Servant Leadership:
Innovative Leader Development
in the Online Classroom and Beyond

Lora Reed
Ashford University
Lora.Reed@ashford.edu

Andree Swanson
Ashford University
Andree.Swanson@ashford.edu

ABSTRACT

By virtue of the ways online higher education faculty interface with students in asynchronous learning environments, they are rarely what King (1993) described as sages on the stage. Rather, faculty are facilitators of learning or guides on the side. Indeed, effective online faculty members often teach and otherwise encourage learners who may be isolated and alone at computers. Such learners may be preparing to lead families, communities and organizations in a dynamic global environment. This paper explores whether online faculty fit the servant leader model characterized in Robert Greenleaf's (1978) vision beyond the Leadership Crisis. And, if they do, are online faculty who model servant leadership in the classroom and other interactions with learners assisting in leader development? Do faculty model the type of leadership that is conducive to innovative organizational cultures? Do they create trust and meaningful relationships that sustain both student and faculty as continuous learners? These research questions are considered in the context of the online classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary undergraduate and graduate students engage in online courses as part of earning their degrees. In fact, statistics show that as early as in the 2007-08 academic year 20% of US undergraduates, over 4.3 million students, enrolled in at least one online course (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). According to Carron (2006), adult learners engage in online education more frequently than traditional undergraduates do. To succeed in an online course, one must be accountable, have a high level of maturity, and demonstrate intrinsic motivation (Carron, 2006). Online education offers adults asynchronous learning platforms wherein they can complete course work at times that are conducive to their schedules. Although numbers of students and programs are still growing, online education can be perceived as controversial. The availability of online education has challenged university and college decision makers to perceive themselves, students and education differently. Stakeholders are dared to rethink their education paradigms in terms of creativity and innovation, both increasingly valuable commodities in the 21st century. The development of online education platforms has required different resource dedications than more traditional brick and mortar institutions. Educational decision makers are now afforded opportunities for new technologies to be tested for purposes of reaching students with diverse learning styles and modalities, as well as physical challenges that previously inhibited their learning in other classroom environments. Online education continues to present students and faculty alike with virtual venues wherein dialogue and ideas can be exchanged with colleagues in distant locations. Distance education has provided a means of sustaining learning communities that address complex problems from dissimilar perspectives and embracing the goals of peoples from around the globe.

On the other hand, online education has brought with it new challenges. For example, without vibrant teacher presence and strong student engagement, it can be yet another classroom space in which less than stellar students hide out. Some academics have used this and similar arguments to support their views as to why online education will never work on a grand scale. Clearly, online education is working on a grand scale and it is here to stay – that is, until the next big idea comes along and replaces current models of faculty-student engagement. For now, however, even though the finest Ivy League colleges and universities may offer free access to Massive Online Open Access Courses (MOOCs), distinct issues related to establishing teacher presence, engaging students in meaningful learning and student retention in online education exist. The notion that some faculty members do serve as servant leaders as one means of enhancing online learning and especially leader development is explored in this paper.

BACKGROUND

As online education has become a norm in most institutions of higher education, learners adapt to, and either love or hate the online learning environment. Experienced faculty who have often taught on-ground and in asynchronous classrooms continue to explore ways of improving their teaching and bringing their courses to life. One faculty member recently reported that course design and delivery are clearly distinctly different animals. Online courses are expertly designed, peer reviewed and quality certified, thereby creating consistently excellent course content and learning environment; the only variables left to chance are engagement between faculty and learner (Davis, 2013). In other words, the faculty are free to focus on course delivery in ways that demonstrate teaching at its finest, where they can serve students by caring about, engaging with, and leading them in active pursuit of knowledge. Faculty are free to explore meaningful theory and practice of course material and to model application with examples of experience, as well as role modeling in the classroom.

Johnson, Ehrlich, Watts Taffe and Williams (2013) found in their recent qualitative study on teacher identity, that online teaching is not comfortable for every faculty member. Among their findings, Johnson et al. (2013) realized that moving from on-ground to a virtual environment can impact teacher identity, influencing a faculty member's teaching manner and how he or she interacts with students. A faculty person who enjoys the drama of being the center of attention might not enjoy teaching in an online learning environment. Yet, the online classroom may be a perfect fit for faculty who lead by serving, the primary characteristic that differentiates servant leaders from all other leadership styles (Greenleaf, [1970] 1991).

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant Leadership is a term that was coined by Robert Greenleaf ([1970] 1991), although many leadership scholars believe the term predates to Biblical times (Matthew 23:11 New International Version). Servant leaders are different from all other types of leaders because of their motivation to serve rather than lead. Servant Leadership framework articulates the relational, moral and emotional dimensions of leadership in useful ways that benefit more than just one individual or organization (Reed, Vidaver-Cohen & Colwell, 2011). The best test of a servant leader, which Greenleaf ([1970] 1991, p. 7) conceded was problematic to oversee was, "[D]o those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" In addition, for the servant leader, it was important to know, "what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?" One might question why such lofty goals might be more applicable in online education than in other venues. The distinction between King's (1993) "sage on the stage" and "guide on the side" must be taken into consideration at this point.

