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Teaching Leadership Through the Lens of Gender as a Practice of Transformative Learning

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Abstract

Leadership education is undergoing a paradigm shift to redevelop and redefine leadership utilizing theoretical lenses as tools to examine and critique traditional, hegemonic narratives. Through an instrumental case analysis of a gender and leadership course, this study examined the phenomenon of transformative learning by teaching leadership through the lens of gender within an environment of critical feminist/engaged pedagogy. Findings include the importance of the learning environment in building affective and cognitive frames for scaffolding student learning, the relevance of engagement in vulnerable storytelling as a peer-to-peer learning device, and the need for strong preparation as a facilitator of the engaged learning environment. We call on higher education educators to transform their learning practice and consider gender theory and critical feminist-engaged pedagogy as tools to facilitate a new learning perspective.

Keywords: gender, college students, critical feminist pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, leadership education

Teaching Leadership Through the Lens of Gender as a Transformative Learning Practice

Leadership learning sits at a crucial juncture. As educators grapple with the challenges of disruptive times, it becomes apparent we must expand our theoretical curriculum and pedagogical tactics when teaching. Guthrie and Chunoo (2021) entreated leadership educators to engage in the imperative of socially just leadership education. The scholars of the updated National Leadership Education Research Agenda (Andonoro & Cilente Skendall, 2020) articulated that leadership scholars, educators, and learners required deeper reflection on systemic oppressions and intersecting identities as integral influencers of leadership development and practice. These calls emphasized the continued need towards updated, critically oriented pedagogy for learning about leadership and identity. Yet minimal attention has been paid to considering the benefits and challenges of teaching gender theory through critical feminist engaged pedagogy within leadership education as a transformative learning practice.

Leadership education literature offers some insights to student leadership learning and development from an identity-based focus (Dugan et al., 2008; Guthrie et al., 2013; Guthrie et al., 2016); however, none of this scholarship offers a gender-specific focus. A multitude of leadership curriculum incorporate gender in some fashion (Alan et al., 2020; Appelbaum et al., 2003; Badura et al., 2018; Billing & Alvesson, 2002; Carli & Eagly, 2001; Crites et al., 2015; Eagly, 2005), but do not utilize critical or postmodern gender theory to inform their examinations of gender. Scholars who do examine leadership and gender through a critical lens denote the need to explore these ideas further but have not examined their use in the classroom (Beatty & Tillapaugh, 2017; Owen, 2020).

Limited understanding of updated gender conceptualizations in scholarship perpetuates outdated perspectives and analysis of gender in relation to leadership, decreasing the potential of teaching gender and leadership through a socially just, critical lens. Frequently, there is an assumption that gender = woman (as in Gender Studies) or gender equates to binary terms. In many instances in leadership scholarship, gender could often be replaced with the words woman/man, male/female, or simply 'woman' (with cisgender, heterosexual, White, and able-bodied implied).

To examine how to address this issue, the purpose of this multi-semester instrumental case study of an undergraduate course on gender and leadership explored the phenomenon of utilizing gender theory in leadership education through the implementation of critical feminist/engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1991). Through the lens of critical feminist theory, the case study examined how an intentional pedagogical lens and multidisciplinary angle influenced the course experience in understanding gender, leadership, and how the two concepts intertwine.

Research questions for the case included: 1.) How did the course structure, pedagogy, and environment influence understanding of gender, leadership, and gender + leadership? 2.) How did the course influence understanding of identity?

Teaching Identity-Based Coursework in Leadership Learning

The instructor(s) took an integrated approach to teaching about the complexities of gender and dove into the intersectional nature of oppressive systems (Catalano & Griffin, 2016). Learning about gender cannot happen without exploration of intersecting identities and systems of oppression around race, class, religion, ability status, and more (Crenshaw, 1991). In creating leadership learning opportunities, it is critical to take integrated approaches to sexism, heterosexism, and trans oppression as they are all related to how gendered systems operate (Catalano & Griffin, 2016). It is not easy to unpack years of socialization around genderism, sexism, and hegemony (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2017), while also grappling with multiple, complex understandings of leadership.

