

Learning Portfolio

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VCUG 2002

My preliminary thoughts upon enrolling in this course was to gain a better understanding of leadership skills, what it takes to be a great leader and how I can shape myself to become a better leader . What I discovered in the course were several deep discussions on the qualities and interpersonal skills of leaders, the 'Action Learning Cycle' which detailed the learning process in 4 steps and quite a broad discussion of moral leadership which everyone seemed to have their own opinion on. In Week 3 we were asked to deliver a short presentation on a person of influence. The most useful part of this I found was the self-reflecting after the presentation and to see how we fair against other presentations. Then, taking a different approach to learning, everyone has the chance to facilitate a tutorial. I ran a tutorial on the psychology of leadership with a partner. This activity not only encouraged the self learning of what psychological qualities are crucial to great leadership but also explored a different presentation skill which required leading discussions and activities that were engaging and relevant. The last part of my learning portfolio contributes an idea that I believe would improve the student experience at ANU. My idea was to ensure that all disciplines across ANU are exposed to assessment that develops a student's verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

Stage 1

Table of Contents

Preliminary Thoughts	2
Themes from the Course	2
Balance of Qualities	2
Action Learning Cycle.....	3
Great Leaders vs Moral Leadership	3
Tutorial Facilitation	4
Psychology of Leadership.....	4
Week 3 Talks	5
Improving Student Experience at ANU	6

Preliminary Thoughts

Enrolling in this course, I was hoping to gain a better understanding of leadership skills and what it takes to be a great leader and how I can shape myself to become a better leader. I took this course as I thought it would be a great forum to practise my interpersonal skills and also to practise my oral and written skills. I was also hoping to gain more insight as to how to motivate and build on my own leadership skills.

Themes from the Course

Balance of Qualities

In the first week we discussed a variety of leadership qualities. The ones I felt most important are tabulated below.

Leadership Qualities (General)	Interpersonal Skills of Leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertive • Emotionally Stable • Enthusiastic • Decisive • Determined • Non-resistant to change • Self-confident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persuasive • Ability to work with different people (e.g. who are resisters or over-enthusiastic) • And understanding how best a team operates • Motivating • Ability to build relationships and networks

The main point I took from examining this is that a leader would not be great if they possessed just one of these qualities, but rather a careful balance of these would shape an excellent leader. In my personal notes, I titled this as the 'Recipe for Power'. I imagined a big pot and mixing the right amount of each ingredient to create the best tasting leadership cake. And this is when I thought, there are many cakes in the world. Some I hate and some I like. It's hard to put my finger on a favourite, because they're all so good.

If we think of leadership styles as cakes, then we can see that there are heaps of varieties of leaders and each one has a unique recipe or mix of leadership qualities and interpersonal skills. Each one appropriate in certain circumstances and also has a different effect on different people. (A point that is discussed later on in this learning portfolio)

I chose these qualities and interpersonal skills because I felt that collectively they almost cover and imply other qualities that are not listed. For example, being persuasive implies some sort of consulting ability, negotiation skills and the ability to communicate a vision. Building networks and relationships implies the ability to reach a broad range of skills from which to seek help which in itself implies the quality of leader to work effectively with a group and build a strong team.

The emotional stability and enthusiasm of a leader is important because their opposites are typical characteristics of bad leaders. A leader who isn't emotionally stable won't be calm in stressful situations. A leader who isn't enthusiastic won't be able to build networks or motivate peers.

Action Learning Cycle

What I found great about the exercises to do with the action learning cycle is how it made me think about why I do or don't do some of the things that reflect on my qualities as a 'task completer'. An important issue raised from this exercise is that leaders must not be resistant to change and it's this resistance that keeps many people from pushing boundaries and exploring options that would otherwise be unconsidered.

The 4-step cycle includes: 1. Becoming self-aware of what I do. 2. Reflecting on my strengths and weaknesses. 3. Devising ways to improve and 4. Implementing my development plan.

In the tutorial, we discussed which part of the cycle we had the most trouble with. Mine was the last one of actually implementing the plan. Chris Browne made the interesting notion that instead of having trouble with a particular step, we can also have trouble linking the steps. That is, there are barriers from devising a method of improvement to the actual implementation.

For myself, these barriers include procrastination and lack of motivation. One example I thought about when doing this exercise is my approach to doing homework. I know I need to get it done earlier than I do, but I have the hardest time making the connection to actually doing my homework earlier.

