby, 1971; Tonnies, 1887/1963; Wilkinson, 1991; Young, 1995). Building on this foundational content, a total of 32 readings (journal articles and individual book chapters—all of which are either readily available online or may be copied for distribution to students) are grouped into six topical areas to increase knowledge and build capacity among students with regard to the practice of social science in a rural context: (a) historical perspectives on rural education and rural communities; (b) intersection of schooling processes with community life and community structures; (c) rural poverty and its impacts on communities and schools; (d) demographic shifts in rural populations; (e) human capital, outmigration, and its impact on rural communities; and (f) social capital and its impacts on rural communities and rural schools (Schafft, 2006). By design, the topics and their accompanying readings move from the general and preparatory to the specific and more directly applicable to leadership policy and practice.

Selected chapters from three books (Cubberley, 1922; Peshkin, 1978; Sherman & Henry, 1933) offer a historical perspective on rural education and rural communities. The two chapters from the 1920s and 1930s highlight limitations in how rurality has been historically construed and understood, and reveal the deficit model that all too often still pervades thinking and talking about rurality today (Cubberly, 1922; Sherman & Henry, 1933). The contextual approach to leadership we espouse and explicitly emphasize in this course works against such a deficit model. The chapter from the 1970s work by Peshkin moves beyond the biases of its predecessors to disclose and describe the vital role that a school plays in the life of the community. This topic area frames more recent reading used in the course by illustrating the traditions out of which they evolved.

The group of readings investigating the intersection of schooling processes with community life and community structures (Bauch, 2001; Merz & Furman, 1997; Smith, 2002; Starrat, 2002; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000; Witherspoon, 1998) point to the potential for a sense of place (i.e., the environmental, historical, cultural, economic, and political meanings that accrue to a particular community) to inform curriculum, and to the potential for academic teaching and learning (i.e., the work that schools are expected to do) to benefit community. Of note, the different readings in this group engage these potentialities through varied constructs: community-based education, place-based learning, service learning, activist pedagogy, and community renewal/revitalization. These readings call students' attention to the potential in the kind of school-community interdependence that Peshkin (1978) introduced, turning it on its head to show that schools and communities can support and sustain each other (i.e., to describe how schools and communities can work together to build upon their shared and individual assets to overcome challenges facing each).

Readings investigating rural poverty and its impacts on communities and schools(Bickel, Smith, & Eagle, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Fitchen, 1999; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Schafft, 2005) move beyond both jingoistic language (e.g., "all kids will be proficient by 2014, regardless of the challenges they face") and predeterminist ideologies (e.g., "poor kids can't learn") to consider the complexities inherent in the way economic distress manifests among individuals, in households, and across communities, and the ways in which those varied manifestations impact schooling in rural settings both directly and indirectly. From these readings, students should take away an appreciation for the depth and breadth of poverty's influence on what happens in schools and communities, and should begin to formulate appropriate ideas for policy and practices that can work at ameliorating such influences.

Readings engaging demographic shifts in rural populations (Bushnell, 1999; Edmondson, 2001; Grey, 1997; Johnson & Strange, 2009; Miller, 1993; Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007; Salamon, 2003) collectively call attention to the dramatically changing face of rural America. Such changes range from the aging of rural population, to economic decline in some rural regions and economic growth (tied most often to exurban sprawl) in others, to the tremendous growth of English Language Learners (ELL) in rural schools. Such changes impact what schools are called upon to do and play a sizable role in determining the resources made available to them to carry out their mission. Anticipating demographic changes requires awareness and understanding of trends, and is vital to effective leadership, particularly in rural settings where smaller organizational scale and often remote locations can compound challenges by

making it more difficult to access the kinds of services and resources (e.g., ELL training) that schools need to effectively meet the needs of their students and their communities.

The third group of readings (Cushing, 1999; Gibbs, 1998; Hektner, 1995; Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996; Lichter, McLaughlin, & Cornwell, 1995) considers the role that human capital plays in rural communities and the role that rural communities play in the development of human capital. Put simply, human capital includes the knowledge bases and skill sets of an individual that can be translated into economic value—the ability to generate income and/or wealth (Johnson, et al., 2010). The issue of *rural brain drain* (i.e. the outmigration of human capital from rural places) is one of particular salience to educational leadership in rural areas. The issue receives close examination in these works, and sets the stage for discussion around how schools contribute to outmigration and the loss of human capital, what it means for communities, and how schools can be organized and operated in different ways to pursue outcomes that can contribute to sustainability and revitalization of rural communities.