When exploring the complexities of social identities, it is imperative to understand terminology used to express identities as a foundation for learning (Catalano & Griffin, 2016). As a lens for understanding the educational experience, critical/engaged pedagogy (Friere & Macedo, 2000) acknowledges how students from varying and intersecting identity backgrounds might experience identity-specific (gender) focused content differently based on their social group memberships, identity intersections, and identity salience in gender, race/ethnicity, or other systemically influenced identity categories (Hahn Tapper, 2013).

Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) emphasized the imperative for leadership educators to do self-work on their own identities and positionalities before they show up in leadership learning spaces. In identity-based leadership learning, the educator is a central element of the community while also often learning and wrestling with personal identity development. This is especially important to consider when a significant number of leadership educators are white cisgender women (Jenkins & Owen, 2016). Redon (2009) noted facilitators of identity-based leadership learning must be willing to admit they are still learning, are innovative healers and liberators who can restore learner's self-confidence, see education as a greater good, and be activists who fight for equity and justice for all.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study employed critical feminist theory (Clark, 2007). Scholars of critical feminist thought emphasize gender as a central lens of analysis to understand inequitable power systems in a patriarchal, misogynistic society. Expanding on feminist theory which emphasizes the radical idea that women are people (Clark, 2007), critical feminist theory employs a lens of intersectional critical theory which critiques historical feminisms that do not go far enough to address systemic inequities in gender identity (beyond the lens of cisgender, white, upper/middle-class women; Collins, 2005) or consider the intersectionality of oppressions in gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and other social positions (Crenshaw, 1991).

Critical Feminist/Engaged Pedagogy

The classes in the case were framed within critical feminist/engaged (CFE) pedagogy. CFE pedagogy disrupts historical acceptances of power in systems (such as the classroom) and centers marginalized (particularly Women of Color, trans, and gender non-binary) voices as experts and knowledge holders in the learning space (Freire & Macedo, 2000; hooks, 1994). This pedagogy features dialogical, participatory, and experiential approaches to the classroom in a fluid and context-aware nature to allow for a transformational process of engaged interaction (Chow et al., 2003). hooks (2009) stated, "Engaged pedagogy begins with the assumption that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher" (p. 19). CFE pedagogy uses education as a liberating force that centers lived experiences of the learners in the space, emphasizes gender and power as the central focus of exploration, and intentionally connects narratives to curriculum (hooks, 1994).

Studying social identities and leader identity as inherently connected and intertwined required a liberatory pedagogy grounded in critical theory and feminist theory (Freire & Macedo, 2000; hooks, 1994). Central to CFE pedagogy is a vulnerable and transparent educator who is willing to learn and offer lived experiences alongside students (hooks, 1994). It also requires a shift from safe spaces to brave spaces, as safety cannot be guaranteed in vulnerable conversation and learning but bravery can be encouraged (Arao & Clemens, 2013). When educators label these spaces as safe, they appear to be comfortable and imply lack of risk, particularly for privileged (white, male, heterosexual, cisgender) identities. Conversations around social identities and oppression are grounded in embracing discomfort and vulnerability, a risk intended to encourage moments of cognitive dissonance that lead to growth (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Methods

This qualitative instrumental case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008), framed through the constructivist paradigm (Harris & Graham, 1994) and the theoretical constructs of critical feminist thought (Clark, 2007), focused on exploring meaning in experiences (Creswell, 2013) within a gender and leadership course. An instrumental case study focuses on gaining insights into a particular phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). We identified and selected this method because understanding the phenomenon of teaching leadership through a lens of gender within critical feminist pedagogy remained the focus of the study, with the case itself as secondary (Milles et al., 2010). The method allowed the researchers to explore the phenomenon of how the course influenced learning and growth in three different semesters of classroom experiences.