A great leader would have qualities that reflect on their ability to create these links and accept change as a productive step towards a better outcome.

Great Leaders vs Moral Leadership

This was a topic that I felt was poorly addressed by Ron Brent in week 2. My learning and understanding of this topic was mainly through the student discussions on the wattle forum and in the tutorials. It might be best to first define morality, so I can more clearly make the distinction between leadership and morality.

Morals are a person's beliefs / principles of what is right and wrong. Ethics is the collective knowledge of moral principles of some group or individual. Ron Brent gave me the impression that he believed one of the qualities of leadership is to possess *his* set of ethics and moral principles.

He was quite firm on the idea that Hitler was a terrible leader because of Hitler's set of morals and how they failed to match his own. I believe the point he was actually trying to convey is that the most successful leaders have the greatest support. If your morals are supported by many, they are far more likely to follow you than someone with opposing morals.

This is what I mainly took from his talk and it is something I also believe is quite true. This has psychological implications and Michael Platow in week 4 gave a number of examples where someone is easily influenced by someone who claims to be from the same university which highlights this very fact. I believe it is very important that people following a leader have some sort of moral connection with their leader. This is also a way of helping everyone work towards the same goal and achieve it in the same manner as is intended.

For example suppose some leader, a manager of a company, asks his employee to complete some task by any means necessary. And the situation presents itself such that the manager's instructions didn't cover what to do in case completing the task conflicted with some moral standard. If everyone practised the same set of moral principles, everyone would know what to do in such a situation. This is why businesses setup what they call 'business ethics' and standards for their employees to follow.

Relating this back to what makes great leaders; it is not their set of values and moral principles that determine how effective they will be, but what *shared* values they have with the people they're trying to lead that will shape how they can influence a community.

If someone tried to encompass all moral principles, they would not get very far. They would have little common ground with everyone and have barely any decisive skills as they would be tied up in conflicting morals. This would follow with a lack of authority and this person would be a terrible leader. Tying this back into what was discussed in the very first week, a leader must be able to make decisions and quickly, a leader must be able to set goals and motivate people to continue on the same path.

Tutorial Facilitation

One of the fantastic learning experiences of this course was preparing and facilitating a tutorial. This had a number of learning outcomes for me. I was able to learn about the topic in my preparations but also had the opportunity to develop my understanding through the tutorial discussions.

There were two main parts of this task that were most challenging. The first was trying to coordinate my ideas with my partner to create meaningful and appropriate exercises in the tutorial. The second was physically explaining the tasks in the tutorial such that it made as much sense to the students as it did in our heads when preparing the tutorial.

Reflecting on my own presentation of the tutorial I can see where I could have improved – especially in terms of clarity of discussions. Another learning outcome of this tutorial facilitation is that everyone interprets the world differently and great ideas are born from a pool of many. The discussions that followed from the last exercise we led spurred ideas that I hadn't thought of in my preparation for the exercise. Leadership and influence is also about listening to what's around you and observing what can be influenced and how. I was particularly surprised at the response students had to this last task in which we observed various people trying to convince the group they were holding an Ace of Spades (the value of the card was only known to the holder). We discussed why some people were convincing and what qualities of leadership they were showing at time.

Psychology of Leadership

One of the key learning outcomes from this topic was how important it is for a leader to first take control of their mind before they can tackle a leadership role. In the tutorial facilitated by my partner and I we discussed the importance of understanding the relationship between a person's "inner and outer worlds".

We particularly focused on how taking control of your inner world (your thoughts and emotions) will reflect on your outer world (your physical actions and body language) which will affect the people around you first in their inner world and then their outer world.

Having complete control of your mind and emotions will allow you to focus at the task at hand and be able to put aside any irrelevant and unhelpful thought patterns or progressions. We also looked at a hypno-therapy session which was completed with mixed reviews. Some people found it relaxing and others found it irritating. The conclusion was that people respond differently to certain tasks, which highlights the point that leaders must have a thorough understanding of what motivates their team as whole and individually. The primary purpose of the actual exercise was to understand what motivates yourself and that if you are oblivious to this, you cannot hope to motivate someone else with much success. A lack of self motivation leads to a lack in enthusiasm which reflects on how your peers view your leadership. An ancient Greek aphorism 'Know Thyself' almost sums up this key point. Knowing your weaknesses and strengths will enable you to perform at your strengths and build on your weaknesses, progressing through the 'Action Learning Cycle'.