The final group of readings explores social capital, rural communities and rural education (Castle, 1998; Coleman, 1998; Israel & Beaulieu, 2004; Portes, 2000; Ream, 2003; Russell & Elder; Schafft & Brown, 2003; Singh & Dika, 2003) engaging a construct that is often not well understood (or at least not in a meaningful way that allows for marshaling its potential) by educational leaders (Johnson, Hess, Larson, & Wise, 2010). Briefly, social capital refers to the value that accrues to relationships and networks of relationships. This form of capital is especially important in rural communities where traditional lines of authority tend to be superceded by authority that is embedded in the history and culture of the place (Johnson, et al, 2010; Johnson, Shope, & Roush, 2009). The emphasis, then, is on examining and understanding the (changing) social relationships that exist in rural communities through the theoretical frames of *lifeworld/systems-world* (Habermas, 1987; Sergiovanni, 2000), and *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* (Tonnies 1887/1963). Habermas's social theory of *lifeworld/systems world* expands on existing theories of *lifeworld* as the horizon of one's experiences – the dynamic reality in which we live (Husserl, 1936/1970) to describe private and public life. Sergiovanni used the lifeworld/systems-world construct as a frame for discussing the organizational structure of schools and for construing schools as communities as opposed to organizations. Tonnies (1887/1963) described *Gemeinschaft* as relationships or associations that develop from instinct or natural will, the most representative example being the relationship between mother and child. In *gemeinschaftlich* relationships, commitments are assumed, taken for granted, and based on kinship or place (neighborhood). *Gesellschaft* represents the public world or society in which relationships are voluntary, based on exchange, and are a means to an end. To lead effectively in rural settings, practitioners must understand and be attentive to existing social networks, cultivating relationships with legitimate authority figures and networks (Weber, 1968) and challenging those that impede the shared goals of the school and the community.

4.2 Book-length Works Relevant to Rural Education Policy and Practice

Blending empirical works with fictional texts provides a common foundation and context for discussing educational policy issues that are salient to work of educational leadership in rural settings (e.g. school and district consolidation, pupil transportation, funding equity and adequacy, NCLB and state accountability requirements, academic tracking within schools). Four books that directly and indirectly address these issues are offered for consideration here. It is not expected that a course would require all four; rather, we typically require two, one assigned and the other selected by the student. The books vary considerably in terms of content. The two most academic in tone are *Learning to Leave* (Corbett, 2007) and *Little Kanawha Farewell* (DeYoung, 1995). Using qualitative data from rural fishing villages in eastern Canada, Corbett (2007) offers an analysis of the way schools are organized and operated to efficiently export human capital (their best and brightest students) to metropolitan areas. DeYoung (1995) provides a social-anthropological investigation of a West Virginia community as it wrestles with school consolidation.

Hollowing out the Middle (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) is one of those rare crossovers—a book that engages academic content and themes but earns a more mainstream readership on the basis of its compelling narrative. Carr and Kefalas spent more than a year living in a rural Iowa town and studying the interaction of school and community. Their findings suggest that schools and school leaders not only invest most heavily in the

students they know will leave and underinvest in those students who will stay (and form the basis for the town's future), but that they do so knowingly. Thus, schooling operates in ways that will ultimately lead to the demise of the community as well as the school (cf. Corbett, 2007).

The dynamics of small town life are captured in *Deer Hunting with Jesus* (Bageant, 2007), a work of gonzo journalism written by a rural expatriate who returned to his hometown after more than 30 years away. The discussion of how the Right co-opted working class voters in recent decades provides useful context for discussing federal education policy under the Bush and Obama administrations.

4.3 Fictional Representations of Rural Communities

As noted earlier, a decidedly different and innovative pedagogical approach involves the use of fictional representations of rural contexts (e.g., Berry, 2001; Drury, 2006; Proulx, 1999) to provide a common foundation for applying abstract constructs derived from the more empirical readings, and, more generally, for discussing the interrelationships between rural communities and rural schools. The readings provide a rich context for students who have limited personal experience from which to discuss rural issues. In essence, the fictional narratives become a source of qualitative data for group discussion and analysis of rural communities. Of considerable value is the fact that students can look broadly, deeply, and critically at these communities without the limitations or biased perceptions that are often present when looking at the place or community to which one belongs. Looking closely and critically at the community is important for educational leaders, even necessary; using fiction as an entrée allows students to clarify their understandings under less threatening circumstances, and should help build their capacity to more effectively analyze the communities where they serve.

Jayber Crow (Berry, 2001) chronicles the history of a rural Kentucky community through the eyes of the town barber, a man whose social standing and personality positions him to be a witness to most everything that occurs in the town but not an active participant in anything. This point of view results in a sociological perspective on the town and its inhabitants. The inclusion of a school consolidation in the narrative (and the results of that consolidation on the community the school served) makes this novel a good choice as a companion piece to the DeYoung (1995) text. It should be noted, however, that the depiction of rural community life in the novel resonates with the other readings as well, both book-length and shorter empirical works.