Case Description: The Gender and Leadership Course

The boundaries of this case focus on an undergraduate gender and leadership course. The data represent three separate offerings of an in-person undergraduate leadership course at a large, public research institution in the southeast. Students in the class changed each semester; the instructor remained the same for all three courses with an additional co-instructor added in the third semester the course was taught. This class is part of a leadership studies program that also offers coursework available for all students at the institution. Students who chose to take the course were able to use the credit as an elective in the leadership program; they were also able to use the course to meet a university-wide diversity course requirement.

The *Gender and Leadership* course was designed purposefully to be a *gender* and leadership course, not a *women* and leadership course; emphasizing the idea that gender does not equal only women. The course goals were to intertwine understanding of gender from multiple perspectives and disciplines in interrogating conceptualizations of leadership. The course was structured through a CFE pedagogy lens in three areas—shared power, multiple voices of identities, and varied modalities for students to examine narrative experiences of gender and leadership (Chow et al., 2003; hooks, 1994).

Course structure.

Arao and Clemen's (2013) "brave space" was provided as a foundational expectation for course interaction. These expectations included a collective conversation and agreement to engage in controversy with civility, for individuals to take ownership of their intentions and the actual impact made in their conversations, and to allow for instructive challenging of their ideas (even if it made them uncomfortable). The course was developed to examine, critique, and synthesize current research and narratives on gender and leadership. The curriculum also introduced intersectional voices navigating the gendered experience through multiple identity lenses, including race, socioeconomic status, and religion and introduced critical and postmodern thought on gender with myriad conceptualizations of leadership and their intersections (Butler, 1990; Collins, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Structured through a CFE pedagogical foundation (Berry, 2010; Chow et al., 2003), the course instructor implemented power-sharing techniques including relationship and trust building, purposeful emphasis on marginalized experiences, and inclusion of diverse voices through course readings, discussions, and guest speakers. The instructor also employed experiential learning activities and dialogical interactions (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). In order to mitigate implicit bias built into the course, reflection on how the instructor's positionality influenced course content, discussions, activities, and interactions was shared. Discussion included consideration of the instructor's social identities and experiences of power, privilege, and oppression as a White, cisgender, straight woman; these considerations were shared in the class and through her reflexive journal. This allowed a process of praxis-weaving between theoretical foundations in critical feminist thought with direct application and reflection.

The course learning outcomes aligned with this collaborative, praxis-oriented perspective: Describe perspectives, concepts, and theories used to understand gender and leadership; Critically evaluate the perspectives advanced by concepts of gender and describe how they can influence leadership practice; Communicate effectively about the nature and complexity of gender and leadership; Reflect on and come to an understanding of one's own development in gender and leadership identity; Analyze the human experience of gender and leadership from multiple lenses, and their intersection of gender with other social identities including race, class, sexual orientation, and religion; and Explore one's own norms or values of gender and leadership in relation to other perspectives.

The instructor also explained that the course's foundational design was influenced by critical, feminist, queer, and postmodern thought on power, privilege, and authority as well as her role as a co-creator of knowledge and learning in the class experience. She noted in her teaching and learning statement in the syllabus

We can only learn more and further our understanding of ideas and concepts if we are open to teaching and learning from each other. This requires our classroom to be founded on relationships (I believe we need to know each other in order to best learn from each other); rooted in critical theory (we should critique and question systems of power that create inequity); and open to discourse in a brave space. We will be embarking on an exciting, and at times uncertain and uncomfortable adventure together.

Course content.

