

Should We Start Coaching Young Leaders Through Transformative Learning Experiences Before They Enter the Workplace?

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Abstract

Coaching, assessments, self-driven discovery, and the non-traditional measures of success that initiate leadership growth are critical, but missing pieces, in current leadership development. Integrating these alternative methods has proven to help the development of necessary leadership skills, such as goal-setting, active listening, self-awareness, commitment and resiliency, in addition to uncovering the obstacles that stand in the way of their improvement. This study investigates the impact of adding a Transformative Learning Experience (TLE) to a leadership development course at a Canadian university undergraduate business program, with the intention to provide students with lifetime career skills. The effects of this learning experience were found to be powerful and persistent, with the benefits carried beyond the classroom and into the workplace. The impact on those enrolled during the intense 12-week course is examined, in addition to following up with two post-graduation cohorts. The results suggest the presence of greater personal and professional advantages when leadership characteristics are developed well before reaching mid-career management level. Future leaders—and the corporations they join — benefit when applicants undertake personal growth and reflection before they join the workforce, instead of waiting until they have climbed their career ladders.

Keywords: leadership development, transformative learning, resiliency building, self-awareness, leadership coaching, assessment-based training, Life-Styles Inventory (LSI)

Introduction

Until recently, leadership development predominantly took place in the corporate environment, targeting mid-level managers and above. Although this original purpose and strategy has evolved to some extent, one critical issue remains embedded in today's complex and global corporate world; new graduates may enter the workforce equipped with the technical skills to succeed in their field, but their leadership skills are traditionally considered less important— at least until they reach a higher level in the corporate structure (Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize, 2006). “Unique stressors facing organizations throughout the world today call for a renewed focus on what constitutes genuine leadership” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 316). A call in the literature has argued that to be effective, leaders need essential competencies, such as emotional, social, and cultural intelligence, self and other types of regulation. Additional characteristics, such as compassion, reliability and ethical standards, are now increasingly sought after in entry-level hires, and necessary long before promotion to corporate leadership. However, little research

has explored the value and effectiveness of developing these skills in the business school curriculum before and after young leaders embark on their careers.

This paper aims to address this gap, and the findings suggest that leadership characteristics should be developed at an earlier stage in life. The research sets out to discover whether a Transformative Learning Experience (TLE), based on the work of Mezirow (2000), was beneficial for students in the development of their leadership thinking and associated behaviors, as well as in their growth during the academic term, and their lives beyond the classroom. The overall effectiveness of a final-year Leadership Development course at the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University, Ontario, Canada, was assessed. The professor strategically crafted the material with the intention of applying a TLE, incorporating the use of coaching, assessment-based training, evaluations, self-driven discovery, and non-traditional success measures throughout the course. The aim was to allow students to use these methods, and to equip them with tools to develop and work towards a vision for their own leadership identity, both while studying and as they went forward. Once undergoing this experience, the expectation was for them to continue to apply self-reflection and self-discovery, in order to take steps towards continually making positive changes in their lives. A study followed cohorts of students two and three years after they graduated and entered the workplace. This enabled the real-world impact of this academic training to be identified.

The prospect of a clear correlation between Transformative Learning Experiences and leadership development in higher education is timely and relevant. The educational community recognizes, and is interested in its impact: “the development of leadership among college students is one of the goals often cited in the mission statements of higher education institutions” (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999, p. 51). However, many researchers have questioned whether higher education has the empirical data to determine whether leadership development programs in college are truly effective for the students participating in them. According to Posner (2009):

Despite the plethora of leadership programs scattered across college campuses, scant empirical investigation has been conducted into the benefits of such educational efforts. Many have asserted that research examining the impact of various leadership development programs and classes, especially over time, would assist greatly in understanding just how leadership is developed. (p. 551)

We believe self-discovery to be a positive driver of leadership development, and that other educational institutions, as well as organizations, could adapt these types of processes in the development of their current and future leaders.

This paper begins with a literature review. The methodology and research methods are provided, and the results presented. Limitations and ethical considerations are also addressed. Finally, insights and future directions for both the course and research are discussed.

Literature Review

Our main area of interest was to examine how leadership development was currently being taught in higher education. In particular, the aim was to demonstrate a clear relationship between leadership development and Transformative Learning Experiences in the context of a course at a Canadian university business school, in addition to tracking graduates as they began their careers. Mezirow (1997), the grandfather of TLE, stated:

Transformative learning is not an add-on. It is the essence of adult education. With this premise in mind, it becomes clear that the goal of adult education is implied by the nature of adult learning and communication: to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others. (p. 11)

Torrez and Rocco (2015) wrote that transformative learning “does not simply provide new insight for future experiences but actually transforms the individual into a new, more complex way of knowing and being” (p. 21). Avolio, et al. (2005) posit that “understanding the moments that matter in life that accelerate authentic leadership development and recreating those moments may help to accelerate leadership development faster than life’s program.” Young adulthood is one of those moments, and developing leadership through Transformative Learning Experiences at the university level capitalizes on this. Avolio et al. stated that a “critical issue that deserves research attention is how authentic leadership develops and evolves” (p. 815).

There is strong evidence that “engaging in leadership roles as an adolescent improves one’s chances of getting into college and has a positive impact on future earnings” (Samardžija et al, 2017, p. 85). However, the current business world literature has largely focused on leadership, defined as the leader of a corporate team, and tended to ignore the greater, more personalized meaning of the term (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Self-driven discovery has been shown to maximize the effectiveness of building leadership capacity. This is true for a number of reasons, most notably that leadership development should always be guided by values and authenticity. As Ross (2014) suggested, the most effective and efficient leader is grown from the true self, and a “critical factor is the individual’s desire to want to become a self-leader by making personal choices that gives the individual greater responsibility for his or her personal actions” (p. 302). The importance of this self-driven discovery process comes into play with the realization that leaders, by definition, impact other people. Ross (2014) added that “if an individual is unable to lead his or herself, then the individual cannot expect to be able to lead others. Leadership involves the individual exercising responsibility and control over his or her personal actions” (p. 300).

Best (2010) proposed that among other professional skills, the benefits of leadership development included active listening, self-awareness, empathy, process observation, giving and getting feedback, cognitive restructuring, learned optimism, effective use of reinforcement, as well as resistance management. Reports of changes in perspectives, beliefs, self-talk, decision-making powers, clarity of ideas etc. are labeled as a core category under “Mind Experiences.” Mental “ah-ha” moments are related to a change in beliefs or perspectives, or a strengthening of the ego through the release of negative self-talk or thinking patterns. Of course, mind and body are not separate, so in some ways this is a false distinction, but nevertheless, “changes in mindset have a huge effect holistically in the client’s life” (Longhurst, 2006, p. 68).

Mintzberg (2004) noted “we need leaders with human skills, not professionals with academic credentials.” In larger organizations, especially, success depends not so much on what managers themselves do, but rather “on how they help others” (Samardžija et al, 2017, p. 87).

Coaching has been recognized as an important aspect of leadership development, with two elements of particular note. First, it is seen as crucial (and of particular relevance to this research). Ting and Riddle defined the intent of leadership coaching as “helping leaders understand themselves more fully so that they can draw on their strengths and use them more effectively and intentionally, improve identified development needs, and develop untested potential” (Ting & Riddle, 2006, p. 11). Second, Boyatzis (2006) discussed that coaching, as part of a leader’s responsibility, can sustain effectiveness, and it should therefore be emphasized as a key component of a leader’s role and behavioral habits.

