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Abstract

Adopting a social constructionist approach to the teaching of leadership, we asked students in a required course in management to find or create and submit a digital image that captures leadership as they see it. Our intention was to help students understand their own perceptions of leadership and to see how their perceptions compare to those of others. We have run this exercise for the last 10 years (2000–2009), and to date we have collected 5037 digital images. These images are used throughout the course to demonstrate the relevance of the subject, to enrich the discussion of leadership theories, to help embed the teaching, and to illuminate classroom exercises and team project work. This social constructionist approach aligns the course's philosophical stance on leadership with its pedagogy. In addition, this approach has allowed us to capture students' collective lay theory of leadership which offers a valuable counterpoint to extant theories of leadership. Moreover, this approach lends further support to the use of a socially constructed approach to leadership education.
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Introduction

This paper makes a contribution to the literature about teaching leadership by outlining a new approach grounded in the social constructionist perspective.[1] In the body of this paper, we describe a new teaching technique based on the identification and analysis of student-selected digital images of leadership in a required undergraduate management class at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Over the course of 10 years (2000–2009), students were asked at the start of the course to provide an image that represented leadership as they see it. During this period, over 5000 images were uploaded by students into an electronic archive. We call this initiative the *Images of Leadership* project (http://www.wharton.upenn.edu/learning/images_of_leadership.cfm). This project has provided us with a diverse and growing array of images that enhance class discussion of key topics and readings and provide stimuli for exercises and project team work. In the following pages, we identify the theoretical underpinnings of our pedagogical

approach and explore the use of images of leadership as a teaching and learning device in the classroom.

Socially constructed theories and leadership education

The social constructionist approach to leadership holds that leadership is a property of observers rather than leaders. In short, leadership is in the eye of the beholder, not an innate characteristic of individuals (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). Grint (1997), using the term 'constitutive' approach for the social constructionist perspective, captures the essence of the approach well. He says that much of what we appreciate as leadership is a consequence of various accounts and interpretations, rather than a consequence of objective or rational analysis. Grint (2000) further suggests that leaders actively shape our interpretation of the environment, challenges, goals, competition, and strategy. Leadership, according to Grint, is essentially a social phenomenon; leaders must construct an imaginary community that followers want to join. Since all accounts of leadership are derived from linguistic reconstructions, constructionism rejects the idea of objective accounts and favors the importance of community narrative or myth.

For Fairhurst (2009), expressing leadership is a matter of negotiating meaning. She observes that context is multi-layered, co-created, contestable, and locally achieved, and she argues that communication is more than an act of transmission; it is about the construction and negotiation of meaning. In much the same spirit, Grint (2005: 1471) comments, "the book is never closed, but permanently open to contestation." Ford and Lawler (2007: 419) argue that examining the social construction of leadership requires us to consider how relationships are described and understood by the individuals involved, using their own language and conversation. In their words, "encouraging dialogue to examine leadership provides a means of discerning the meanings that individuals attribute to relationships and to leadership."

Although usually deployed as a critical perspective on traditional approaches (for example, trait, contingency, and situational approaches to leadership; Grint and Jackson, 2010), constructionism can also be used as an approach to teaching leadership (Billsberry, 2009). Billsberry (2009) acknowledges that leadership is a contested construct and makes a clear case for the adoption of a socially constructed approach to leadership education.

According to him, a major advantage of a socially constructed theory is that it avoids problems such as disagreements about definitions and offers instructors an opportunity to align theory with pedagogical practice. Instructors may use alternative teaching methods, film clips for example, to help students realize and define their own understanding of leadership. Students become valued observers of leadership in action, and the practice gives value to students' interpretations and assessments of leadership. Language becomes an essential medium; through discussion and debate, perceptions and understanding of leadership surface. In this way, the essential aims of leadership education are to help students understand their own definitions and experiences of leadership in context (Billsberry, 2009).

Images of Leadership project

In the teaching approach we describe in the remainder of this paper, we have adopted a social constructionist approach to leadership. Although we felt obligated to review traditional theories of leadership, we wanted to juxtapose these against our students' lay theories of leadership. Most important, we wanted to elicit the lay theories before the course began so that the students were not 'tainted' by hearing about other theories of leadership. Then, throughout the course, we wanted to give students opportunities to see how their own lay theories of leadership were changed and shaped by course readings and activities. In this way, students were exposed to course concepts, and they were able to explore the relevance of these concepts to themselves.