Gender and Leadership was an exploration of the intersections of the complex social construct of gender and the intricacies of enacting leadership. Participants were encouraged to consider gender as a socially developed and enacted concept (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and explore the historical inequities in which this construct has progressed and influenced our understanding and enactment of leadership. The course content included the experiences of transwomen, ciswomen, genderqueer, transmen, and cismen leaders as well as concepts of gender expression and the intersections of identities, including race, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status as influencers on leadership access and practice. To address these perspectives, the course reviewed research from a variety of disciplines, including education, social psychology, sociology, economics, and management and organizational science.

One of the first course interactions after establishing ground rules through brave space was to offer students introduction to research paradigms as tools to analyze and critically consider theory in gender and leadership. Paradigms presented included 1.) positivism/post-positivism, which posits we are capable of analyzing concepts through a controlled, objective truth (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). 2.) Scholars of social constructivism/interpretivism suggest there are multiple truths that can be studied and therefore subjectivity must be a factor in understanding phenomenon (Harris & Graham, 1994; Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). 3.) Critical theory, is a form of social constructivism that emphasizes the need to make inequality/inequity explicit as a form of understanding multiple truths and dismantling power imbalances (Agger, 1991; Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010). 4.) Post-modernism/post-structuralism scholars introduce a lens of fluidity and disruption to concepts of knowing, questioning the ability to pin down or study "truth" as a means of understanding the world (Agger, 1991; Bellwoar, 2005; Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010).

Key course assignments included a relationship building storytelling project titled, *Our Stories, Our Voices*, where students, through whatever creative means they wished, told the story of their identities, upbringing/background, and past in relationship to their understanding of gender and other salient identities to their peers in class. Students were also required to create a personal statement paper at the beginning of the course reflecting on their understanding of gender and leadership based on socialization from family, friends, education, and location. Finally, students submitted a leadership synthesis paper detailing an analysis of their original personal statement paper with updates and reflection based on course content to review their current understanding of gender and leadership.

Participants

Study participants were first-year through fourth-year undergraduate students at a large, public, predominately white, research-intensive institution in the southeast. Thirty-six students consented to participate in the study out of 69 students in the three classes; 34 participants' data were complete and utilized for the study. Participant demographics were collected through the electronic consent form; data were collected on race/ethnicity and gender identity, but not sexuality. This was due to concerns for students' privacy if they were navigating exploration of their sexual orientation. Participant demographics were majority cisgender, White women (n = 18). There were a greater number of cisgender women (n = 24) participants overall, with cisgender men (n = 7) as the next largest group, and trans or genderqueer students (n = 3) as the smallest number of participants for the study. Students of Color were a smaller representation (n = 8) compared to White students (n = 26). Specifically, Students of Color included Latinx (4), Black/African American (1), multi-racial (1), and Asian/Pacific Islander (2). Due to this small number, People of Color (PoC) was chosen to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Data Collection

The study was approved by institutional IRB and study data were collected over three semesters of the course. In the first class meeting, students were informed of their option to participate in the study by consenting to allow their written course assignments to become data points and that their participation in the study would not impact their experience or grade in the course. All data were collected after grading culminated for each semester to inhibit ethical concerns for the faculty-researcher. Data were de-identified and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Data collected included students' discussion board responses, written class reflections, mid-semester and final course assessment, and two papers – the personal statement paper written at the beginning and the leadership synthesis analysis and reflection paper submitted at the end of the semester. The data points were collected to examine how students in each individual assignment expressed understanding of intersections of gender and leadership throughout their course experience, connecting to the research questions exploring how the course influenced understanding of intersections of gender and leadership and in context of social locations.

Data were downloaded in electronic copies from the learning management system site after grading culminated. Additionally, the researcher-instructor completed a reflexive journal (Anfara &

Mertz, 2014) for each course considering the experiences after each class. The reflexive journal served as a touchpoint of learning for the instructor across three iterations of teaching the course and as a reflexive praxis of theory, reflection, and application to examine for the study.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data through the qualitative software, NVivo 12 (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014) and examined through three rounds of coding processes using the constant comparison method of data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2012). The first round of coding was completed by the first author. The second and third rounds of coding were collaboratively analyzed across the research team. The first round of coding examined high-level themes in all units of data including personal statement papers, synthesis papers, course assessment, and instructor's journal. Data sources were compared for specific words and phrases, and similar and distinct experiences articulated. Aligned with the research questions, high level codes were determined through seeking examples of learning in the course, discussion of the course environment, reflection, and references to social identities in connection to course content, and perspectives offered on the connections between gender and leadership throughout the course.