A vast body of research has also demonstrated the importance of coaching. It is “now one of the dominant methodologies for developing leaders” (Mackie, 2014, p. 119). According to Mackie (2014) it can result in a significant increase in a number of beneficial characteristics, including goal attainment, well-being, and a reduction in stress. He also discussed how goal-striving— particularly within the realm of goal setting and attainment—increased hope, well-being, cognitive hardiness and mental health, with its impact extending beyond the leader. Another observation noted how participants experienced statistically significant increases in their “transformational leadership behavior after coaching, and this difference was perceived at all levels within the organization” (Mackie, 2014, p. 118). Commitment to goals can also reduce workplace stress and anxiety (O’Connor & Cavanagh, 2013). While considering

mentoring in business, Luecke and Ibarra (2004) pointed out how important timely coaching was for enhancing effective manager teams' performance. Samardžija et al (2017) continued to observe that:

Coaching and mentoring help employees grow professionally and achieve their goals. Managers therefore need to learn how to master mentoring challenges, improve their listening skills, and provide ongoing support to their employees. Within an educational environment, professors and the administration should do the same, providing students with support and enhancing the development of their potential. (p. 86)

Mezirow (1997) identified self-awareness as one of the key concepts of Transformative Learning theory, along with other elements such as autonomous thinking, self-reflection and establishing new points of view. Assessment-based training has incorporated this, and proven to be a complementary tool to personal and leadership development coaching, with evidence "that 360-degree feedback and coaching was correlated with enhanced workplace performance" (MacKie, 2014, p. 119). Particularly in its 360-degree form, there are two clear aspects: the first, and potentially most important, is setting a baseline. Thinking and behavior are crucial to leadership development, and for advancing leadership efficiency. Research by Best (2010) found assessments that measure thinking styles as "particularly important, given that while the skills associated with effective leadership can be cultivated through training, the personality traits that influence leadership style are less amenable to modification" (p. 25). Addressing a characteristic that can be changed, in this case thinking styles, is key when discussing leadership development.

Feedback is the second important feature of assessment-based training. Humans have blind spots, and are prone to treat others differently for a variety of reasons. "Feedback has long been known to increase performance by both motivating individuals and directing them to correct performance strategies" (Ashford, 1991, p. 251). The use of feedback is an instigator of transformative learning. When people "receive feedback that differs from their own perceptions and assumptions about their performance, the noted difference can be a disorienting dilemma, and this is where transformative learning may take place" (Mezirow et al, 2011, p. 148).

A deeper and longer-term perspective has been advocated. Avolio, et al. (2015) claimed that "too often the focus of leadership programs remains on specific leadership behaviors and the attempt to change them at the surface level [...] leadership is considered an outcome when in fact it should be viewed, treated, and practiced as a continual learning process" (p. 32). Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh (2015) also advocated for:

... examining the long-term impact of this course on students through a follow-up study on the perceived impact of the course on their life choices, approaches to learning, personal and professional relationships with colleagues/peers and persons in authority, and career choices. Expanding this study longitudinally would be helpful to further explore the transformative aspect of students' learning. (p. 82)

This belief is echoed by Kuvaas (2009) who suggested that the contributions of their research were limited by the being gathered at one point in time, "making it impossible to draw inferences of causality" (p. 230). Carmeli et al (2006) also stated that in order to substantiate a causal relationship, a longitudinal design is needed.

It is also important to note that leadership coaching is no longer restricted to executives: while the elements surrounding successful leadership development have been researched in the workplace, the literature indicates a need to examine the application of TLE in the teaching of aspiring young business leaders, in addition to tracking the impact of such training after graduation. (Yarborough, 2018) suggested:

Leadership coaching can significantly impact a young person's growth, especially when coupled with a developmental experience that incorporates meaningful assessment, challenge, and support. To have the greatest impact on a student's growth, the coaching process should be developmental (not directive) and it should focus on the coachee's objectives, not the coach's objectives. Whether someone is a professional leadership coach, novice coach, or peer coach, it is important that the coach and learner have a clear sense of both the leadership development context and the coachee's learning agenda. (p. 60)

This study aims to provide some longer-term insight, as well as to offer a number of tools to effectively provide students with Transformative Learning Experiences. Mezirow (2011) pointed out that although "there is little agreement as to what constitutes transformative learning or how it occurs within practice, it seems even more difficult as a practitioner to perceive and understand this process in action" (p. 64). We believe that the relationship between TLEs and leadership development can be discussed through four aspects; self-driven discovery, non-traditional success measures, coaching, and the use of assessments. By surveying business school cohorts two years after they graduate, our paper is able to suggest that the positive impact of TLEs carries them forward as they embarked on their careers.

Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach: student journals from the undergraduate course provided qualitative data analysis, and an online survey collected both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the course experience, as well as its longer-lasting effects. An additional area of focus was to understand the effects of self-directed learning on the students.

TLE 1 and 2

Throughout the course, non-traditional methods and evaluations were used as Transformative Learning Experiences. The students were asked to write two Transformative Learning Experience (TLE) papers that formed the framework for their leadership journey. By demonstrating both the desired action and achieved results, these papers acted as main sources for this study. Both the TLE 1 and TLE 2 compiled by the research participants were used to collect data in order to analyze the overall course and strategies employed. TLE reports were collected from 10 students in 2016 and 12 in 2017.

In the first week of the Commerce Leadership Development course, students underwent assessment-based training. They were required to complete a variety of diagnostic surveys used in corporate leadership. The primary assessment tool was the Life Styles Inventory (LSI), leveraged to "identify thinking and behaviour styles" (Human Synergistics). Essentially, the LSI helps individuals better understand and change the way they think and behave by measuring 12 thinking styles associated with a number of effective and ineffective leader behaviors (Human Synergistics). This intervention was particularly selected because it evaluated the students' current "approaches to motivation" and maintained a track record for "promoting more effective management and leadership strategies" (Human Synergistics).

The students began with what they believed was an understanding of who they were, while their assessment results disrupted or affirmed the areas on which they needed to focus. Completing the inventory provided them with a deep level of awareness on how they were showing up in the world, for themselves and others, and gave them a perspective on the effective and ineffective leadership styles they were currently using. This was the first step towards building a foundation for their leadership development.

They discussed their results in the TLE 1, created a leadership vision statement, and built goals with action steps to work towards their desired leadership state. The students described their disorienting dilemma (DD), as identified by Mezirow (1991), which forced them to become self-reflective. This was essential to the transformative experience. Undergoing this process enabled them to examine their beliefs, values, behaviors, and assumptions that made them *them*. They also gained a starting point from which to

begin their journey of self-improvement. As the course progressed, writing in reflection journals (TLE 1 and TLE 2) helped with this transformational journey. A student's current state was identified by diagnostics in TLE 1, coupled with their ideal leadership identity, or the person and leader they wanted to become. At the end of this journal, they were asked to devise a strategic, detailed and individualized plan to bridge the gap between their current and desired states. The TLE 2 report was written and completed during a six-week intended change journey, and served as a self-assessment of their progress to date, as well as a place for them to identify future goals for continued improvement and development of self.

Three researchers conducted a thematic analysis across the dataset (Appendix A) which consisted of six phases. They discussed broad data patterns and themes, creating relationships between the codes, and examined how the emerging mapping addressed the research questions. These themes were then connected back to the raw data to ensure they were true to the participants' voices. A primary researcher reviewed the assumptions and variations, before a final set of qualitative codes was collectively agreed upon. An independent team of researchers wrote a cover letter to participants (Appendix B) and created a questionnaire (Appendix C) to identify and better understand the real-world impact of the transformational, self-directed leadership course on both the professional and personal lives of previous students.

Longitudinal Survey

The questionnaire was designed to collect data from a total of 42 McMaster University's business school graduates of 2016 and 2017, (20 and 22 respectively). In their final year, these cohorts had attended the leadership development course that exposed them to the TLE. The survey examined their thoughts about the curriculum, their experiences in taking it, and the personal and professional impacts on them as individuals and leaders. The 15 questions were strategically composed; eight used a Likert scale, coupled with an option to provide complementary commentary, and where applicable, seven were open-ended. All questions were designed to gain deeper insights into five key areas: experience; application; growth; preparation and timing; and final thoughts.

1. Experience: Understanding the overall experience of students, the impact of class participation and of the assessments.
2. Application: Understanding the application of the action plan, goal-setting activities, and leadership concepts.
3. Growth: Understanding the impact of the student's leadership development and growth as a leader.
4. Preparation and Timing: Gaining insights into the impact of timing of the course, academic readiness and academic requirements.
5. Final Thoughts: Gaining insights on areas of opportunity, personal and professional impact, and key success factors.

