Developing reflection and critical thinking in a leadership education course: leading learning and change

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Abstract: In higher education learning environments, critical thinking is often an assumed skill; however, many students require explicit support to effectively achieve in this area. This research focuses on the application of scaffolded learning experiences to promote reflection and critical thinking in a post-graduate educational leadership course. It particularly recognises the unique challenges for international students, managing their transition into a culturally different learning environment while meeting the academic and critical thinking demands of higher education.

This research draws on two main data sources: student survey responses regarding reflections on the concept of leadership and researcher reflections on student engagement and critical thinking. Descriptive analysis provided profiles of the student cohort and their views on leadership. Three themes emerged from the analysis of open-ended responses regarding views on leadership: diverse understandings of leadership; the importance of leadership actions for change; and evaluating leadership – self and others. Reflections from one researcher on the conduct of the course and student work provided a link between the initial design and student outcomes.

Two levels of positive outcomes were found. Firstly, a greater level of early engagement in course learning activities was observed which continued across the course. Secondly, students' learning and achievement were greater than a previous cohort implying the benefits of early modelling of reflective practices to scaffold students' critical thinking. Importantly, stronger tutorial engagement supporting critical reflections is likely to translate to other post-graduate studies. Recommendations for further research on students' engagement and critical thinking are proposed.

Keywords: Higher education; critical thinking; scaffolding; international students

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Introduction

Leadership learning is complex with shifts in theoretical understandings moving from the characteristics of leaders in positional roles seen in corporate or military contexts to what Northouse (2022, 6) now defines as: 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal', a much broader and more widely applicable construct. A corollary to this is that processes behind leadership may be learned and are now the focus of tertiary programmes.

Postgraduate education in leadership, the focus of this study, strives to integrate theoretical knowledge around leadership with real-world applications. This paper reports on research undertaken with a cohort of Master of Education students at an Australian university. The leadership course focused on leadership to deliver change in the educational arena. In assessing their learning, students were tasked with critically evaluating a leadership change that they experienced or observed and then developing a plan for a proposed change supported by informing data, analysis of context and leadership theory.

The cohort represented diverse experiences including international students, many of whom spoke English as a second language. In a previous offering of the course, nearly a quarter of that cohort were at-risk of failing the subject – one rationale behind this intervention to add scaffolding, drive early engagement and reflection, and model critical thinking. These skills and behaviours are also recognised as essential and transferable to other programme subjects; however, as recognised by Volpe-White and Guthrie (2016), reflection as a skill is one many students only develop at the tertiary level. This aspect is likely to be more difficult for international students.

In focussing on the teaching of leadership, Jenkins (2020, 52) found that rather than focussing on specific information through tests, the most effective leadership educations were 'constructivist in their pedagogical approaches, providing opportunities through creative and reflective learning activities for students to develop and make meaning of their experiences'. This highlights the importance of adopting approaches, including contextualisation of issues, that support students' capacities for meaning-making in their learning.

Valuing intercultural understandings was foundational to teaching adding value to discussions by a focus on real-world discussions, a feature highlighted by Jenkins (2020). A breadth of leadership experience from diverse educational contexts was shared, with previous student analyses ranging in topics from leading downstream production processes in a Malaysian rubber industry to driver training for police in the Middle East. Students were introduced to a range of theories, selecting a relevant theory to critically evaluate leadership through change. Drawing on a wealth of contextual experience, reflection supported students to refine their understandings and practise communicating about leadership theory in relation to situated change. And recognising both the potentially broad implications of training educational leaders and in particular those with international backgrounds, Jenkins (2012) stresses the need for the greater development of critical thinking to support future decision making in global contexts, with actions identified that a leader can take to lead critically (Jenkins and Cutchens, 2011; Jenkins, 2012) .

Student diversity enhanced the range of leadership experiences and contexts raised. However, an identified challenge was the limited prior learning experiences involving reflection, critical thinking, and academic skills. As such, a teaching and

learning project was undertaken to support students' engagement and learning by providing scaffolded reflection and situating that learning in small group discussions.

This research is framed by three intersecting bodies of literature: engagement in learning in higher education; critical thinking and academic writing; and intercultural understandings.

Engagement in learning in higher education

Student engagement in higher education is a recognised challenge (Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Kettle, 2017), with patterns of engagement shifting in the past decade (Zepke, 2018). Kettle (2017, 42) identified that 'engagement has felicitous ambiguity, that is, it can be an action or a thing'. She proposed international student engagement as a practice focused on the 'the range of elements that combine in particular relationships to form the lived actions, knowledges, and identities associated with engagement' (Kettle, 2017, 48). In conceptualising international student engagement as a social practice, we are encouraged to examine the cultural, social, academic and linguistic demands of higher education.