The second round of coding employed open coding (Saldaña, 2012) to deepen thematic understanding across data points. Researchers sought examples of learning connections, moments of cognitive dissonance, and levels of change from within the course. Following open coding, axial coding allowed the researchers to develop categories and groupings (Saldaña, 2012) and finally emergent, overarching themes. Data triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2010) occurred using participant data over three subsequent semesters, multiple forms of assignments, and the instructor's reflexive journal.

Credibility and trustworthiness were achieved by applying member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2010) through multiple sources. Four student member checkers (two from the first course and one from each subsequent course) consented to review the analyzed data for confirmation of findings from their own experience in the class, affirming trustworthiness of the analysis process. Additionally, the theme analysis was member-checked by the co-instructor of the last course taught in the study. Methodological limitations include the similarities in researcher positionality (see below), the research site as a predominantly white institution with restrictions on access of a diverse participant group influenced by students' choice to register for the course, and the singular case site.

Researcher Positionalities

The three co-authors identify as cisgender, straight, white women. All three work in leadership education within higher education; one is an established researcher in the field, one is an early career faculty member, and one is a manager of a leadership program. We contemplated our similarities in social locations in the analysis process through reflexive consideration of our positionalities, particularly considering privileged identities in whiteness and heterosexual, cisgender status. The first author was the primary researcher, developer of the course curriculum, and the instructor for all three courses. As participant-instructor-researcher, she possessed deep knowledge of the intentions and goals of the course. In each iteration of the course, she learned and adjusted from the experience to better implement the content for the following semester. The two other authors served as critical friends, processors, content creators, and editors within the analysis and writing process.

Findings

Participants exhibited growth in their abilities to describe gender, leadership, and gender + leadership through an intentionally framed environment. Students' identities in gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and religion were salient factors in the courses' theoretical content. Through these highlights we show the importance of intersectional identity-focused leadership coursework but also reveal the need to appropriately structure such curriculum with scaffolded pedagogy and preparation of the educator.

Build the Frame

Scaffolding coursework to appropriately progress students through the curriculum provided important development for the course experience. The two emergent themes of these building materials were cognitive and emotional/affective frames as intertwined, crucial factors. For the emotional frame, purposeful structuring included emphasizing relationship building and storytelling as a core element in the class. The focus on relationship building opened the space for vulnerable authenticity and truth-sharing about each student's story. For the cognitive frame, we found the introduction of research paradigms prior to the presentation of gender and leadership theories allowed for a broader individual and collective understanding of complex ideas.

Affective frame: Relationship building, multiple perspective-taking, and vulnerability.

In two-thirds of the final papers and throughout feedback from mid-semester and final evaluations, students identified the unique nature of the class as a profound experience in transformative learning. In both mid-semester and final course evaluations, a positive classroom environment was mentioned over 50 times. Students described appreciation for being "treated like equals." One student shared, "The learning environment was healthy and organic. It taught me that having an opinion is important and okay. What was positive was the engaged conversation that took place every class." Students noted discussion 41 times as their most engaging element of the course and over 20 students stated the importance of guest speakers to their learning experience. Thirteen out of the 34 students mentioned in their final synthesis papers direct examples of learning from specific peers. Overall, students identified learning from guest speakers, discussion with peers, and being encouraged to share their own stories as primary factors in feeling comfortable to tackle difficult topics in the classroom.