The following multiple sub-research questions were developed to support the overarching area of inquiry, explored through data analysis:

1. How did the TLE process affect the students' learning and development of leadership related skills?
2. What were the common challenges they experienced throughout this learning process?
3. How did students experience and react to the initial disorienting dilemma? Was this a critical point in the development experience for them?
4. Were students able to develop realistic and effective action plans? How did they adapt to challenges, and pivot their action plans to navigate through crisis and ambiguity?

Descriptive statistics from the closed-ended questions were used to support the qualitative findings. The survey responses were independently analyzed to learn more about the longer-lasting effects of the

course, where the students gained insight and felt they needed self-improvement. Open-ended questions were coded following the same thematic analysis processes as the TLE dataset.

The sample size was approximately 66.7% of the combined number of students in both cohorts. Participation rates were limited by a lack of student contact information: many students no longer used their previous university emails, and/or were not in contact with prior classmates. However, the research team achieved a high 75% response rate, as 28 students who completed the course in both cohorts agreed to take part. The extremely positive feedback provided the research team with additional qualitative and quantitative insights. Responses to the 15 survey questions are provided in the Findings section.

Ethical Protocols

Ethical protocols were taken into consideration, especially since the leadership journey is personal. The participants consented to the collection of their TLEs, which were written during their academic semesters. Following completion of the course in 2016 and 2017, the journals (TLE 1 and TLE 2) had been collected and stored. Three independent researchers familiarized themselves with them, and then coded five sets individually. The data were safely stored, with great care taken to ensure all materials were kept in a locked and secure location, only accessible to the research team. The survey was executed through McMaster's Online Survey platform to ensure full anonymity, legitimacy, and privacy, and was open for two weeks, from July 26th to August 9th, 2019. Those contacted to take part were informed that their answers would be used for pedagogical research purposes. The survey data were stored on a secure server under password protection, again only available to the research team. Confidentiality was assured; to maintain anonymity, a numerical coding system was instated to identify each participant, and to prevent disclosure of any private information. To avoid a potential conflict of interest, the professor was not involved in this process. All responses to the online survey were anonymous, and the questions were designed to avoid influencing or bias in any way. While created to elicit optimal information, sensitive language was used. The skip question feature was enabled, so respondents could opt not to answer a question if they felt uncomfortable doing so.

Findings

TLE 1 and TLE 2 Results

The results from coding the TLEs 1 and 2 across both 2016 and 2017, were astoundingly clear. Throughout the Transformative Learning Experience process, the students showed a capacity to discuss their fears, lack of motivation and direction, a strong willingness to start defining success for themselves, and to pursue personal and professional growth. One student discussed how their "personal transformation was deeply rooted in my self-awareness" and went on to acknowledge that the process had allowed them to better manage stress and make decisions.

The results from the TLEs 1 and 2 make it evident that the student's benefited from the Transformative Learning Experience, expressing statements that included "I learned the importance of making choices that I truly believe in," "when reflecting on the overall outcome of my action plan, I very clearly see that time management is definitely an issue for me," "I am now more aware than before of when and why I try to take control of things and what the negative consequences of doing so are," and "my perception of what my behavior and attitudes were was way off from what they actually were." The impacts of the TLE are now discussed in more detail.

Finding 1: Fear.

The students expressed self-awareness in how they described their feelings. Fear was an overarching theme in the results. This included fear of failure and an uncertainty about their abilities with respect to life in general. While a seemingly broad category, some definite impactful trends emerged, including fear of failure, fear of doing the wrong thing, fear of opening up to others, and getting hurt. This often manifested itself as high avoidance, or high passive-defensive tendencies. It was evident that the

Lifestyles Inventory (LSI) tool provided the students with clarity, helping them to admit “it is obvious that I found fear [to be] my greatest barrier” and “I typically shy away from setting high, realistic goals for myself in fear of failure. I never want to disappoint others or myself, so I convince myself that striving for a lesser goal is better, as it is more attainable.”

Fear was often attributed to a tie between both achievement and avoidance thinking. One student explained that “this is an important bowtie for me to work on because my high avoidance is creating a level of self-doubt and fear of failure that is limiting my ability to live in the moment and embrace opportunities.” Another said “I truly disdain the fear within me, yet in a classically avoidant manner, I flee from my fears and I try not to think about what the act of avoidance is doing to me both cognitively and spiritually.” The action steps taken in this transformation brought further attention to the fear that may not have been obvious to them at first. It was interesting that a student stated that they “didn’t realize how uncomfortable it actually is to confront conflict in relationships, especially when I struggle with a fear of rejection,” and that this awareness and experience had them reaching even deeper conclusions about their ability to overcome their fearful feelings. This student reflected:

I wanted to express that the choices I had ahead of me are choices I can make for myself— not to satisfy the expectation of others, or because of my fear of disapproval. This situation proved that I could overcome my fear of rejection and failure in relationships.

Finding 2: Lack of Motivation and Direction.

Lack of motivation and direction was another concern and a commonly-discussed theme among the students, specifically when entering the TLE 1. Many indicated experiencing stress, depression, self-doubt, or anxiety as a result of their current thinking styles. Multiple behavioral, psychological, and physiological symptoms were also described. Students listed stomach pain, shaky hands, sweating, loss of sleep, hives, avoiding confrontation, and restlessness as some of the most troublesome symptoms. A common issue at the outset of the course was being wary of personal resistance to change, as well as recognition of an end-goal mindset rather than one focused on the journey. One student noted, “typically my focus is on the prize and not necessarily on the process of getting there.”

Interestingly, fear collided in this theme as well. Another student wrote “it is hard for me to start a task without clear direction from a manager, as I fear that making my own decisions pertaining to the task will result in failure or being wrong.” This particularly outlines the importance placed on direction and motivation, and the fear experienced if it weren’t present. Of note is the awareness the students gained around their lack of direction and motivation, as well as their need for it. One reflected that “my inability to make decisions and stick to them often leaves me struggling to finish something once I start it, and I often overreact in those situations.” An additional student said “due to my dependency on others, especially on my family, I tend to feel uncertain about my future and worry about myself more than usual.” Overall, when these Seniors wrote their TLE 1, the lack of direction and motivation they felt provided a particularly interesting observation, which begged the question, if they didn’t have direction now, when would they get it?

Finding 3: Importance of Defining Own Success/Independence.

Several transformational experiences were reported. Success, or rather self-defined success, emerged as one theme. Interestingly, how this was defined shifted slightly between the two TLEs. Throughout the TLE 1s, the acknowledgement of other-defined successes or goals was apparent. Many students shared the sentiment that they need to “worry less about impressing others and focus more on pleasing myself”, as well as a shared reflection that they too often “prioritized career-related tasks before personal happiness.” This transformational experience is significant, as it allowed them to see these errors, work towards changing them and evolve into their desired leadership state. Most shared that they wanted their “success to be motivated by my own values, beliefs and ambitions” and that they had “learned the importance of making choices I truly believe in.” While there would be no overnight shift, this transformation resulted in an altered perspective with the acknowledgement that they “want to

measure success in life through love and happiness, rather than wealth or status.” Another student’s comment seemed to encapsulate the inherent message of the course that, “at the end of the day, the only one who can truly motivate you to change is you.”

Finding 4: Desire for Personal/Professional Growth.

The students’ passion for both growth and transformation was evident, and they often used the words transformation and transformative learning synonymously. Growth arose as a theme on different fronts in both TLE 1 and the TLE 2. One student wrote “growing is something that I believe never stops, and all people are able to do so as long as they really want to.” Another articulated where they thought their own growth was necessary, saying “my desire is to continue to grow in truthfulness, respect and humility with the intent to behave with integrity.”

The discussion of balance was an interesting piece to this theme, the notion of wanting growth but not in the sense of wanting more, or to be more, but the need to gain more balance. One student said “I want to have a healthy balance between ‘a desire’ and ‘the need’ for approval to increase feelings of self-worth.” Many others also echoed a desire for this kind of growth which would give them more balance in their lives. This theme appeared frequently in the TLE 2s, sometimes out of pride, other times expressed as a simple reflection of the further solidified importance of continued growth. Students reflected on how important they found both supporting others, and the help they received in return. One wrote “by helping others grow, I myself have grown and feel confident going forward.”