A range of communication challenges arise that constrain engagement, for example, accented English and confidence in dialogic classroom activities. Park et al. (2020) identified challenges and strategies for international students in Australian higher education. Opportunities for meaningful interactions between first language (L1) and second language (L2) speakers support L2 students improving their academic communication. Self-confidence, underpinned by perceptions of language accuracy and accent, could affect how L2 speakers were perceived by listeners. For lecturers, international students cannot be considered a homogenous group with similar learning needs. Similar to Ladson-Billings' (2014) ideas on culturally inclusive pedagogy, students' diverse leadership experiences should be considered as assets. And clearly

when such considerations do not occur, there is an associated lack of confidence that can constrain international students' active engagement.

Critical thinking and academic writing

The complexities involved in critical thinking and academic writing also need to be considered to maximise students' engagement and learning. Elder and Paul (1996) define critical thinking as 'the ability and disposition to improve one's thinking by systematically subjecting it to rigorous self-assessment' (34). Duro et al. (2013) and Forbes (2018) found that tertiary students prefer explicit teaching and practice of critical thinking, as the skills are necessary to their studies and will be needed once they engage in the workforce. However, critical thinking skills are complex in nature and often ill-defined by educators (Atkinson, 1997; Egege and Kutieleh, 2004; Fox, 1994). Further, the construct is not consistently defined or operationalised, leading to difficulties in designing appropriate teaching and assessment.

Some educators perceive that critical thinking is obtained via osmosis or should reside naturally within their students (Duro et al., 2013; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). However, these notions are unhelpful in designing teaching approaches that can improve students' thinking. In addition, whilst the stereotype exists that many international students have not previously been exposed to critical thinking, research has shown that this is not the case (Lu and Singh, 2017). Rather, students experience difficulty adapting to the academic writing norms required of Western tertiary education (Al-Mukdad, 2019; Eldaba and Isbell, 2018; Paton, 2011; Zhang, 2011) and may struggle with truth seeking and systematic thinking (Tiwari et al., 2003). As it is often through written mediums that critical thinking is expressed and subsequently graded, it is particularly relevant to consider how these genres can be scaffolded.

Recognising that international students are concurrently developing academic literacy whilst also learning discipline-specific content guides effective teaching design. Explicitly teaching critical thinking and scaffolding written tasks provides students with opportunities to construct clear understandings. This study encouraged initial reflection on leadership experiences, prior to engagement in tutorial discussions on leadership. This was important, as studies have shown that international students may have limited previous exposure to the reflective genre (Lang and McNaught, 2013).

Intercultural understandings

Inextricably linked to the scaffolding of leadership learning embedded in the course design was a need to understand and value cultural differences within the cohort. Bennett provides one well-known model of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993; Hammer et al., 2003). Cultural difference is scaled from a 'denial' orientation through to an 'adaptation' perspective. 'Denial' is attributed to limited experiences of other cultures so that understand relies on stereotypes; then a 'polarisation' focusing on differences such that there might be a 'defence' orientation whereby differences are perceived as threats or a 'reversal' that idealises the others' cultural practices. 'Minimisation' focuses on cultural similarities rather than differences. 'Acceptance' is where there is a more nuanced understanding of the patterns of cultural differences. Finally, 'adaptation' occurs when behaviours are changed to be more culturally appropriate and authentic. More recently, Punti and Dingel (2021) highlight that although models such as Bennett's can assist reflection on 'colour-blindness' and other practices that limit intercultural understanding, attributing issues to race and ethnicity can diminish understanding of structural and institutional inequalities. Accordingly, they argue for the importance of empathy and understanding student diversity.

Recognising and adjusting to accommodate different cultural perspectives are necessary in designing effective teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms. However, it is important to understand which adjustments will enhance the student experience. Rear (2017) argues that the differences in critical thinking between Asian and Western students have been overexaggerated. Therefore, if we challenge the overall deficit perspective (where international students are portrayed as wholly lacking in critical thinking), we can focus instead on the more subtle differences and support them appropriately. For example, some students report experiencing difficulties incorporating their existing cultural perspectives into their work (Spack, 1997; Zhang, 2011) and there are recognised differences between how the process of attribution is understood and conducted (Zhang, 2011). Differences are also apparent in the preferred means of expression of critical thought, for example, a study comparing Taiwanese and Canadian students found that the Taiwanese cohort was less likely to explicitly express disagreement during discussions and made fewer overall suggestions during brainstorming sessions (Saad et al., 2015).