The examples students gave regarding listening to and learning from guests and peers relates to the pedagogical framework of the course in critical feminist thought by including validity for all voices and experiences as key elements of the learning process. These elements of relationship building and making space for understanding others' perspectives built the emotional connections students recognized as important to the dynamic of the class. In a mid-semester assessment exercise entitled "stop, start, continue," one student requested what to continue in the course for establishing this open classroom environment: "Continue everything. [Continue] creating a space where people can express their opinions, grow and learn."

In intentionally framing the course to allow for powerful connections, students approached difficult topics with a deep vulnerability. However, this was not true in the initial weeks of the course; a vulnerable connection was achieved as students became more comfortable with each other's stories. The *Our Stories, Our Voices* assignment particularly supported this growth. The researchers were able to observe a distinct shift in student relationships comparing the first semester when the assignment was at the end of the semester to the second and third offering of the class, where this assignment occurred mid-semester. The students who were in the two semesters when *Our Stories, Our Voices* occurred sooner identified the assignment as a clear moment of connection to their fellow peers. The instructors observed greater vulnerability and willingness to share personal stories with their classmates. Holly, a white, cis-gender woman, shared:

> *the Our Voices, Our Stories [sic] assignment gave me an entire [sic] new perspective. I have always been one to not judge people, however, this was really eye opening. It is definitely going to help me to focus more on the fact that you never know what a person has been through or is going through... It was incredible to see how strong all of my classmates are.*

Bridget, a cisgender white woman, shared:

> *When we did Our Stories, Our Voices we really got to know one another, and it showed us that we all have a vulnerable side but also that we want to be heard and understood. [The instructor] made our classroom welcoming and open which made all of us comfortable enough to be our genuine selves.*

In addition to this course assignment, students shared a variety of examples where they learned from peers. Specifically, they appreciated hearing alternative perspectives which allowed them to broaden their understanding of the topics discussed. This aligned with Aurora's experience, a cisgender Latina, who described how peers changed her perspective on an assignment where she initially held one viewpoint but broadened her understanding after hearing from peers and ultimately shifting her position.

Candace, a white, ciswoman, clarified how learning from peers through personal storytelling helped her understand the course concepts:

> *My favorite aspect of this class was listening to everyone's personal stories and viewpoints on the issues that we discussed… I was not very knowledgeable about some of the situations and problems that are prevalent in our society as most of the others in the class, so having the opportunity to talk to them and find out what they know and how their past experiences have shaped their opinions on these things is an opportunity that I would probably have never had without this class.*

Bridgit summarized how the course environment, peer learning, and relationship building through assignments brought about a change in her experience and appreciation of the topic:

> *Throughout the semester we have encountered all sorts of information and perspectives and I think that the way the classroom was set up, really fueled the conversations. The space that we were in felt very safe and inviting and it made us, as students, want to be open and vulnerable. I was able to hear from people from all walks of life. Whether they were gender queer, trans, Hispanic, African American, gay, male or female we were all able to find things that we had in common and I thought that was the coolest part of class… I was able to discover what my identity was more than I ever have before.*

Throughout the students' reflections and evaluations there was a clear connection of how feeling trust in the emotional and relational environment of the classroom allowed students to be vulnerable enough to hear and share multiple perspectives across difference. This emotional framing progressed identity development, learning, and application of intended new behaviors throughout the course experiences.

Cognitive frame: Teaching paradigms and critical analysis.

The instructor constructed course content to overlay critical and postmodern perspectives on gender to examine theoretical and applied considerations of leadership. This construction imposed a heavy load on undergraduate class participants. Students were expected to learn various paradigms of research then apply those lenses to other scholarship and identify complexities and holes in the conversation around leadership and gender. Many students shared initial feelings of confusion surrounding the new concepts and identified longer, more complex readings as difficult to navigate. This was affirmed in students' initial reflection paper on gender and leadership, where most participants showed little to no comprehension with theoretical foundations. However, by the end of the course, most students showed progress, particularly around concepts and terms related to gender. Students noted in-class discussion and active, engaging class activities that broke down more complex theoretical ideas allowed for greater learning and growth.