Discussion of TLE 1 and TLE 2 Results

The TLE 1 and TLE 2 results largely focused on overall growth through the academic term. It is also interesting and important to discuss the themes that arose during the course itself, including fear, lack of motivation and direction, the importance of defining one’s own success/independence, and the desire for personal/professional growth. All the students were given an honest picture of what to expect from the curriculum, which included the many ways they would be challenged. They were told they would be graded according to how reflective and open they were to the experience, and how seriously they took it. The 42 students taking the course needed a willingness to grow, and an openness to change. With a strict and required commitment to the process, they reported investing over 100 hours to the transformative learning process. They were obligated to complete the assessments, and be dedicated to creating an evolving goal and action plan. It was additionally made clear that they were not expected to complete the process alone, and instead to find and incorporate social support to help them along their journey. The suggested guideline was to bring in five to seven people to walk alongside them throughout the Transformative Learning Experience. For most students, the breakdown was roughly 50% family/friends and 50% past employment relationships. Between 10–12% students across both cohorts chose to drop out after learning what was being asked of them, but the majority stayed.

From the moment they entered the 25-seater, oval classroom, the students encountered a learning environment that differed from any they had experienced before. They first underwent assessments that measured their current leadership thinking styles to act a baseline for the start of their journey, the LSI being the primary diagnostic. The process created a disorienting dilemma (DD) for many, as they were made aware of uncomfortable behaviors that required change. After receiving a brief on their results, the students were asked to reflect on what type of leader they wanted to be, and how they planned to reduce the dissonance between their current and desired states. Students were coached on how to write their individual Leadership Vision Statement that described who they wanted to be, how they wished to be remembered, and what their legacy would look like. All were then asked to complete their first TLE 1 report, which as mentioned earlier, formed the qualitative data analyzed for this research. Here, they discussed their own self-perception when embarking on the course, their feelings as they began their journey, their reactions to the DD, as well as indicating three thinking styles they needed to work on. This provided an opportunity to express self-perception, and discuss any reservations or positive feelings about starting the journey.

The responses to the DD were quite mixed, but a few key ideas emerged during analysis of TLE 1. Essentially all the students accepted the results they were given, whether they were pleased with them or not. Some displayed negative reactions. One wrote “I was not raised to be this way” and “I am ashamed of the person I have become” when referring to their low scores on humanistic encouraging and affiliative thinking styles. Another said “I was surprised and upset by how low my achievement [thinking style] score was, but it was definitely a wake-up call to kickstart necessary change.” Yet another who reacted negatively, explicitly stated that they accepted the results and were not particularly surprised by them. Interestingly, many students who had either negative or positive reactions also expressed no surprise. When discussing their low scores in a number of areas, one expressed that “[the results] support my belief that I rub people the wrong way, and have difficulty being friendly and tactful.” Overall, 100% of students embraced their assessment results, along with the idea of working towards making change.

Fear of failure, as well as an uncertainty about their abilities towards the TLE—and life in general—arose as another theme. The students expressed how these emotions were affecting their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and often manifested as highly avoidant behavior. One student even noted that until completing their TLE “I didn’t realize how afraid I was of making the wrong choice, having the wrong opinion.” And further that “I could overcome my fear of rejection and failure, I do have the strength to not shy away from life.” This also ties into the lack of direction and motivation that were other common concerns.

Finally, there were many commonalities in the thinking styles the students chose to improve. Every student created a unique action strategy for each of their three chosen styles, and most included a plan for intentional reflection. Many wanted to work on a range of mindsets. These included: boosting their achievement thinking (a belief in the importance of setting goals and striving towards them); raising humanistic-encouraging thinking (a belief in the importance of helping others to be their best self); and self-actualizing thinking (a belief in the importance of always striving to be their best self). They were also interested in reducing their dependent thinking (believing they needed to ask others for help with their decision-making); decreasing their approval thinking (that people must like them); and changing their avoidant thinking (a belief that conflict and difficult situations should be averted). There were frequent mentions around choosing goals that aligned with each style, and many incorporated another individual to act as a support. All 42 students kept a journal to reflect on their advancements, as well as regularly tracking their progress on a daily or weekly basis. The students then embarked on implementing their action plans to move towards their ideal self over a subsequent six-week period.

Self-controlled thinking styles and habits were the primary concerns mentioned by both classes as they started TLE 1. Many students indicated they were experiencing stress, depression, self-doubt or anxiety as a result of their current thinking styles. Multiple psychological, behavioral and physiological symptoms were described. As noted earlier, the most troublesome were stomach pain, shaky hands, sweating, loss of sleep, hives, confrontation avoidance and restlessness. A common concern at the outset of the course was the wariness of personal resistance to change, as well as recognition of an end-goal mindset, rather than one that focused on the journey. Many students shared the experience of shying away from setting goals altogether.

In TLE 2 journals, students described how they would create a future action plan to continue the changes they had begun in TLE 1 that worked towards addressing the main themes found earlier in the implementation section. One student wrote about the decision to keep writing in order to self-reflect: “another aspect of the TLE that was particularly effective that I will continue doing is nightly journaling.” Another wrote “moving forward, any action plan that I have will change to include more people, and not solely focused on work but also include my family and friends.” An additional common implementation change was around goal-setting: “When I create the next action plan, it will be much more realistic with respect to workload. Seven goals at a time was not realistic ... the next action plan will have only one goal at any given time.” Students also mentioned setting more specific goals, creating more contingency plans, and allocating more time for reflection. In terms of peer support, students were asked to choose five to seven accountability partners, and most chose three. In the TLE 2 reflection many students decided that their future plan would include far more help from friends and family. With respect to more meaningful

changes, the students expressed the importance of constantly acting with intent, and focusing on changing cognitive processes, rather than simply gaining skills.

Survey Findings and Post-Graduate Results

The purpose of the longitudinal component of the research was to identify and better understand the real-world impact of the transformational, self-directed leadership course on both the professional and personal lives of students. Although one participant indicated they did not feel prepared for the course, and another called the TLE “exhausting,” the takeaways were significant overall. Many expressed how experiencing “temporary discomfort” opened their eyes to future possibilities and positioned them to take small steps towards their goals.

The lessons learned varied, but included: creating stronger social relationships, learning to deal with change (particularly through turbulent and ambiguous times), and developing greater self-awareness. They reported that they learned how to make themselves a priority, while others wrote they felt more confident in their leadership abilities, were better self-managers, and had a healthier self-image. Several were explicitly grateful for the TLE journey, stating that they were “thankful for this TLE ... because of it I have made my way to becoming the person that I desire to be.” The unique design of the course allowed students to delve deeper than ever before, opening their eyes to who they were, who they wanted to be, and how to become that ideal version of self.

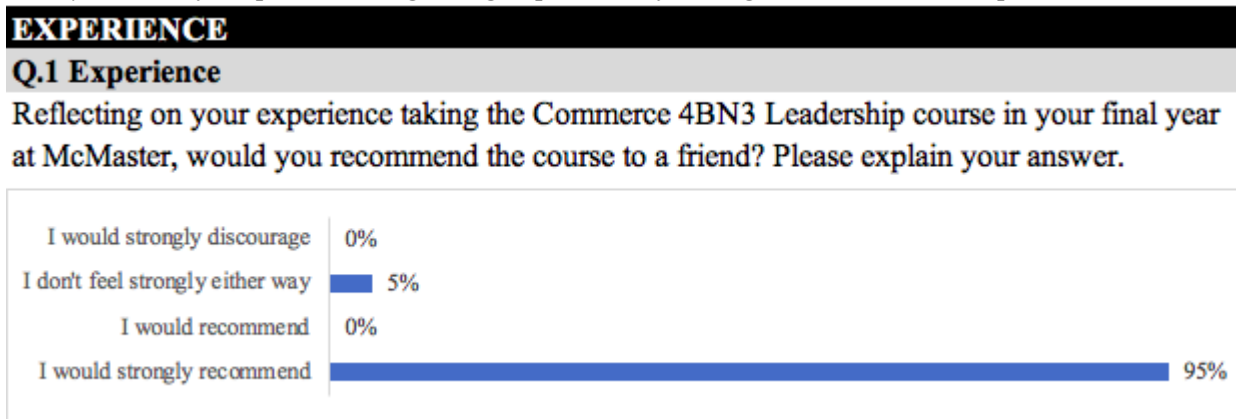
The post-course survey was specifically designed to gain deeper insights. Topics included whether the curriculum was a meaningful experience in the student’s lives to date, their practical understanding of the concepts of the Transformative Learning Experience, and if the participants continued to leverage their learnings two years after completing the course. The questionnaire (Appendix C) was strategically created to gain qualitative and quantitative insights, in addition to measuring certain aspects of the class experience. It also provided an outlet for students to give their feedback. The results (Appendix D) are grouped according to the survey’s five themes: 1) experience; 2) application, 3) growth; 4) preparation and timing; and 5) final thoughts.