For most people, lay theories of leadership are only roughly formed. Few people have a clear idea about how they define leadership. This is particularly the case when young students have not had any formal training in leadership. Asking them to define their understanding of leadership is reliant on consciously held thoughts and denies unconsciously held perceptions. To address this issue, we used a projective device that captures a general sense of the concept when full description is problematic (Billsberry et al., 2005). In our course, we asked our students to choose or create an image that best captures leadership for them and then to upload the image to a website. With their posted images as a point of reference, students can subsequently explore how their lay theories of leadership change or explain their reactions to the leadership theories presented in the course.

Participants. All 5037 first-year undergraduate students enrolled during the falls of 2000–2009 in a required management foundation course, *Leadership and Communication in Groups*, participated in this project. The typical class is comprised of approximately 540 first year undergraduate students with an average age between 18 and 19 years old; 61% are male, 43% identify themselves as multicultural, 83% are domestic students, and 17% are international.

Course description. The primary objectives of the course are to strengthen each student's ability to exercise leadership through service, to speak and write persuasively, and to work collaboratively with a diverse group of individuals. The course is highly experiential, using role plays, simulations, and team project work in the field. The teaching philosophy broadly adopts a social constructionist approach by relying on student experience before formal instruction. The use of images as a teaching device allows us to give students' lay theories a prime place in the classroom.

Use of digital images in the classroom. The five hundred or so images posted at the onset of the semester by each year's class serve as the archive of images for that class. Each participant is asked to complete a required online consent form before selecting and uploading an image to our secure website. All images include the source URL and any available copyright information. Each student's image remains posted and unaltered in the archive, and students revisit and re-think their image periodically throughout the course.

Reflections on the use of these images in the classroom. In the following paragraphs, we give several illustrations of the way we have come to use student images over the past 10 years, including one recent innovation.

On the very first day of class, instructors typically ask students to sit in project teams of approximately 10 students, discuss the images they created or selected, and give the reasons for their choice. As each student expresses the meaning that his or her image holds, the team members listen for common themes. Then, we ask each team to select one image that team members would like to present as emblematic of the values they aspire to keep as they work together throughout the semester. A typical emblematic image is that of geese flying in formation. This image appeals to students because they

say that that the 'V' formation evokes the idea of working both separately and interdependently. After teams discuss their aspirational images in the front of the class, the class as a whole considers these images against the backdrop of a reading such as "The Work of Leadership" (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997). Instructors might use the image of the flock of geese to highlight the authors' notion that "*A leader, from above or below, with or without authority*, has to engage people in confronting the challenge, adjusting their values, changing perspectives, and learning new habits" (emphasis ours). The process of selecting one representative team image requires students to engage in a conversation about their own perceptions of leadership in relationship to the perspectives of authors in the field; moreover, the process establishes a starting point for subsequent discussions about leadership.

Since the fall of 2008, we have augmented the first assignment by asking our students to tag their image with the three words they see as most emblematic. Now instructors can automatically retrieve and display these word tags in order of frequency. Out of 555 images and essays posted in the fall of 2009, the three most popular tags were *respect*, *courage*, and *passion*. As instructors meeting our students for the first time, we knew that any discussion of leadership should take into account these qualities if we wanted to reflect a perspective on leadership commonly held by the students enrolled in our course.

At key intervals throughout the semester, we ask students to re-examine their original images and tags and add new classifications of their image from a menu of choices taken from assigned readings and survey instruments. For example, last fall, after students read Goleman's discussion of styles in *Leadership that gets results* (2000), students logged back into the website and selected one of the six styles that best related to their image (either "authoritative," "affiliative," "democratic," "coaching," "pace-setting," or "coercive"). Instructors were able to launch class discussion by pulling up an image. For example, the image of Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian statesman, was tagged by one student as "coercive" because he saw Bismarck's style as highly directive and autocratic. Instructors were able to contrast that image with another, perhaps, the famous painting of "Liberty Leading the People" that another student tagged as "authoritative" because Liberty pulls her followers along saying, in effect, come follow me, the defining expression of authoritative leadership.