Methods

This mixed methods research was structured around a multiphase approach to focus both on the initial reflective survey and ongoing course activities. The anonymous survey offered students a reflective tool prior to learning about leadership. Results were used to inform the lecturer in tailoring learning, building on students' prior knowledge. Throughout the research process, care was taken to be responsive to students' cultural, social, academic and linguistic needs.

An overview of the research phases is provided in Figure 1.

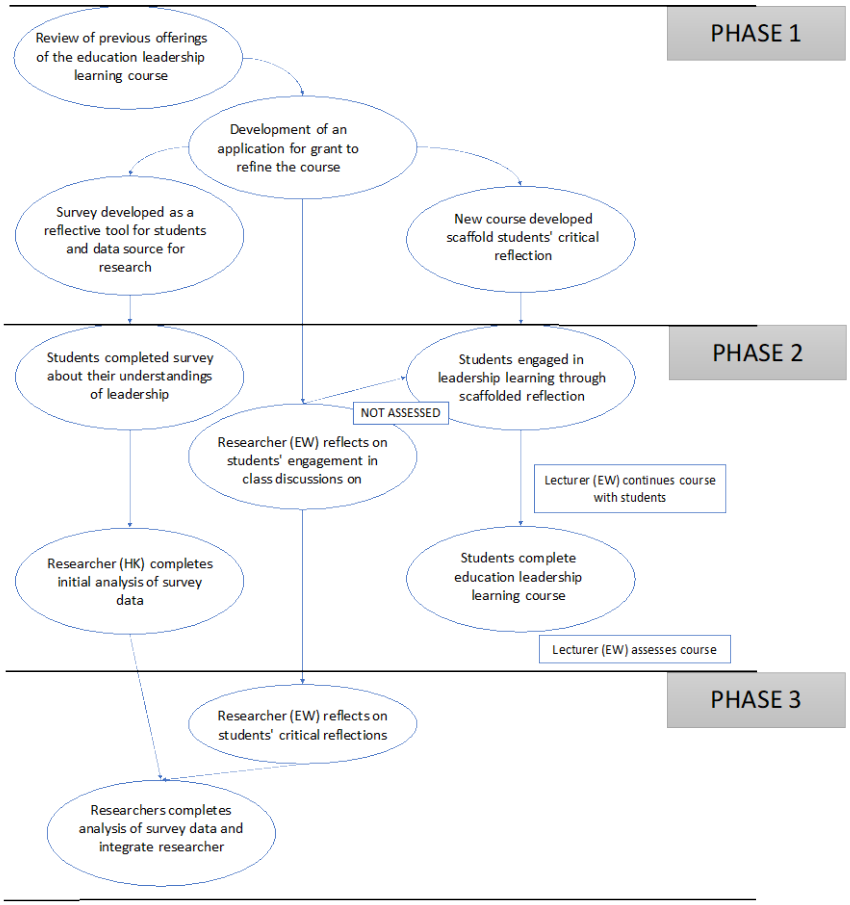

Figure 1. Overview of phases of research

Conceptualising the research in these phases assisted in understanding the researcher roles, particularly of one researcher providing an insider-perspective on scaffolded reflection and leadership learning. Prior to commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was approved by the university's Human Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2020/469). The analysis of each data set is addressed in sequence in the following sections.

Phase 1 – planning

Due to recognised issues with the progress of international students in Master of Education courses, particularly in their first year of study, a successful application for

an internal Teaching and Learning Grant provided support from the university to refine course.

There were several engagement and reflective strategies included in the course design:

- Anonymous online survey (not assessed).
- Leading a tutorial discussion as a formative requirement for the reflective log.
- Maintaining a reflective log (20%).
- Essay: Critical reflection, analysis, and evaluation of leading as practice (40%).
- Essay: Leading plan for change (40%).

The initial survey invited student reflections on their concepts of leadership and their experiences within the leadership space. This was designed to encourage early engagement in the course and also prepare students to think about leadership language preparing them to engage in discussions. As a part of tutorial engagement, students were also required to lead a 5-minute discussion. To assist students, the tutor modelled an example of how to lead a discussion:

1. Introduce a leadership theory;
2. Explain their understanding of the theory;
3. Share personal reflections about their leadership context; and
4. Engage colleagues to share about their contexts.

From this, students were led to reflect on how their colleagues' views challenged, confirmed or extended their own understandings of leadership. This paper presents results from the survey and researcher reflections on students' engagement in discussions, their reflective logs and essays.

Phase 2- action

The initial survey provided impetus for early engagement, encouraging students' reflections about their leadership understandings and perceptions of leadership. This

was important because ipsative progress might not be reflected in the assessment tasks if there were other academic barriers, meaning that a student may not achieve highly in the assignment task, though their learning progress may have been substantial. To establish a safe space for students to take risks, the discussions, themselves, were not assessed, however, to frame the critical thinking processes, students wrote a reflection explaining their leadership theory and what they shared with colleagues, discussing how their colleagues' views, supported, challenged or extended their thinking about leadership. In addition, one researcher (EW) kept a reflective log about their perspectives on students' engagement and leadership learning within the course.