Experience (Appendix D)

The results of this section were extremely positive: 95% of students stated they would strongly recommend the course to a friend. The majority described the course as “very positive,” “life-changing,” and they highlighted the fact that it encouraged self-reflection and self-awareness.

Table 1

Survey Results of Responses to Regarding Experience of Taking the 4BN3 Leadership Course



One student wrote that “the course really pushed me beyond my limits and forced me to reflect on who I wanted to be as a leader.” Another said “[it] was the most beneficial class of my degree!” It became

evident that the common themes in this section included a substantial increase in self-awareness around personal strengths and areas of opportunity.

From a preparation perspective, 81% of participants claimed the course was *very* helpful for life after graduation. Students commonly mentioned that it had given them a realistic understanding of what it would take to be successful in the workplace, and that they now had a better understanding of themselves as leaders. The participants expressed how they were able to make better decisions, collaborate with team members more effectively, and have a greater understanding of how to leverage different characteristics to enable synergy. These learnings helped the students adopt the TLE approach as they deepened their knowledge about themselves, both personally and professionally, and increased their market readiness. One student summed up this insight:

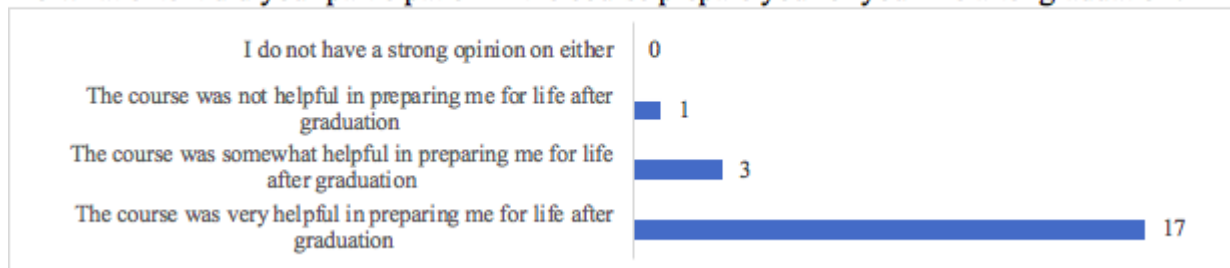
I found this course to be of great value to me, both professionally and personally, after graduating. Professionally, it allowed me to be more aware of my weaknesses, and how they may affect my ability to grow and contribute to a team. It also made me much more conscious of how other people's behavioral patterns at work may be connected with experiences and challenges in their personal lives. Personally, this course taught me some valuable skills related to self-reflection and goal setting.

Table 2

Survey Results for Responses to Question 2, Regarding How the Course Prepared Students for Life Beyond University

Q.2 Participation

To what extent did your participation in the course prepare you for your life after graduation?



The last question in this section was about the effectiveness of the self-assessments completed as part of the course. Here, 95% of participants expressed that they would re-do the assessments if they had the opportunity, and that they found the course transformational. One student wrote:

The final assessment [course process] is something that I believe everyone should complete before graduation. It really pushes you to take a step back and evaluate the most important things in your life and which direction you want to head into. More importantly, it encourages you to reflect on the why and how of it all.

By acquiring the tools to develop fundamental skills at the beginning of the course, this demonstrates the value the students associated the TLE with their measure of success beyond graduation.

Application (Appendix D)

The second section of the survey (Appendix D) attempted to further understand the impact of the action plan application, goal-setting activities, and leadership concepts. Students continued to demonstrate strong application of the TLE concepts by describing their learnings as “relevant,” “powerful,” “fantastic *real-life* course,” and “adding to my tool kit.” Positive feedback was consistent, yet also highlighted

potential opportunities. The survey revealed that 71% of the students agreed that the course taught them how to create and implement realistic action plans, and when they create them today, 76% of them continue to use similar goal-setting techniques.

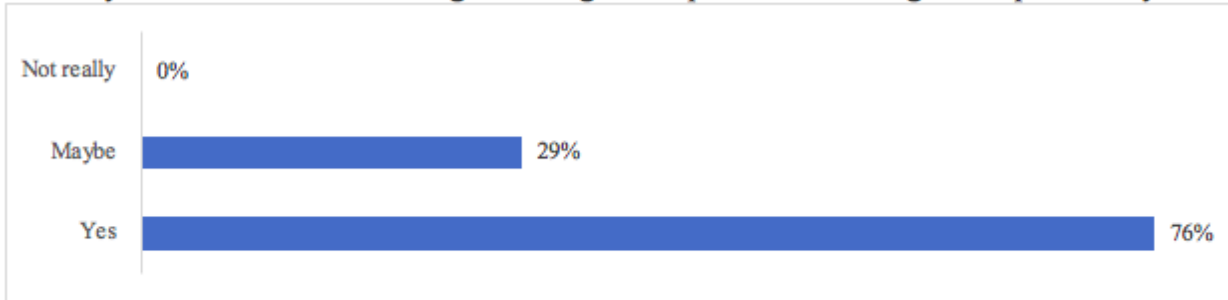
Table 3

Survey Results for Responses Regarding Goal-setting Techniques for Action Plans

APPLICATION

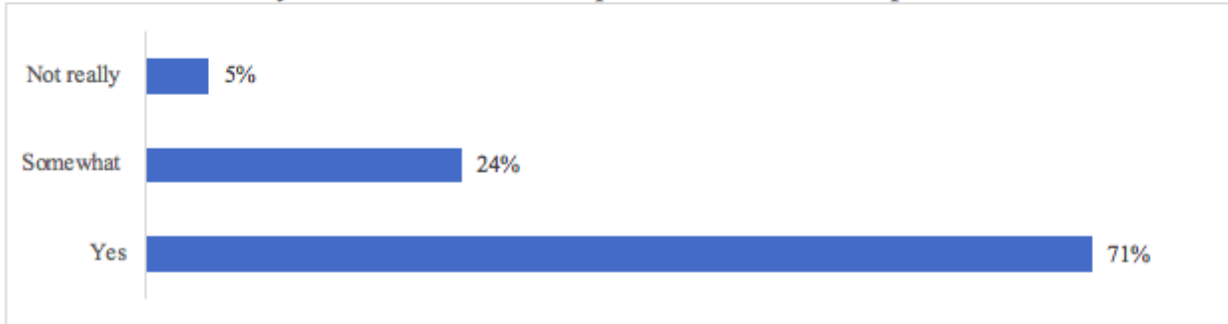
Q.1 Action

Would you continue to use similar goal-setting techniques when creating action plans today?



Q.2 Plans

Did the course teach you how to create and implement realistic action plans?



Only 5% of the participants said they did not apply or implement realistic action plans from the course teachings. Overall, the participants placed importance on being skilled at creating and implementing realistic action plans, and expressed the need for it to be taught more frequently, rather than just one course in their final year. One student wrote “It’s hard to develop practical action plans, and it’s even harder to follow through [in a short period of time].” Another was self-compassionate: “I didn’t fully achieve my goals but it was a step in the right direction.” This suggests that the goal-setting technique impacted and influenced all the students to some extent, while highlighting the need for increased opportunities to develop realistic action plans for themselves throughout their undergraduate degree.