The sage on the stage is the central figure in a traditional classroom. The sage has knowledge that is transmitted one-directionally to students who "memorize the information and later reproduce it on an exam – often without even thinking about it" (King, 1993, p. 2). As King (1993) and other teachers in organizations such as Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning (ABSEL) have reported for many years, the transmittal teaching method is no longer appropriate as 21st century problems require learners to think critically, create new knowledge and work together to frame and solve complex problems. King (1993) described such learners as similar to carpenters, actively learning through the constructivist model to combine new information with prior knowledge, assisted by a guide on the side whose role is more facilitative and less directive than his or her sage on the stage counterpart.

King (1993) suggested that would-be guides on the side should gradually implement active learning in their classrooms. In 2013, what King (1993, p. 2) described as "guided reciprocal peer questioning" is now standard practice in online discussion forums; coupled with servant leadership, the standard practice can engage students in challenging their mental models. Instructors serve as facilitators of a learning community wherein students engage in collaboration, construction of knowledge and provoking thoughts from one another. At best, this can be, "an environment in which consensual dreams can emerge that have the power to guide purpose and decision in ways that make for greatness" (Greenleaf ([1978] 1986).

Most imaginative on-ground classroom teachers have been working to affect the paradigm shift that King (1993) put forth because, among other reasons, the transmittal method is not the most effective way to engage students or impart information, much less manage knowledge and build innovative organizations in the 21st century.

TEACHERS AS LEADERS IN THE CLASSROOM

Barbuto (2000) posited that aside from issues such as instructional methods, instructors "are leaders of the classroom experience" (p. 164). Classroom instructors have diverse leadership styles that can be conducive to various goals. For example, transactional leaders, who may be low or high order, depend on their power and control of resources that are desirable to followers. A low order transactional leader focuses on followers' instrumental needs and a high order transactional leader attends to interpersonal needs of followers. Situational leaders focus

on "leader-behavior dyadic relationships with little regard for the organizational focus or mission" and an emphasis on moving followers from merely focusing on their own personal interests to organizational goals (Barbuto, 2000, p. 164). Organizational goals may be those of the collective class or group of students, the academic institution, the greater community and/or society at large. Importantly, in order for leadership to be effective, it must consider the needs and motivations of the followers. Consistently, Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) proposed that a leader must always consider the developmental level or his or her followers.

FOLLOWER DEVELOPMENT

Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) proposed that leadership, whether transformational or transactional, needs to be considered in terms of the level of development of the followers on which it is focused. Barbuto (2000) considered the same model in the context of Kegan's (1982) 5-stages of human development and the classroom environment. Table 1 is an adaptation of Barbuto's (2000) framework for relationships between Kegan's (1982) stages of development and Kuhnert and Lewis' (1987) leader-follower interaction correlations.

Notably, at stages 4- 5 in Barbuto's (2000) model, the Institutional and Inter-individual stages, the recommended leadership style is that of Servant or Stewardship. This indicates that, to Barbuto (2000) and in the classroom, Servant Leadership is related to a higher-order of human development.

PROFILE OF A 21ST CENTURY ONLINE LEARNER AS FOLLOWER

As early as 2008, 20% of United States learners that engaged in higher education had taken at least one online course (NCES, 2011). In many online programs the vast majority of learners are adults attempting to include one

more priority into their already busy lives so they can improve career or other prospects for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. These are often learners who must actively challenge their mental models to lead families, organizations and communities in a changing global economy and in a time when innovation is critical for organizations of all types to remain competitive. In many cases, such individuals are also the first person or a member of the first generation of their family to move toward achievement of a post-secondary credential. These learners are people who envision a better life through the dream that is higher education, but they are also often people who are isolated and conflicted by many commitments.

Some online learners run the risk of over-conformity with the course material due to fear of non-compliance with the instructor. Other online learners may be so focused on their own self-interest (e.g., personal goals) that they may not easily consider the bigger picture that surrounds them beyond the online classroom and the immediate objectives of passing a course. Still other online learners may not even realize that temptations to take an easier path to knowledge than they might be wise to use is due to the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility that occurs when others are not face-to-face with the learner to challenge an individual action.