Phase 3 – reflection

Researcher reflections were used as a parallel data source to make conscious judgements in relation to students' engagement, leadership learning, and critical reflection and writing. Throughout the process, the role of the researcher as lecturer/assessor was held in careful balance. Creswell (2019) notes the importance of 'the researcher being aware of and openly discussing his or her role in the study in a way that honors and respects the site and participants' (486). As suggested by Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017), reflexivity is enhanced through three 'perspective-taking' steps:

(a) Activating the mental process of perspective-taking;
(b) Anchoring own perspective and dissecting the perspective of others, and
(c) Equilibrium-negotiating difference understandings without imposing commonly shared meanings (9).

In addition, Researcher 2 (HK) served as a critical friend to check assumptions and perspectives as well as providing an alternative voice through the anonymous survey.

The researcher role was as an outsider, not being part of the student cohort, but also as an insider, in relation to participating in the leadership learning design, enacting strategies to support students' development of critical reflection and assessing students'

learning within the formal structures of the higher education course. Although acknowledging that there are 'benefits and drawbacks to every researcher stance' (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, 2), the author recounts challenges for an insider-researcher that include needing to detach from personal experiences that may not be shared by students (Kanuha, 2000, as cited in Finefter--Rosenbluh, 2017, 2) and maintaining a neutral or balanced viewpoint (Chawla-Duggan, 2007, as cited in Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, 2). To manage this reflexity, the shift in roles between researcher and lecturer/assessor was managed consciously through the phases in the research (see Figure 1).

Analysis

Survey

A survey was created in the university's LimeSurvey tool. The survey involved three sections:

1. Background details – including age, gender and leadership experience – whether in school (S) or non-school environment (NS);
2. Responses to 11 items, including the five traits and three skills from Northouse (2019), and leaders' tendency to control, include and/or delegate (nine-point scale low to high importance); and
3. Six open-response prompts:
    a. additional explanation of decisions assessing importance;
    b. participants' understandings of leadership;
    c. participants' experiences in leadership;
    d. leadership behaviours in delivering change;
    e. evaluating leadership; and

f. the option for additional comments.

SPSS v26 was used to analyse the survey responses. In line with the survey objectives, and small sample size, the analysis was descriptive/comparative, profiling the participants and comparing response patterns on leadership characteristics.

Open responses

Open responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). The six-step process included: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming themes; and reporting (Braun and Clarke 2012, 120). Each response was initially read in relation to the question asked with line-by-line analysis. Initial codes were generated to identify discrete ideas from participants' responses about their leadership perceptions. Researchers worked collaboratively to define and name themes.

Researcher reflections

The researcher/lecturer undertook regular reflections to record perceptions of students' engagement and critical thinking. Given the line between researcher (lecturer) and students, care needed to be taken to manage the differences in power of student and assessor. The researcher's reflections on the range of participant interactions are included in the results including evidence of students' engagement and analysis of critical thinking using the framework of Liu, Frankel, and Roohr (2014).

Results and Discussion

This section commences with an introduction to the student cohort and their leadership experiences. The findings from the closed survey questions, which focus on the perceived importance of a range of aspects of leadership, provide further contextualises participants' leadership understandings. Next, the results from the thematic analysis of

the open responses are explained. Then, researcher reflections on students' engagement and critical reflections are presented. Finally, results are discussed in relation to the research literature.

The student cohort

Of the 25 student participants in the course, 23 completed the survey. The course is, as with other courses within the Master of Education programme, offered in two modes – mixed mode offering focussed on in-person tutorials against a fully online offering. The student profile in each mode differs, with many in the online group older educators addressing career development objectives while the mixed-mode group was largely comprised of younger international students. In the current cohort there were eight students enrolled online, two of whom were international students, while, in mixed-mode, 16 of the 17 enrolments were international students, most of whom were from a range of Asian countries. Table 1 summarises the cohort regarding gender, age and workplace characteristics.

Table 1. Characteristics of class cohort

		Age (years)				n
		20 – 29	30 – 39	40 – 49	50 – 59	
Gender	Female	35.3	47.1	11.8	5.9	17
	Male	50.0			50.0	2
	All	36.8	42.1	10.5	10.5	**19**
Workplace	School – leader	50.0	50.0	-	-	2
	School – teacher	22.2	55.6	11.1	11.1	9
	Manager – not school	-	-	-	100	1
	Not school	100	-	-	-	3
	Other	-	66.7	33.3	-	3
	All	33.3	44.4	11.1	11.1	**18**

Note: Survey data includes 22 students, however 1 did not disclose their age, 2 their gender and 3 their work situation.