On graduation, 100% of the students were able, or partially able, to make connections between the theoretical and practical aspects of the course. They believed the blend of reading books, articles, and class presentations was the most effective way to learn many concepts. One student expressed that “[it was a] great way to get through so many leadership books” and that “I often find myself recalling things that were discussed in class when relevant situations arise at work.” Another commented “it all made sense from [the professor’s] teachings. It made me a better leader in my life!” This strong correlation continues to suggest that students understood and carried with them the concepts gained during the

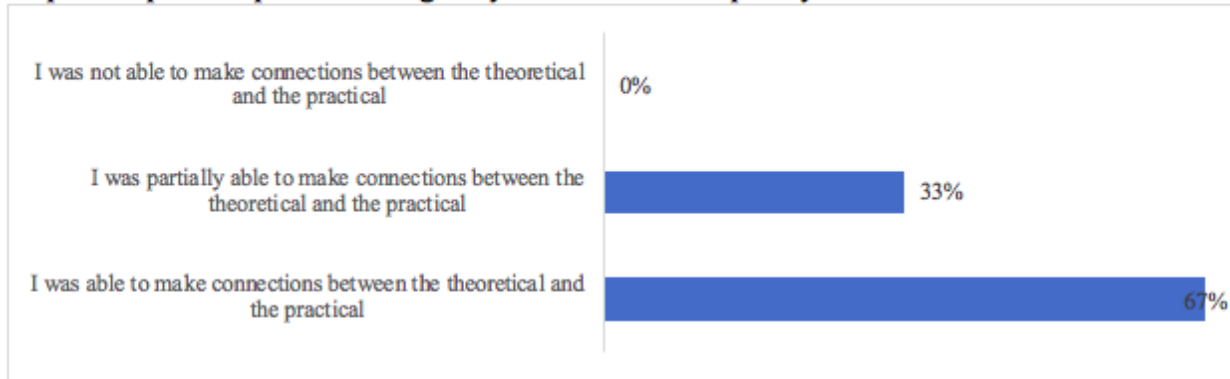
Transformative Learning Experience following participation in the course, including; self-awareness and autonomous thinking.

Table 4

Survey Results Regarding the Application of the Course Leadership Concepts to Implement Positive Personal Change

Q.3 Concepts

Were you able to take the theoretical leadership concepts from the course and develop practical steps to implement positive change in yourself? Please explain your answer.



Growth. (Appendix C)

The third section of the questionnaire explored the leadership growth journey, and its impact on how the participants developed as leaders. The course was described as an opportunity to increase self-awareness and self-improvement. Those surveyed reported that they left feeling empowered, challenged, and having a better sense of different leadership styles, with the ability to identify the one they aspired to. One student wrote:

The TLE was one of my favorite projects to do at McMaster! It was super interesting to dig deeper into myself and it allowed me to figure out why I was the way I was. [...] It opened my eyes to who I am and who I want to be, while giving me a path to get there.

This suggests the graduates were better equipped to uncover the many layers and complexities of their thinking styles and behaviors.

The participants also shared that the TLE helped them navigate professional relationships and the organizational landscape, which cultivated a sense of accountability as they were able to develop action plans. One wrote “I feel I have grown as a leader through the experience, since it encouraged me to be more aware of how behaviors support or hinder my goals.” The comments demonstrated that the course encouraged students to self-reflect, and to understand that every choice and decision either brought them closer, or steered them away, from their goals. They additionally appreciated the need to prepare growth plans, all realizations that are key success factors in leadership development.

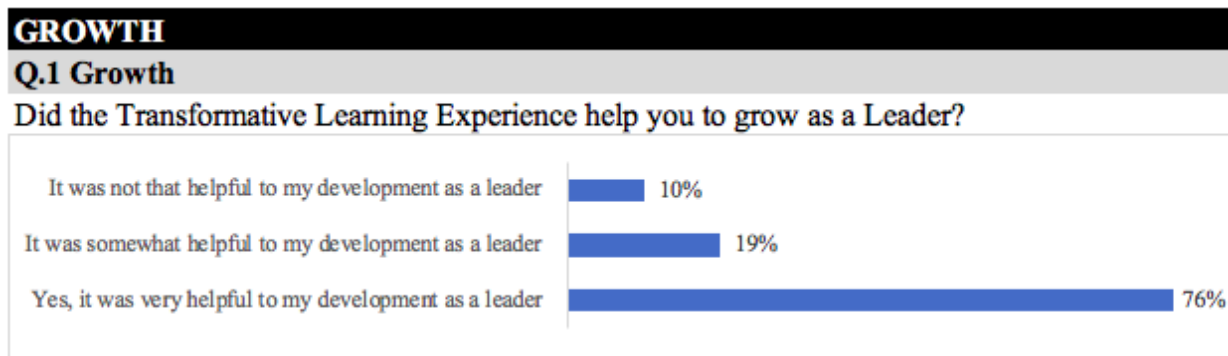
The responses showed that the students developed emotional intelligence, and a deeper understanding of empathy, humility, and willpower. They described how they were better able to relate to others while driving their own self-improvement: “the TLE has given me the confidence to lead and be led. It taught me to take advantage of my strengths and gave me a positive outlook on my weaknesses, with the proper tools to improve them.” Respondents subsequently voiced how their leadership growth journey had revealed the positive and negative impact of the power of perception. One said “to be a better leader I believe that you have to be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses and have high emotional

intelligence.” The student went on to express how they were able to better understand their audience, and the feelings of people around them. They concluded by writing “these are just a few areas that contribute to growing in your leadership. The Transformative Learning Experience helped me through all of these areas, and I could see small progress almost right away.”

The need to develop productive self-reflection habits, understand links, tensions, and roots are imperative for personal and professional success. The data in this section revealed that the students were eagerly seeking opportunities to better understand and apply themselves in the real world through their TLE learnings. This suggests that the TLE was a key success factor in helping the students grow as leaders.

Table 5

Results of Survey Responses to Whether the TLE Helped Leadership Growth



Preparation and Timing (Appendix D)

The fourth section of the questionnaire was designed to gain insights on the overall preparation, academic readiness and requirements, as well as the timing of the course. The program was only offered as an elective to upper-level students, and the majority were in their final year of university. The participants were asked whether they would choose to take it in an earlier year if given the opportunity. The majority described key success factors they viewed as necessary to maximize value from the curriculum. These included a certain level of maturity, being mentally prepared to work hard, having a willingness to ask hard questions, to possess strong self-discipline, and be open to change. The final and often-mentioned prerequisite was some relevant professional work experience. Some expressed concern that without these basic requirements, they would have not fully benefited from the course. These common themes were reflected in this comment:

The timing was perfect for me [in my final year] as I was already open to change and improving myself. I was not ready and prepared to open up about myself in earlier years. I was not ready to accept my weaknesses and mistakes.

Another wrote “I don’t know if I would have the maturity or self-realization to appreciate the journey [if the course were taken earlier].” The same respondent later went on to say that “I wish it was a required course for every single student.” The results demonstrated some wrestling with the idea of having the course available to younger students, however the major concern was that the younger or less experienced would not be fully prepared to reap its benefits. Some appreciated taking a program that was specifically designed for upper-year students: “having this in my final year allowed the learnings to be top-of-mind as I graduated and headed into the ‘real world.’” The findings highlighted that the course was beneficial in preparing students for entry into the workforce, and enabled them to thrive in their new corporate roles.

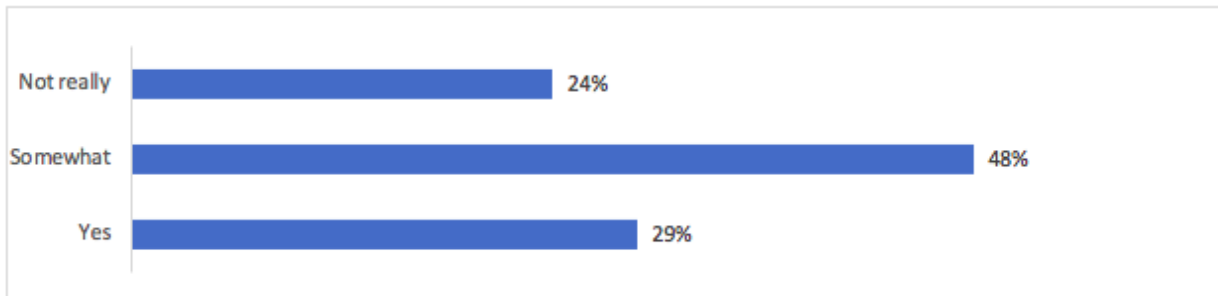
The next set of questions examined student readiness on the completion of their first-, second- and third-year courses. Almost half (48%) said that prior year courses somewhat equipped them to succeed in the leadership course, whereas just under a quarter (24%) stated that preparation fell short. The common remarks were that the earlier curriculum was repetitive and not overly applicable, rather than providing a progression in learning. One student stated, “I feel that the preparation fell short. First/second/third-year commerce courses were heavily focused on textbook content and theories; it was very repetitive.”

