CULTIVATING LEADERS IN THE DISTANCE LEARNING CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Distance learners may be geographically diverse; they can enjoy the benefits of working with other students and instructors from all over the country and the world. Students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to pursue higher education at a campus nearby are able to pursue degrees with online courses. Students who successfully manage the complex challenges associated with distance learning demonstrate leadership abilities and are ideal candidates for targeted leadership instruction that will maximize their professional and academic success.

KEYWORDS: Complex challenges, Cultivating leaders, Distance learners, Leadership skills

CULTIVATING LEADERS IN DIGITAL CLASSROOMS

Distance learners face unique challenges in order to obtain their college degrees (Rothweiler, 2012). They must possess superior time management, facility with diverse technologies, personal drive and excellent organization to complete their discussion postings, individual assignments and team projects by deadline (Hannay, Venne, 2012). Many distance learners are non-traditional students who work full time, care for families, and experience additional stresses adjusting to the college coursework (Eriksen, 2006). Though this provides added time constraints, successful distance learners use astute strategies to prioritize needs, delegate tasks, and maximize work opportunities to meet these demanding personal, professional and academic obligations (Ying et al., 2008). Students who successfully manage the complex challenges associated with distance learning are demonstrating leadership abilities and are ideal candidates for targeted leadership instruction that will maximize their professional and academic success.

Leadership skills generally include problem solving, delegating tasks, successful collaboration in diverse teams, communication abilities and information management and implementation (Stein, 2013). Distributive Leadership models in higher education focus on the importance of collaborative work where “knowledge, skills and information” are freely shared (Keppell et al., 2011). Identifying and fostering leadership skills in proven candidates such as successful online students, will build the student’s self-esteem and lay a foundation for future success in the academic and professional worlds. Leadership skills that are practiced in a safe space like an online classroom or indeed any supportive class environment allow the student to polish those abilities and feel comfortable transferring them to the professional sphere (Shanty, Gropelli, 2014).

Building active engagement strategies into the class will allow students to practice leadership skills that can readily translate to the world outside of the classroom (Fulford, 2013; Stein, 2013). Whether it is integrating social media, podcasting, videocasting, blogging, or other current digital
trends, instructors can capitalize on the wide range of interactive content creation opportunities to further engage the distance learner and ensure that they are absorbing the course objectives sufficiently. Today’s distance learners face many obstacles to their commitment to the work of each class. Whether it is stress from their jobs, families or personal challenges, distance learners are busy adults with full schedules. To get the most out of each class, they must see clear application to their everyday lives. As Fulford states, “adult learning theory clearly indicates that we learn the most by doing”. Team based exercises, hands on projects and other active engagement strategies can help to not only keep the attention of the adult learner, but also create opportunities for meaningful absorption and acquisition of the skills. Using interesting and challenging exercises, like assigning a team book review to distance learners, offers students a chance to practice their team building and communication skills within a familiar framework while specifically building the community of the classroom (Moore, 2008).

Technology and diverse media offer a wide range of learning and leadership opportunities for distance learners. Rather than being disadvantaged by working online for their classes, these students can be on the leading edge of digital capabilities and demonstrate a sound, working knowledge of software and learning platforms to create, collaborate, and present or submit their assignments. Popular digital platforms like Facebook, Youtube, podcasts, and blogging sites are generally accessible and free or low cost. These can support leadership learning by promoting collaboration, brand building experience, and the overall enhanced learning of objectives with user generated content opportunities (Phelps, 2012).

Though younger students may already be familiar with many social media opportunities, there still may be areas of unease or unfamiliarity with using such platforms in an academic environment. Understanding potential limitations of student knowledge can better prepare the instructor to foster success with diverse learning strategies that may make use of interactive technologies. Adult students, in particular, may experience stress when presented with tasks and technologies that are outside their areas of expertise (Eriksen, 2006). Starting with technology that is familiar to students, like assignments that include watching a carefully selected movie that promotes the goals of the class, can help to clearly demonstrate concepts, especially with leadership skills (Hannay, Venne, 2012). Incorporating innovative digital strategies for leadership learning online requires a consideration of the student population to ensure that the assignments “support and not detract from the overall objectives, goals, and missions of leadership education” (Phelps, 2012).

Distance learners may also be geographically diverse and can enjoy the benefits of working with other students and instructors from all over the country and the world (Motteram, Forrester, 2005). Students who may not otherwise have an opportunity to pursue higher education at a campus nearby are able to pursue degrees with online courses. The diverse backgrounds and locations of distance learners can help to replicate the professional challenges of communicating over long distances or with varied groups of employees. While this diversity may offer advantages in leadership training, it can also contribute to difficulties with regular computer or Internet access, time and individual progress with the work (Phelps, 2012). When deciding to implement digital learning and leadership opportunities in an online classroom, consideration should be given to the accessibility of any assignment.

Since the demographics of undergraduate distance learning students are similar to community colleges, students may be above traditional age and have extensive workplace experience and personal obligations that influence their success in the classroom (Kimmel et al., 2012). Instructors must be sensitive to both the skills that students bring to the classroom as well as the skills with which they have not yet gained an adequate facility (Tinberg, Weisberger, 1998). While acquiring new skills may aid personal and professional transitions, it may be challenging for students to stay engaged and motivated without meaningful support from the faculty (Rothweiler, 2012).

In distance learning courses, there is usually no face-to-face component or brick-and-mortar classroom that ensures students make attendance or make progress on the class work. Instructors must overcome these challenges by clearly linking the tasks in the classroom with the specific uses in the professional world. This can help keep adult students with professional experience engaged and motivated to absorb the new skills (Kim, 2009).

Though distance learners are steeped in the digital innovation which may enhance the flexibility and ease with which they can attend class, they must also confront a myriad of personal challenges which may include full time employment, family obligations, and other anxieties associated with non-traditional age, returning to or beginning an online college education, and the higher proportion of first generation college attendance that may impact their confidence and feelings of ease with their own, demonstrated abilities (Nordstrom et al., 2014). With distance learning, there is no hiding out in the back of a classroom, avoiding making contributions to the class conversation, or just texting while the professor is lecturing. Each student must participate fully from the beginning of the course or risk damaging their scores. Students may also have had negative experiences with formal education in the past that inhibit their ability to see themselves as the successful college students and leaders-in-training that they are. These challenges may impede the adoption of new identities associated with higher learning and leadership. When managing the challenges of college and the development of new leadership skills, distance learning classrooms can offer a safe space to explore new abilities in the presence of others who help connect the new and old aspects of their identities (Felle, Schyns, 2014).

The online learning environment offers unique benefits and challenges to students and instructors (Hannay, Venne, 2012). Distance learners who are able to successfully navigate the significant obstacles to their education can be ideal candidates for leadership training. Preparing these dynamic, hardworking, and resourceful students with targeted leadership skills can help students more confidently and successfully use leadership skills to achieve their academic and professional goals. The digital classroom can offer a unique environment where adult learners can obtain hands-on, technically savvy and professionally applicable instruction. The cultivation of these leadership skills in a dynamic and relevant manner ensures that they are able to learn course objectives alongside key leadership strategies like collaboration, team building, prioritization, communication and problem solving. The online college class can also provide a flexible space to exercise new leadership roles and identities which allows students to develop the confidence they need to act as leaders in their professional, academic and local communities.
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