It is clear that most students were in the 20 – 29 (n=7) or 30 – 39 age group (n=8). While the course was offered for students in education, as a non-teaching qualification many of those enrolled, particularly international students were not from a teaching background. Of 18 of the students who indicated their background, nine were currently teachers while two were in school leadership positions. Another four students were not from school-based roles, with one identifying as being in a management position. Finally, three students identified 'other' work situations – a likely response for students undertaking fulltime study.

Findings from the analysis of closed responses

The survey first collected responses regarding the perceived importance of key leadership characteristics identified from the course textbook (Northouse, 2019) rated on a 1 – 9 scale from Low to High Importance. An initial exploration of the responses was used to identify the perceived importance of these characteristics by the students, with ratings summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Student ratings of their perceived importance of various aspects of leadership

	n	Low	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	High
Intelligence	22					18.2	13.6	27.3	31.8	9.1
Self-Confidence	22		4.5			4.5	9.1	22.7	31.8	27.3
Determination	22						4.5	27.3	18.2	50.0
Integrity	22					4.5		22.7	13.6	59.1
Sociability	22			4.5	4.5		13.6	4.5	22.7	50.0
Technical Expertise	22			4.5	4.5	27.3	18.2	13.6	22.7	9.1
Interpersonal Skills	22			4.5		9.1		13.6	9.1	63.6
Strategic/conceptual expertise	22			4.5		9.1	9.1	27.3	27.3	22.7
Level of Control	22			9.1		9.1	13.6	22.7	22.7	22.7
Level of Delegation	21			9.1	9.1	13.6	22.7	22.7	22.7	28.6
Level of Inclusion	21				4.8		4.8	14.3	23.8	52.4
	Low	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	High	n

From Table 2 differences in comparative ratings of importance of leadership skills/traits is apparent. Clearly participants saw all items as of basic importance, with no ratings of 'Low' recorded, and only one '2' (Self Confidence). On the other hand, some characteristics were viewed as highly important – over 50% of participants rated Interpersonal skills (n=14), Integrity (n=13), Level of inclusion (n=11) at 'High'. Interestingly, both Intelligence and Technical Expertise were viewed as less important, with only two participants rating them at High. Summarising across the rankings, the mean score provides a single overview ranking (Figure 2).

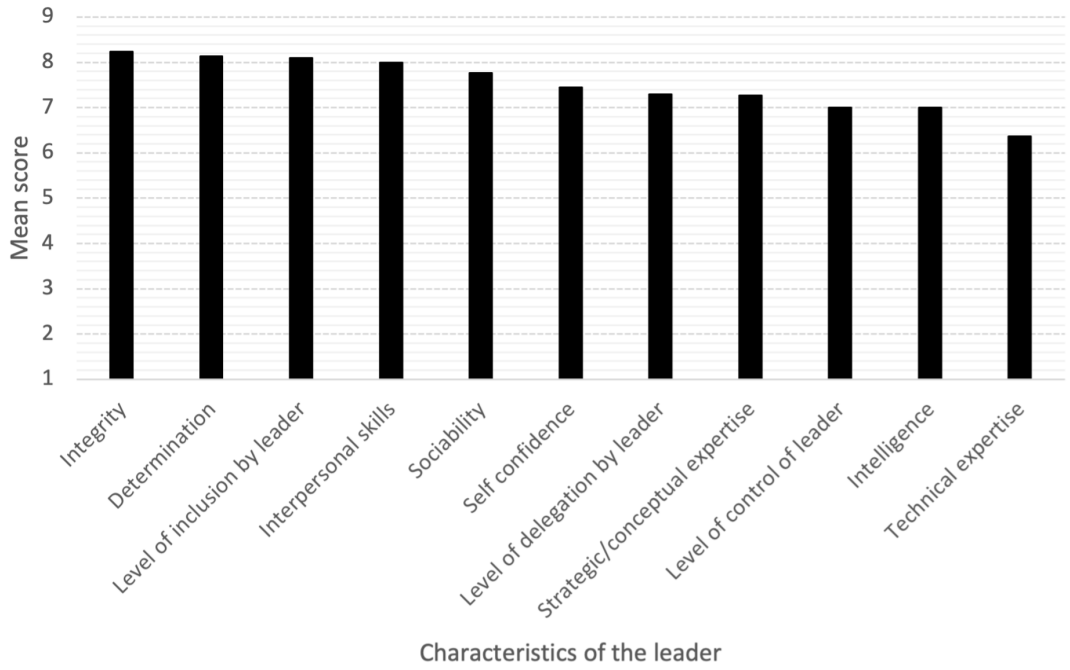

Figure 2. Mean scores of characteristics of the leader

This analysis provides an interesting perspective, showing that the top three characteristics are social and personal characteristics of the leader – Integrity, Determination and Level of Inclusion. The 3 characteristics rated least important were: Level of Control, Intelligence and Technical expertise. The responses appear to profile two types of leaders – one leading an inclusive team with strong drive, while at the

other extreme a more old-fashioned leader who might fit the 'Command and Control' style.