Table 6

Results of Survey Responses to Whether Earlier Courses Provided Adequate Preparation

Q.2 Preparation

Did the first, second and third year Commerce courses (e.g., COMMERCE 1BA3/2BA3, 2BC3, 3S03) prepare you to succeed in the Leadership course or did you feel the preparation fell short? Please explain why you did or did not feel prepared for the leadership course:

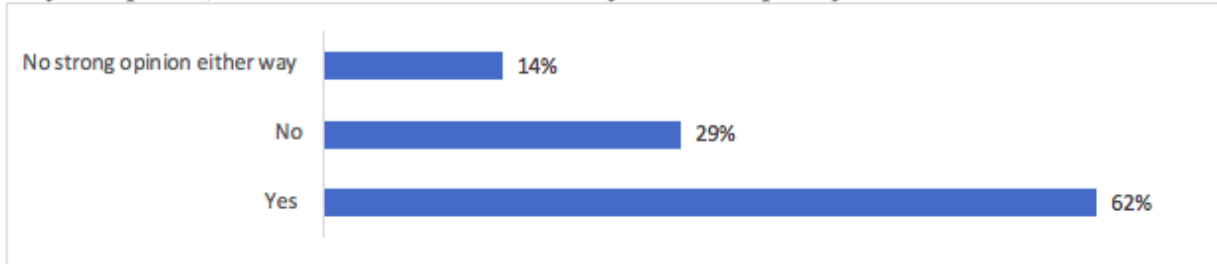


Participants expressed that most courses were theory-focused, lacking practical application. This affected their learning experience, reducing learning retainment, as well as lowering impact and influence. One person said “the leadership course was so very unique; I don’t feel as if it connected much at all to my other courses. Also, it was extremely hands-on, which the other courses were not.” This gap underlines the opportunity to increase the impact on student learning and experience, especially if half of their education is considered lacking in preparing them for the outside world. Many passionately expressed that “[they] wish the professor taught every course!!! Other courses felt very ‘textbook’ but it didn’t prepare you for real life, whereas the leadership course most certainly did!” Additional comments were, that “this course stands alone” and provides a “unique experience.” Although almost 75% of students said they felt they were not adequately prepared to face the realities and demands of the professional working world, the leadership course was considered to be influential, impactful and integral to their development, and a key success factor in helping to better equip them.

Table 7

*Results of Survey Responses to Whether the 4BN3 Course Should Be Mandatory***Q.3 Requirement**

In your opinion, should this course be mandatory? Please explain your answer.



The subsequent section in the survey explored whether the course should be mandatory. The results indicated that 62% of students strongly believed it should, however, there were mixed emotions and reviews. Most students agreed that the hands-on application of leadership theories, the strong sense of self-discovery, self-awareness and reflection were major factors in supporting personal and professional leadership development. One respondent shared:

Absolutely [this course should be mandatory]! This course actually prepared me for real life! It was by far the most rewarding class I took, and one that brought forth the teachings into my everyday life. I feel that all commerce students would strongly benefit from this course!

Another wrote “this course is super helpful in so many ways beyond school that I think any student would benefit from [it]!!” Students praised the professor for the experience and value. “The way [the professor] instructs the course goes hand-in-hand as to why I liked the course so much and why it is so beneficial.”

On the other hand, some expressed concern that not everyone would be mentally prepared, or willing to undergo deep self-reflection, be able to drive meaningful change, or to put in the effort required to experience growth. A compelling issue was that the overall dynamic atmosphere of the class would change if the course became mandatory:

Some students may not have enough past experiences to look back on, or may not want to dig deep and open up. I believe the course could be mandatory however, [it] may not impact every student in the course as it should.

The small handful who had signed up all chose to be there; if the course were mandatory, the concern was that there would be a significant change in the class size beyond the current fewer than 20 who attend. It was felt that the intimacy and experience would be at risk, particularly if reluctant students were present, running the risk of affecting the experience and overall class morale—features that made the course so impactful and memorable to begin with.

Additional comments suggested that increasing experiential aspects to lower-level curriculum could push students to start thinking differently earlier on, and allow them to develop some of the skills before starting the course.

Final Thoughts (Appendix C)

The final section of the survey invited insight into the areas of opportunity, personal and professional impact, and key success factors. The comments suggested that the course provided value. “It changed my life for the better. I love [the professor]. She is an excellent instructor, teacher, coach,

listener, and friend!” Certain opportunities arose that would strengthen the longitudinal impact. Respondents shared that although the TLE was seemingly tedious, and that they eventually benefited from it, greater guidance would have enabled them to get on board faster. One suggested tactic was to provide support around the use of a more relaxed goal-setting framework that could be additionally practical for everyday use. It would be helpful to clarify to the students that failing to meet their goals was not a course requirement, but were there for them to understand the process and reflect on it.

Students shared that they needed more time, and that they would have benefited from an extended program beyond the six weeks, even potentially making it a year-long course. This particular shift might allow for a longer and more impactful transformational journey. This was suggested because it would provide them with an increased capacity to incorporate informal and formal leadership growth experience into their everyday action plan: “In hindsight, I wish I had more formal opportunities to practice key leadership skills (e.g., communicating a vision, navigating difficult situations with integrity and compassion, balancing openness and decisiveness, encouraging and developing others, removing roadblocks).”

Others expressed that inviting more guest presenters, with the possibility to “implement more speakers from leaders in different industries,” using virtual or in-person experiences, would help bring the theory to life. Participants shared that studying and applying real-case studies/assignments increased retention and learning exponentially. Ideas included adding extra real-world case studies to help the students apply their theoretical learnings to the business world. Bringing in previous course graduates to connect with the students and discuss their experiences might be motivating and informative. More engagements with hands-on non-traditional learning experiences were proposed, such as “[incorporating] practice projects or real-life cases where we can use our leadership characteristics and styles and apply it to a case or scenario” to enable engagement.

One final recommendation was to consider implementing a mentorship program between recent graduates and current students to create a “lifeline” for when they graduated, and in turn, for those taking the course to put their leadership skills into action by mentoring younger commerce students. Participants also provided feedback on aspects of the Transformative Learning Experience they believed the course should continue to offer, together with recollections of their most memorable student moments.

The top most impactful features included the assessments, the instructor, the presentation and books, along with the TLEs. The assessment component was described by 77% of students to be their favorite part of the course, which illustrated the desire to further understand and discover themselves. “All the self-assessments [were] super important to do and very informative for self-reflection.” More than half of the respondents said that the presentations, books and TLEs drove meaningful change in their professional and personal lives. “The TLE, assessments, and presentations [were] an effective and efficient method to get through content, teach it to other students, increasing retention and application of theory.” Another wrote “my most memorable part of this course was receiving feedback on hundreds of pages of personal thoughts, assessments, and other documentation that allowed me to develop as a person.” Lastly, 63% highlighted that the professor’s competency and teaching style were instrumental to the overall experience of the course: “[The professor] is amazing. Thank you for being a phenomenal teacher, a mentor, a coach, a counselor and therapist all at the same time” and “the professor should always teach this course! She is such an inspiration and has such an ability to make people shine and grow.” On a personal level, they were able to improve self-awareness, increase their sense of empowerment, and their ability to tackle conflict in their lives:

It has given me so many answers as to why I behave the way that I do, and helped me identify ways to improve. The assessments were so helpful in understanding myself and empowered me to dig deeper and challenge myself into a strong independent leader.