GREENLEAF'S ([1978] 1986) *LEADERSHIP CRISIS*

Robert Greenleaf ([1978] 1986) knew that every institution exists to live out a great dream. Academe is home to students and faculty who generally aspire to big ideas. To Greenleaf ([1978] 1986), institutions were capable of functioning better, "when the idea, the dream, is to the fore, and the person, the leader is seen as servant of the idea." This premise works well at all organizational levels in institutions of higher education. It is demonstrated to students when Servant Leaders are leaders in the

EXHIBIT 1
LEARNER DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER AS LEADER INTERACTION

Assessment	Selection	Outcome
Development	Teaching/Leadership Style	
0) Incorporative	Authoritarian	
1) Impulsive	Low Order Transactional	
2) Imperial	High Order Transactional	Student Development
3) Interpersonal	Transformational	
4) Institutional	Servant Leadership or Stewardship	
5) Inter-Individual		

ADAPTED FROM BARBUTO, 2000

classroom.

Greenleaf ([1978] 1986), a management consultant and former executive of AT&T, knew that effective leadership practices, "…in business seem equally applicable in the academic world". Greenleaf ([1978] 1986) asserted that colleges and universities are charged with the goals of being conscious of their impacts on society through higher education. In *The Leadership Crisis*, he averred that it is imperative for colleges and universities to realize that one of their roles is to continue building civilization. To that end, Greenleaf ([1978] 1986), cautioned that there is a difference between 'training' and 'preparing' future leaders. "'Preparation' is a much more subtle process" (Greenleaf ([1978] 1986, p. 2).

LEADER PREPARATION
IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

How can faculty as servant leaders practically prepare learners for leadership in the 21st Century? How, if at all, does this pertain specifically to the online classroom as a learning environment? Perhaps the online classroom provides a unique learning venue wherein, at its best, all learners engage in dialogue with each other and with the faculty leading the course. Perhaps discussion forums and team activities and simulations, when facilitated by servant leaders, can be assignments in which mental models can be challenged and visions can be shared for purposes of building people and sharing ideas that focus on common objectives beyond those of the immediate course completion. Maybe the online classroom provides a 'place' wherein learners and faculty alike can participate and, as Greenleaf ([1978] 1986, p. 8) hoped "…the idea, the dream, is to the fore, and the person, the leader, is seen as servant of the idea." In a classroom environment such as this, "[d]reams should be articulated by whomever is the ablest dreamer, and leaders should always be open to persuasion by dreamers" (Greenleaf [1978] 1986, p. 8). An important consideration of the online classroom is that all students participate in discussion, ideas exchange, and other activities wherein they might be more inclined to be passive in an on-ground learning environment.

THE CHALLENGE

The academic literature is replete with information related to student passivity, but when student passivity is considered as a problem of adult learners in an online venue, preparing to lead others in the 21st century, the concept takes on a more impressive connotation. Student engagement, as a challenge that affects leaders and would be leaders becomes a more important consideration for academic institutions in a time of unprecedented technological change, as well as amidst leadership crises the likes of which Greenleaf ([1978] 1986) attempted to caution society about. If there was ever a time when Servant Leadership was needed, some say that time is now on a variety of levels.

Barbuto (2000, p 166) posits [that] "to foster student development, instructors must expose student's current thinking patterns to promote decision making and idea generation from the perspective of the next developmental stage." In other words, if Servant Leaders are needed, then Servant Leadership must first be modeled in places where students can actually experience it.

- Proposition 1a: Students in stage 2 of development (Imperial) will experience greater cognitive dissonance and, consequently, be likely to progress developmentally when instructors practice Low Order Transactional Leadership.
- Proposition 1b: Students in stage 3 (Interpersonal) development will experience greater cognitive dissonance and, consequently, be likely to progress developmentally when instructors practice Transformational Leadership.
- Proposition 1c: Students in stage 4 (Institutional) development will experience greater cognitive dissonance and, consequently, be likely to progress developmentally when instructors practice Servant Leadership.
- If instructors view themselves as 'guides' rather than 'sages', their teaching styles will be more compatible with the students' developmental stages. Consequently, students will be exposed to the types of classroom leadership wherein students will be energized and motivated in the learning process (Barbuto, 2000, p. 166).
- Proposition 2a: Students in stage 2 (Imperial) of development will demonstrate greater motivation when instructors practice a low-order transactional leadership style.
- Proposition 2b: Students in stage 3 (Interpersonal) of development will demonstrate greater motivation when instructors practice a high-order transactional leadership style.
- Proposition 2c: Students in stage 4 of development demonstrate greater motivation when instructors practice Servant Leadership style.

SUMMARY

Just as online course delivery has caused faculty and students alike to reconsider how they perceive higher education, these learning platforms have inspired 21st Century leaders to rethink how leaders are created, and/or prepared and how leadership is modeled in the dynamic 21st Century. Greenleaf's ([1978] 1986) *Leadership Crisis* is not over. "Leaders not accountable **to** their people will be held accountable **by** their people" (Myatt, 2013). During a decade that gives educators many reasons to pause for a moment of reflection, it is time to realize that innovations

that technology provides for us in education can be combined with trust and meaningful relationships to create teachable moments that can assist in leader preparation. The research conducted in this paper sets the stage for such a study.

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