While this initial exercise elicited a diversity of views about what leadership is, the survey was primarily designed to encourage reflection on leadership and the leadership they may have practiced or experienced, providing a useful entry to the course and discussions different styles and characteristics of leadership. Further, reinforcing the supportive nature of the initial reflective survey comments was the reference to the range of comments in the lecture materials to stimulate discussion and also reinforce the non-judgemental and inclusive nature of the tutorial discussions.

Themes

This section presents the results from the thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses. Three themes emerged from the analysis:

1. diverse understandings of leadership;
2. the importance of leadership actions for change; and
3. evaluating leadership – self and others.

These themes are discussed, with reference to individual quotes with participants identified by number and whether they were school (S) or non-school (NS) based.

Diverse understandings of leadership

There were a range of responses extending from ideas about control and sense of responsibility to more inclusive team leadership. Emphasising a need to have 'control', one participant identified, 'A person who can play a leadership role and a command role in a team surpasses the team for better development' (ID20: NS). Focusing more on accountability, another participant '[It] is the leader who reviews and makes important decisions. The person who leading a group of people or an organisation' (ID12: NS). Shifting from a singular accountability, another participant noted, 'A responsibility of

service and decision making that NEEDS to always be accountable to a core group who desire the best outcome. Leadership is not a solitary service' (ID18: NS).

Another important perspective was social characteristics, expressed by a teacher (ID6: S) who rated 'integrity, interpersonal skills, sociability, delegation and inclusion higher than other qualities', further noting:

> I feel that if these areas are lacking than (sic) it is difficult to respect or even warm to that leader. If these more personable qualities are evident, it feels like I can overlook any other quality that is lacking. I do expect a high level of the other qualities just not as high as the ones that I feel are essential.

With this inclusive school perspective further described by another teacher:

> To me leadership is not the same as being a boss. I feel that leadership is shown when a leader guides, inspires, encourages and creates a safe environment for all. Leadership is making people feel that they are important and that their view matters. They have excellent communication skills and are direct and do not send mixed messages… Leadership is making it clear that they are the captain with a clear plan, yet not afraid to get down and row the boat with you if needed! A boss is someone who controls in a negative way - through fear, intimidation, aloofness. Staying in their office, barricaded behind secretaries while the school is crumbling - yuck! (ID9: S)

Although positional leadership is highlighted as being 'the captain with a clear plan', the notion of being part of the team, rather than separate from it, is also apparent.

In summarising, participants demonstrated a diverse range of personal perspectives about leadership – reflecting differences in views and experience of how leadership is manifested: such reflections provided an excellent introduction to the presentation and discussion of leadership models. These students brought together a broad range of experiences embedded in different cultural and linguistic contexts.

Conceptualising diversity as an asset rather than limitation aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2014) work on culturally relevant pedagogy. Three domains of educators' work are identified. First, academic success that focuses on intellectual growth as a result of learning experiences; second, cultural competence that balances appreciation

and celebration of one's own culture and those of others; and sociopolitical consciousness which extends learning beyond the classroom to 'identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems' (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 75).

The importance of leadership actions for change

Almost all (16) participants commented on the importance of leadership behaviours in delivering change. Most rated leadership highly in supporting change. One perspective was that of leaders modelling behaviours, thus leading to a level of change: 'If the Leaders is not modelling the behaviours that he/she would like to see going forward then the symbols that he/she is displaying creates such cognitive dissonance that there will be a mis match in expectations, understanding and in the integrity of the change' (ID21: L NS). They further explained how effective leadership might require different actions at different times:

> In an amalgamation of an accounting firm of three companies we saw three leaders specifically chosen for the different strategies of the business. The first Leaders was employed that had a people focus, someone that could engage and collaborate with the people so that integration was possible of the three firms, he was there for one year. Once the integration piece was completed another leader was brought into the organisation who was able to create financial growth, he was there for 18 months. The third leader was then brought in, he was tasked with a slower growth over time and to create sustainability for the future. Leadership requires at times different skills. (ID21: L NS)