The opportunity to develop a personal vision and mission statement helped to anchor them in life, providing direction and purpose. One respondent wrote how self-reflection had led to making career changes that better aligned with their values: “I started a mood journal to be more self-reflective and

haven't missed a day in two years. I left my job for an opportunity that better aligned with my values and the kind of people I wanted to be around.” Being an overall better friend, person and partner were attributed to this course. One participant shared how the program prompted them to make a significant decision in their life:

[...] within a few months after graduating, my almost five-year relationship was coming to a mutual end. I distinctly remember this time being a wake-up call for me to figure out what I wanted in my personal life, and take actionable steps toward achieving my goals.

From a professional perspective, survey respondents said that they better understood the type of leader they wanted to become, and recognized the characteristics of healthy and toxic working cultures. They revealed a deeper desire to collaborate, to know their coworkers, and now felt able to set empowering to achieve aspirations and grow:

I created a tangible list of things I wanted to start doing in order to become the person I wanted to be. In the following months I improved my physical fitness, my eating habits, and my mindfulness [...] These improvements have all been sustained.

Students were grateful for the invaluable impact the course had on them both personally and professionally through the TLE approach. Students consistently described how it helped them to make a difference in the world: “Thank you again. This course is truly transformative and life-changing. It’s exactly the type of education we need to see more of.”

Future Research and Direction

Implications for Theory, Research and Practice

This study addressed a number of interesting and necessary concerns currently plaguing undergraduate business programs. Undergraduates were disclosing more mental-health concerns than ever before, and that the expectations of careers after graduation were not being met by the current curricula. They felt unprepared to enter the “real world.” The troublesome reports of low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and frustration expressed in the TLE 1 point to a serious area of concern.

The course tools gave students an outlet to explore many of the current struggles and hurdles they were likely to face in the future. We would like to explore more closely the impact these methods could have made in a wider variety of settings. The importance of resiliency, navigating through ambiguity and crisis management are proving to be more important than ever. For instance, research would be timely on whether the non-traditional skills and transformative learning, acquired as a result of the course, built resiliency and proved beneficial for graduates through the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be interesting to discover how the tools developed through the Transformative Learning Experience contributed to the lives of the students, whether in terms of continued academia or when in the workforce.

Studies into the experience of stress and other psychological struggles need to be a priority at universities, together with a focus on the improvement of availability and accessibility of support services. Those who took part in this study told their stories, and the TLEs are proof of the struggles they faced during their undergraduate degrees. While it focused on those enrolled in a North American business school, this study presents an opportunity to expand on the research material gathered, and to continue to further develop curricula elsewhere to support future students.

Two important considerations have arisen with regard to developing the current methodology. First, what can be added to our post-graduate data questions to ensure they check in on these increasingly important competencies? Were these competencies developed through the TLE process? Second, with academic coursework, lectures and examinations largely moving online, can these competencies provide the same impact when taught virtually? We believe it is more important for students everywhere to be resilient, to be able to deal with change, and to continue developing these skills during a time of isolation

and limited in-person socialization. Pedagogical methods need to evolve in order to keep up with important and changing non-traditional skills.

Implications for the Practitioner

Up until now the focus has been on the students, while the role of the facilitator has largely stayed behind the scenes. In order to conduct a course of this structure, the facilitator must possess the required skill set, and needs a support team to make a significant impact on the students' learning. Best (2010) pointed to the importance of a coach in this type of process, stating that they must successfully integrate the knowledge and competencies of the coaching profession, and also be adept at applying them in unique and innovative ways to help clients reach their goals.

The professor facilitated the use of the assessments, conducted the coaching, oversaw the self-driven discovery as well as the completion of both the TLE 1 and TLE 2. Her involvement has been referenced several times in this paper, and her impact on this course cannot go unnoticed. Replicating this teaching and learning might be challenging for institutions that may not have professors who are trained to guide this transformative process. To address this, an arrangement has been made where interested parties may contact the professor for information and guidance about creating their own version of the leadership course.

With or without the connection to the professor, it is imperative that anyone interested in replicating this approach has a deep understanding of the selected assessments and the transformative learning approach embedded within the course. In addition, facilitators would need to be trained and certified, as required by most industry-based diagnostics. A willing coach must also be familiar with goal-setting strategy, and be able to support students in finding and committing to action steps that match their objectives. This requires a great deal of empathy, interpersonal communication and knowledge of leadership theory.

Course Design Limitations

A number of common and significant themes arose with regards to how the course was designed. One student referenced the lack of social support during the process. Many emphasized the need for more help from their peers when trying to implement big changes. Another wrote "I recognize that in my action plan over the last six weeks, I poorly integrated involving other people ... And so it is a goal to implement this in my future action plan." Those who did not incorporate support into their initial plan later expressed an understanding of why it was recommended. Students who failed to secure support systems found a lack of shared understanding and overall accountability in their goals and action steps. However, when implementing social support networks or accountability partners, another issue raised was that scheduling issues became an obstacle when students attempted to incorporate their friends or family—all the more reason for these key roles and the nature of accountability to be clarified at the beginning stages of the goal-setting process.

The second overarching problem revolved around implementation. Students explained that their schedules were too tight, and they lacked time to implement their action plans. Issues around vagueness in the plans also made change difficult. One wrote "this action plan was a disaster and lacked the narrow focus required for successful goal achievement." Those who did not set up accurate tracking of their progress found it hard to implement change.

The last problem area raised related to personal meaningfulness. This was not connected to action plan design or implementation, but a deeper set of issues that stood in the way. One student explained how their action plan targeted behaviors rather than thinking styles, meaning that on the surface, things might seem to have changed, but the root issues were not resolved. Another stated "I was not always attuned to my goals from moment to moment. This taught me that I have to breathe my intent, otherwise change will be incomplete and inconsistent." Students described the difficulty they felt in determining the meaningfulness of their actions, and that going through the steps of the action plan felt forced and unnatural. One reflected that they were not honest enough in the planning phase, and should have included "passion projects" in their goals.

Limitations of the Research

The small sample size, particularly with the TLE portion of the research, was one of our study's limitations. The research team analyzed data from 22 students in two cohorts using their TLE reports written in the middle and at the end of the academic term. It is important to note that more students agreed to participate in the survey than were willing to allow the use of their TLEs. Twenty-two of the 42 students consented to have their TLE used for research, 28 students agreed to participate in the survey. This speaks to the private and confidential nature of these reports. The increased number of surveys allowed for more quantitative data, and placed the focus on descriptive statistics and basic tests of significance to support qualitative findings. An additional and potential concern involved the generalizability of the findings. There is potential for variation and differing results in the implementation of a leadership course at institutions other than the commerce students at McMaster University who participated in this study.

Finally, this research provides some insight into the effect of the course beyond the early career roles of those studied. The post-graduation findings give some indication of the benefits gained two years after leaving university, however, it is unlikely these new graduates would hold significant leadership roles in that short time. Future research would benefit from following them throughout their career as they gained senior positions in the workforce, and conducting this work would provide deeper insights into how the course impacted leadership identity in the long term.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research demonstrated that the Transformative Learning Experience component of the university business school leadership course was beneficial to two cohorts of students, both in the classroom and once they embarked on their careers. Those who took the classes gained quantifiable and sustained benefits from the strategies taught. The implications suggest that self-awareness, the ability to push oneself, and goal-setting influenced all the students to some extent, while highlighting the need for increased opportunities to develop realistic action plans as undergraduates. Overall, it is important to note that leadership development is a beneficial, maybe even necessary process, best undertaken before gaining corporate management titles. These students proved that this journey starts as soon as a person decides to make changes in their lives.

Coaching, assessment-based training and non-traditional success measures that initiate personal growth are critical—but missing pieces—in current leadership teaching. The results of this initial study provide an opportunity for future research into the importance of a shift towards supporting personal growth and a transformed perspective in the pedagogy to develop leadership, resiliency and other non-traditional measures of success in young adults. Incorporating Transformative Learning Experiences into the business school curriculum may become an essential key to creating a stronger, more open-minded and self-aware generation of leaders.

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