Another theme showed how the introduction of paradigms allowed a shared language of understanding about theory to critically analyze ideas and apply them. The synthesis papers, completed at the end of the semester, revealed several powerful instances of student analysis across multiple paradigmatic levels, offering graduate-level work for an undergraduate 2000-level course. Adell, a cisgender Latina, presented a cogent assessment of positivist framing to dissect the perpetuation of binary perspectives:

As humans, we simplify the world with the use of heuristics to save cognitive resources and create a false sense of understanding; our discomfort with uncertainty leads to this simplification in the form of a binary to not deal with the complexities of gender.

She furthered this examination by considering an example from her own life, using her understanding of paradigms to analyze an occurrence of structuring gender expectations and restrictions:

> *My brother and male cousins were also held to strict norms, evident in the instances when they would do anything labeled not masculine or associated with women, like wanting to paint their nails or helping in the kitchen. They would be met with the response "you want to be a woman? You better not be gay!" In this phrase we see the intersection of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as my cousins were being called gay because of their desire to express "feminine" characteristics, assuming their gender identity as men. The positivist paradigm is evident in this statement because it implies one truth of what is correct for men; that men are not capable or should not be allowed in these spaces because they have been deemed for women. Thus, seeing gender through a dualistic lens creates limitations for people because it establishes rules for what gender can do what; gender is being used to restrict access.*

Kloe, a cisgender Asian American woman, offered an intensive dialectic engagement of Judith Butler's (1990) intimidating work on gender through allusions of performative practice. Butler posited gender not as an identity to be prescribed or owned by a person, but rather as an act, a perpetual and obligatory performance. Kloe's capacity to interact and employ complex gender theory offers an example of how teaching paradigms and then allowing students to get hands-on with theory can have a positive and surprising outcome. Kloe's final synthesis paper tackled theory at an impressive level of complexity. She painted a picture with the concepts, describing:

> *A man performing his masculinity is a magician performing his magic show. Every trick, the magician reinforces and proves to the audience that he is his title and every performance, every learned "masculine" characteristic reinforces to his peers that the identified male performer is his title of male. By not having his identity questioned, he is a normal and fine member of society.*

In both these examples, there were clear indications that the cognitive structuring of introducing research paradigms and the integration of interdisciplinary gender theory as an analytical lens led to deeper student understandings of how leadership may be accessed or enacted.

Student Co-Created Learning

In analyzing the data on a classroom environment where power-sharing and co-learning are at the forefront, factors of challenges, learning, and application emerged. As the instructor applied the tenants of critical feminist pedagogy, the learners became influencers in how the space developed. The identities and development of the learner, reflection of the learning, and application of new ideas were key findings of the co-created space.

Environment + theory + reflection = intended application.

Students' framing of their learning offered comparative examples of how students reflected on their shifts in understanding concepts from the beginning of the course to the end. These reflections included considerations of how they were influenced by external sources (family, education, religion, etc.) and how the experiences in the course broadened their perspectives beyond their original understanding. Student learning was deeply represented in the data, with over 350 participant references to learning from the course experience. Students mentioned significant shifts in understanding leadership, gender, the intersections of gender and leadership, and the broader implications of their learning within their worlds outside the classroom. James, a white cisgender male, summarized this focus on learning, "I learned how I can use all of this knowledge that is new to me to assess how gender plays a role in my life in terms of demonstrating good leadership."

Many of the synthesis papers offered examples of students stating intentions to apply their learning to future situations. This finding provides a way to consider how the course could be sustainable in its impact beyond the time spent in the semester. Students shared plans to be more thoughtful about pronouns, avoiding labeling people based on gender (or other identities), how they will apply leadership

concepts addressed in class in future leadership positions, and how they want to shape their worlds for better understanding based on learning from class.