The notion of change was explored in more detail by some participants. After identifying that leadership behaviours are 'very important', one participant explained:

> In order for change to happen, the group needs to understand the value of the change and be empowered to do something differently. This is done through positive leadership. (ID4:NS)

This response identifies a need for a shared understanding of the value of the change and leadership that empowers others. A leader's position was essential for development

according to another participant, stating, ‘A leader who has a great awareness of what is changing and what is going to change could well perform and bring benefits for the organization’ (ID5:NS). Here, it seems that the position of leader allows for oversight in relation to the change and the organisation’s direction. Another participant also endorsed positional leadership in delivering change, ‘Because the leader has to choose between many options to choose the best one and also they must make big decisions to change everything in their working environment’ (ID12:NS). Shared leadership was implied by one participant who explained:

> Making hard decisions early on - Gain collective agreement by consensus. I could only affirm the change if I believed in it. Allow the change to forge forward by appointing key natural leaders amongst their peers. Educate and inform those chosen peers - set them free to build a following for the change you need. (ID18:NS)

Peer leaders were those deemed to be ‘natural’. The role of the positional leader was to ‘educate and inform’, but then the power to influence was shared with those peers. Interestingly, only one participant mentioned management stating, ‘To bring change by means of good management for the success of individual or world at large’ (ID26:S). A succinct summary of leadership for change was provided by one participant: ‘Leadership behaviors are crucial in engaging and creating a solid team which drive the organization forward’ (ID25:S).

The ideas participants raised in relation to leadership for change mirror those held by theorists in educational leadership. Fullan (2007, 32), for example, identifies ‘theories of action with merit’ highlighting that leadership for change requires a breadth of perspectives including motivation, capacity building, contextualised learning, reflection and engagement from leaders across an organisation.

Evaluating leadership – self and others

The final perspective regarded the capacity to evaluate leadership actions – important in moving to a real focus requiring a more in-depth understanding. Most participants

responded to this question, some providing very brief answers and others elaborating about their evaluation of leaders. Responses ranged from participants reporting that they were ‘very confident’ to ‘not overly confident’.

Confidence in evaluating leadership was attributed by some participants to experience: ‘For other leaders I feel very confident, mainly due to my long career. With my own leadership actions, I am confident due to my studying and my experiences’ (ID6:S). Another identified leadership development over time:

> Now I feel really confident as I have grown as a person and as a Leader. In relation to my own leadership actions, I am really confident enough to say that I am an authentic leader who shows vulnerability to the team and is extremely inclusive. I also make mistakes which I now know is being a human. (ID21:LNS)

The personal qualities of an authentic leader were highlighted by another respondent: ‘I would like to be a leader who has compassion, shares ideas and knowledge, work together with others, and show a good example to other people’ (ID22:UKN).

For those not so confident in evaluating leadership a range of reasons were provided. For one participant, the reason was ideological, whether an observer is well-positioned to evaluate a leader: ‘I personally feel that we are the best person to judge our self as no one knows us better than our self. As a leader we must be cautious of our action and speech’ (ID16:S). Another participant noted: ‘When I am a leader, I put a lot of pressure on myself to think that I have failed to do my best in many places and I have made some mistakes. This leads to the leader’s lack of confidence’ (ID20:UKN). The thought of evaluation might, indeed, be linked to a sense of pressure, although the ability to evaluate leadership actions was related to experience by another participant: ‘I don't feel confident because it takes a long time to evaluate the effectiveness of something and I don't have much work experience’ (ID12:NS). Although perceiving not to have great confidence in evaluating leadership, another participant identified: ‘I could

tell when a leader isn't behav[ing] appropriately in a certain situation' (ID9:S). The process of evaluation was elaborated by one participant who explained:

> …some of [the leaders I have worked with] displayed incredible leaderships skills and others I would say were more on designating tasks without showing examples. Effective learning for me is when I shadow and observe how other people [or my] supervisor work. (ID22: NS)

Participants drew on their personal experiences in evaluating leaders and were mindful about how experience would inform their ability to evaluate leadership in themselves and others.

Researcher reflections on engagement: an insider's perspective

As one researcher (EW) in the team, I had the role of lecturer/tutor and course designer in collaboration with the convenor. I am Anglo-Australian but have worked specifically with international students and colleagues in higher education and professional learning. Philosophically, I strive to create an inclusive learning context – one that fosters a sense of belonging and values all perspectives. Pragmatically, I take responsibility for scaffolding learning, which includes striving for clear communication, clarifying as needed to support students to understand the theory and apply their knowledge to their own leadership contexts. The course intentionally did not assess leading a discussion as students needed space to challenge themselves and engage with colleagues, nor were assessments used as data sources.