The iterative process of re-reading and re-classifying images allows students to reconsider their initial perceptions in the context of their ongoing dialogue about leadership.

Towards the end of the term, instructors ask the students to assess their performance as a team and to consider the distribution of particular roles in their groups. Using McCann and Margerison's (1989) template of work role preferences as a vehicle for discussion, we ask students to place their images of leadership on the team management wheel; that is, under one of the categories "Explorer," "Organizer," "Controller," or "Adviser" on the perimeter or "Linker" at the center. For example, a student selecting astronaut Neil Armstrong as the original image of leadership might place this image under the heading Explorer. Once everyone in the team has placed images on the wheel, team members compare their ideal roles with reality and consider the following questions: What preference have they demonstrated thus far in the semester? What changes might they make to balance the team in the eleventh hour of the term? Once discussion of individual roles is complete, we ask teams to return to the emblematic image they selected at the start of the semester and to consider whether team members made their aspirations a reality. If the emblematic image was a flock of geese, did team members make separate and interlocking contributions to their team project?

Over the last 2 years, we have concluded the course by sorting all of the tagged images in real time and conducting a dramatic unmasking of the data in the classroom to show how the class as a whole had retagged their initial images in light of the readings and instruments. The process of tagging and subsequent retagging allows students to reconsider and reframe their image in the context of the ongoing dialogue about leadership and to share their reformulation with the rest of the class. With each subsequent re-tagging of the images, the class begins to see the emergence of a dynamic and collective picture of leadership; in other words, a 'socially' constructed picture of leadership. Table 1 summarizes the course concepts, corresponding assigned readings and survey instruments, highlighting the dominant tags selected by 555 students taking the course during the fall 2009 semester.

Taken as a whole, the snapshot of leadership portrayed by the fall 2009 class reveals that the primary quality of leadership is bravery and courage. The dominant temperament or personality profile is guardian, known for cooperative actions and concrete language. The salient leadership behavior is expressing authority. The main leadership style, authoritative, pulls others along by saying, in effect, "Come follow me." The top negotiating style is collaborative, taking into account the interest of self and others. And the most preferred work role is that of the visionary and explorer. Seeing this picture of leadership develop over the semester, individual students can reflect on whether their images reflect their aspirations or the way they enact leadership. They can also compare and contrast their aspirations and expressions of leadership with those of the community as a whole. The process repeats itself term after term inasmuch as each new class uploads fresh images to the website and gradually establishes its own collective view of leadership.

Conclusion

Using the images of leadership exercise in our class helps make the study of leadership relevant and plays to the technological aptitude of students today. It is important to note, however, that making use of this exercise does not require technology and the kind of elegant website we have been fortunate enough to use. Students can create or download images and bring a printout to class, use pictures from a magazine, or do impromptu sketches on the spot. Whether high- or low-tech, the images of leadership exercise starts with

Table 1 Course concepts, sources, and dominant tags selected by 555 students, fall 2009.

Topic	Source	Dominant tag
Character strengths	VIA character strengths survey	Bravery ($n=109$)
Temperaments	Kiersey temperament sorter	Guardian ($n=286$)
Behaviors	FIRO-B	Control ($n=272$)
Leadership styles	Goleman (2000)	Authoritative ($n=222$)
Negotiation styles	Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument	Collaborating ($n=335$)
Work role preferences	McCann and Margerison (1989)	Explorer ($n=164$)

the assumption that the concept of leadership is socially constructed and, moreover, that we must bring students into the conversation about their conceptions of leadership. The images of leadership exercise also enables us to construct a collective picture of leadership while preserving and honoring the many contesting views of individual students. In addition, this exercise gives students the opportunity to place the dynamic and dominant portrait of leadership in the context of classic literature in the field and, moreover, to consider how they as emerging leaders have expressed leadership to date and what traits, behaviors, or styles they would like to strengthen.

The collective portrait of leadership is worthy of attention not because it is the right view but because it reflects the combined perspectives and interpretations of an active community of student viewers and class participants. To borrow from Stanley Fish (1980: 168), "interpretive strategies are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them."

Note
[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, August 3–8, 2007, in Philadelphia.

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