Week 3 Talks

The talks in week 3 exposed us to a short presentation where we were analysed briefly by our peers. This had two learning outcomes or experiences in my view. The first is that we had the opportunity to practice some of leadership skills: communication, clarity, confidence, calmness and some interpersonal skills that determine how engaging we are. The second learning outcome was in watching everyone else present; we could see what we might have looked like and were able to observe good and bad methods of making a short oral presentation.

There were a few nervous people (I will omit names), one person in particular was particularly shy and had trouble overcoming this nervousness during their presentation. I too was nervous, but I tried my best not to let that show. In terms of what we have learnt from Geoff Mortimer's talks and my tutorial facilitation, my second person/inner world was nervous, but my outer world tried to convey confidence. I attribute this skill to my hobby and very part time job as a magician where I am able to present in front of audiences that can sometimes be difficult to manage. The hardest part I find about oral presentations is that there is no audience reaction or participation to your presentation (as I am used to) which is why I tend to put a fair amount of humour in my talks – to make the audience feel more at ease and relaxed, rather than bored.

Some people were very adept at writing and constructing their talk such that it flowed from each point and was very clear and easy to follow. From listening to these talks, I can see how to improve on my own structure to help the overall presentation become clearer in terms of information and progression.

The comments I received back from my talk were generally unhelpful in terms of how I could improve. All comments indicated my presentation was humorous and confident. These are things I already knew. About 80% of the feedback remarked I had good eye contact and 20% said I needed more eye contact. I personally believe I could have had more eye contact, but the comments from my peers didn't strongly support this.

We discussed the importance of eye contact and how it made a presentation more engaging. But I don't think that to be engaging you need to have eye contact. (Eye contact -> Engaging but not the other way around). I think many people were too focused on the little things that make a presentation engaging and need to consider the bigger picture. The most engaging presentations are always interesting and usually have some relationship to the audience whether it's a topic of current debate or some deeper emotional connection. A talk about some random person of influence has no connection to other students and so the presentation topics can be boring from the very start. Some people tried to be 'different' by talking about someone who we hadn't heard of whereas I was I talked about a very famous person that everyone can reminisce on their achievements. What I did *differently* was introduce areas that most people are unaware of about someone who seems so plain which made my presentation interesting (or at least I thought so).

Improving Student Experience at ANU

My idea is to ensure that all disciplines across ANU are exposed to assessment that **develops a student's verbal and non-verbal communication skills**. Non-verbal skills may include written pieces and also body language. In many courses, especially mathematics, there is little assessment where the student is required to present themselves in a public forum that would demonstrate their oral/written and communication skills. Many students leave university without the fundamental skills of being able to communicate with their peers effectively. It's my assertion that students of Law, History and English studies will leave ANU with better written and skills than say a Statistics, Mathematics or Computer Science student.

There is only one major work that's common across all disciplines and that's a thesis which is only done when taking an Honours path. While students can take their own initiative in practising these key life skills it is important to guide and lead students to practice the right techniques and communicate in a clear and effective way.

Not only is this problem observed from the distinction between disciplines, it is also observed through the domestic and international student. Many students have the ability to complete the technical work, but when it comes to writing a report or essay and presenting talks many domestic and international students lack the capability to perform. Many are not used to communicating to an audience. My personal observation is that international students are especially prone to this inability and shyness.

This goal is quite easily measured, by examining what portion of assessment (proportion or frequency) is focused on developing a student's communication skills.

While some courses have restrictions on what proportion of assessment must be in a final technical exam, it is still possible to attain a level of communicative assessment pieces. For example, perhaps once an assignment is completed and submitted by all students, the students can take the opportunity in a tutorial to explain one of their answers to the tutorial group such that everyone has the chance to present a solution. Another way to implement this scheme can be done with tutorial homework. Each student can take turns explaining one answer to a tutorial question. Tutors can prearrange which students are presenting which question. Students can prepare for the brief presentation with no additional work. It is clearly not hard to include some form of communication development in the current curriculum.

I believe this would form a key part in the student experience at ANU especially when moving on from university and applying for jobs. This approach to education would be highly regarded by employers which would elevate the reputation of the ANU.

In terms of time, this is a short term goal that can be achieved in a few trial semesters. It could be slowly introduced through non-assessable tutorials and the success of this goal would determine how far to push it into the curriculum in terms of assessment.