Reflection on students' engagement

Consistent with Creswell (2019) and Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017), the role of lecturer was considered from a different perspective than the 'researcher/observer' of students' engagement, learning and achievement as demonstrated in their assessments. Students' engagement was reflected in their attendance. In the first six weeks, all students attended four or more tutorials.

Engagement in learning is more than attendance. I noticed that students needed time and multiple examples, so our lecture summaries frequently took the form of recapping a particular point from a reading, then I would relate this to an education leadership context that I had experienced, or I would draw on previous students' contexts. When students led a discussion with their small group, I consciously did not intrude. I found that groups would immediately look to me for the 'answer', rather than continue their discussion. Each group was asked to appoint a recorder whose role it was to summarise the main points of their group's discussion. These summaries were posted to the class's Microsoft Team site and I would use the summaries to draw together what we learned as a class from those small-group discussions.

The reflective log assessment element served two purposes. First, it offered a pragmatic approach to assessing students' learning about leadership theories and applying these to their education contexts. Second, it provided an opportunity for students to think more deeply about their understanding of leadership. I felt that it was important for students to know what to do with their colleagues' views and understand that meanings are shaped through our social interactions. For confidence in 'critique', I wanted students to understand that in an academic space, they can hold different views from their colleagues and from me, for that matter – it was about explaining and justifying how and why we held a particular view about that leadership topic.

Reflection on students' assignments

The course required that balance of roles between researcher, lecturer/tutor and assessor. Once discussions were completed during the first six weeks of the course, my role was that of lecturer/assessor. After the course was completed, I could, once again, step into my active researcher role and review students' assignments, not from the lens

of assessor, rather to look at evidence of their abilities to reflect on their developing understandings of leadership and express ideas as critical reflection in their writing.

Here, I summarise some of my observations from students' assignments in relation to analytical, synthetic, and explanatory dimensions (Liu, Frankel, and Roohr, 2014). Analytical components included consideration of their specific leadership contexts and evaluate evidence and theoretical perspectives in relation to their contexts. Reflecting on leading their discussions, students were able to articulate how their colleagues' views supported, challenged, or extending their understandings. One student from an education background was in favour of instructional leadership (Seong, 2019) perceiving it to be very important in her context. In her reflective log, she identified that her understanding changed in relation to her colleagues' perspectives on possible limitations in instructional leadership for inspiring innovation and creativity. She was able to analyse and evaluate the arguments and assumptions in her understanding of instructional leadership and those of her peers.

Synthetic components refer to understanding implications and consequences as well as develop valid (well-reasoned) and sound (evidence-based) arguments (Liu, Frankel, and Roohr, 2014, 15–16). Although recognising that theory about leadership has moved past focusing on particular traits of a leader (Sinclair, 2007), another student challenged their group to delve further into ideas about, 'what makes a good leader?' Students then shifted from the characteristics of the leader to actions that a good leader would take to value other people and provide direction for collective action towards change. Students appeared to have drawn on the evidence-base around leadership as process to refine their understandings.

The explanatory aspects of critical thinking about leadership were touched on in the reflective log as students were encouraged to consider alternative causes or

explanations to what they had observed of leaders in their own contexts. Students raised points of contestation where leadership actions may have had different consequences for different stakeholders. Selecting a particular leadership theory as a 'lens' through which to analyse a change, students were invited to consider alternative explanations for the leadership actions observed in their contexts.

Conclusion

Taken together, the analysis revealed that participants' perspectives about leadership were grounded in their experiences and researcher reflections provided some insights into their engagement and learning in leadership through critical reflection. This research has foregrounded, for this learning situation, the importance of reflection and critical thinking. Jenkins and Andenoro (2016, 63) stress the role of leadership educators in developing the critical thinking skills of their students, also recognising the contribution of strategies such as critical reflection. Looking to the broader goals of developing students' reflection and critical thinking about leadership, Volpe-White, Guthrie, and Torres (2019) provide a framework grounding ideas in experience, leadership theory, and reflective practices, alongside support structures for students to reflect and receive feedback, leading to transformation that includes navigating relationships and change process. This exploratory study looked deeply at how those reflective practices were scaffolded and the change brought about in students' engagement and learning. In embracing diverse learners within the course, we do not want to diminish the experiences of international students, but rather seek to create an intercultural space in which empathy and understanding flourish. Reflections on the challenges and potential inequalities for international students are important so that their engagement and learning can be supported.

As a small-scale exploratory study, there are limitations. The research findings illustrate the process undertaken to scaffold students' critical thinking and reflection alongside students' emerging leadership understandings. Further research is in progress to build on these findings to understand further the leadership learning processes through scaffolded critical reflection.

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