Shipping News (Proulx, 1999) is set in Newfoundland, and so seems a natural a match for Corbett's (2007) qualitative study though it too includes characters and dynamics that have relevance to the academic works considered here and will resonate with students from rural areas in the US. Proulx's (1999) narrative tells the story of man who leaves the city and rebuilds a shattered life in a small community. Importantly, the novel does not paint a false rural idyll (there is indeed much about Killick-Claw that is not idyllic), but rather paints a realistic portrait that provides ample opportunity for students to use the fictional creation as data through which to engage key ideas and constructs from the earlier readings and to compare them with their own experiences.

Like Carr & Kefalas's (2009) study of rural outmigration, *The End of Vandalism* (Drury, 2006) is set in Iowa. This novel interweaves the narratives of various characters across multiple and diverse rural communities in Grouse County, Iowa. Not much happens in Grouse County, but there is considerable activity, some of it centered on the (consolidated) high school and much of it involving local leaders. The structure has particular relevance for discussing school leadership in a consolidated district, where diverse and far-flung communities are forcibly melded together to form an artificial entity, all in the (purported) interests of economic efficiency. Even students who have never been to the Midwest Plains tend to recognize characters and events from their own rural communities and have an opportunity to apply theories and concepts to the data offered by the novel's characters and narrative.

4.4 Learning Activities

Our discussion here focuses on two primary learning activities used in the course: (a) a community description and policy analysis and (b) a community asset mapping activity. We focus on these two assignments here

because they are more comprehensive in calling upon students to integrate readings from different disciplines and theory with practice, and because they represent the innovation that distinguishes this course from most others engaging leadership theory and practice.

For the community analysis/policy analysis, students identify an educational policy issue with relevance to rural communities and educational leadership in a rural. They then position that policy issue within the context of a particular rural community (derived from one of the novels), analyze the issue using readings engaged throughout the course (and others as needed), and formulate a policy proposal that reflects an understanding of traditional considerations (applicable legal requirements, recommendations from the *best practices* literature) but is also responsive to the contexts of the particular place in which the policy issue is set. An example of this assignment would be the analysis of a proposed school consolidation that would require students to develop understandings of both the administrative issues involved (e.g., fiscal impacts, staffing impacts) and the social/cultural implications (e.g., the history of the communities where the current schools are located, the social structure of the district in which the schools are located).

Students are also required to complete and present a community asset map (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Through this process students research, prepare, and present salient information on the community served by his or her school or district with an emphasis on capacities, assets, and resident resources. Leaders, particularly rural leaders, are well served by knowing and understanding what assets exist in their immediate environment. The community asset mapping project provides an opportunity to obtain and then apply this critical knowledge within the student's own community. Moreover, and just as importantly, community asset mapping models for students an alternate approach to the needs-driven medical model (cf. Brown, Hammer, Foley & Woodring, 2009) of identifying what's broken or wrong with something/someone and attempting to fix it. This activity is designed to be a purposeful and applied exercise that will result in an increased understanding of assets in the communities served by their district as well as a plan for engaging the assets to address issues of local importance. Of note, asset mapping allows for a great deal of latitude and we encourage creativity in the way in which the information is assembled and presented (e.g., using Google Earth with imbedded links to websites describing particular assets).

5 Accreditation Standards

In its current iteration, the course is taught as part of a doctoral program in educational leadership and thus is not subject to accreditation standards (e.g., Educational Leadership Constituents Council or ELCC). The course could be readily adapted for use in superintendent or principal licensure programs, however, as indicated by its alignment with established standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). While the course content and activities support and reinforce all six ELCC standards, the focus on community and context is especially pertinent for building knowledge and capacity for application in the leadership areas described by standard four (*candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources*) and standard six (*candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context*). Moreover, in addition to shaping program content, the community asset mapping activity presents the basis for an ELCC key assessment (e.g., assessment #7 covering organizational management and community relations, for which the current version of the community asset mapping project would meet the following ELCC elements: 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3).

6 Conclusion

The readings selected for this course bring awareness to the challenges facing rural schools and communities, but encourage educational leaders to work against the deficit thinking that often pervades discussions of rurality and to instead consider rurality from an assets-based perspective. In this course, blending empirical

works with fictional texts provides a common foundation and context for discussing the challenges facing rural schools and communities (e.g. the influence of poverty on schools and communities, demographic shifts in student populations, and educational policies that too often impede rather than contribute to the development of social capital), as well as the interrelationships between schools and communities.

Although the specific context and content of this course is rural, the underlying approach can be applied in other settings (particularly under-resourced settings), including urban environments. Indeed, reading material that would support a parallel inquiry into leadership in urban contexts—both empirical and fictional readings—abound. The activities described within this paper provide educational leaders with the opportunity to build relationships with community members through substantive and meaningful work with and within their communities (i.e. community asset mapping). Cultivating the dispositions, knowledge, and skills to value and enlist members of the leaders' own local communities (i.e. seeing community members as assets) in improving the school as well as the community itself is a worthwhile pursuit for programs preparing educational leaders for any locale.

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