The finding of intentions for application beyond the course clarifies the importance of classes where students are motivated to take their learning outside the course semester in question. Through addressing the topics of gender and leadership and giving the students tools and language to challenge inequitable systems, the course helped drive leadership of individual action. Coursework on theory can be disassociated with real-world issues. The finding of intended action reflects a direct outcome of students synthesizing theory and abstract data to shift their approach to everyday issues in gender and leadership. Students noted their own ability to change the problems presented in the course content – affirming their roles as leaders in creating a new construction of leadership from an equitable lens on gender.

Complexities of co-learning.

While having an open, brave (Arao & Clemens, 2012) classroom offered a host of positive outcomes, we also revealed some complexities to applying the pedagogy for a broad array of students with various developmental levels and identities. First, although in the minority, in the student evaluations, five students over all three courses noted they preferred a lecture-style, more highly structured classroom environment compared to the more power-shared critical feminist pedagogical application. One student noted, "The learning environment was very safe and interactive, but I do not feel like there was much of a teaching environment. [The instructor] said [she was] a facilitator but I think I would have enjoyed the class more if there was more of a structure." In these instances, students who are unaccustomed to being knowledge holders or co-learners/facilitators may retain a preference for direct instruction as a more appropriate way of "teaching."

Identity also played a factor in how students received the classroom environment and content. Specifically, the student reflections and evaluations as well as instructor observations highlighted challenges for students who identified as non-binary, genderqueer, or transgender as well as for cisgender, white, men and women students and students with strong religious backgrounds. Each of these identities presented unique experiences in growth and struggle for students. It was apparent cultural contexts highly influenced students' understanding of gender as well as its intersection with other identities. Danielle, a cisgender Asian American woman, expressed this well in stating, *"The definition of gender varies from culture to culture; different times and places define it uniquely."*

The broad variety of identities and perspectives in the classroom allowed for significant learning, but also did at times serve as a barrier. As students came into the class with identities that are both privileged and marginalized, as well as with an array of backgrounds where they may or may not have had these types of conversations, the overall environments of the courses were impacted. For example, while students were presented with information to critically examine a variety of viewpoints, the degree to which students were open to expanding their worldview varied. Cai, a multiracial, transman described how his perspective changed in understanding others but was also validated in being concerned with peoples' biases. This helped him process his own leader identity development:

> *I've been shoving my peers into a place of understanding without outing myself, for fear of "bias"... as recently as the last week of class, I've been around people who still don't understand how invasive it is to be... interrogated about... your identity.... this class has made me learn that people will have their own perspectives on the reality of gender and leadership, but that people can be taught that what they learned isn't necessarily the truth. What has been advertised as the one and only truth maybe [sic] just be one of many. All I can do is offer my wisdom and experiences and hope people understand the problematic points and injustices in some of these truths, helping us all understand each other one bit at a time. By trying to understand other people's truths, I can more soundly solidify why I exist in the truth I live in.*

As examined by Cai, students in the courses who held privileged identities such as white, cisgender, and/or straight were at times resistant to the information presented about experiences and identities outside of the gender binary or regarding racial/gender privilege. The instructor(s) observed

varying degrees of discomfort with examples of discrimination, oppression, and inequality in the course content.

At times, there were challengers who did not believe there was a direct correlation between gender and leadership. Candace, a cisgender, white woman, reflected in both her personal statement paper and final synthesis paper the disconnect she saw between leadership and identities, including her belief that anyone could rise to be a great leader if they put in the work:

> *The class talked about how the ideas of gender and leadership intersect with each other, which is something that I have always pictured as two separate things… I truly believe that if someone, of any gender, puts in the effort and dedication, regardless of which obstacles that they will most definitely have to face, they can become a great leader. Regardless of how "privileged" one person may be, every person will face obstacles of some kind, with varying levels of challenges and discrimination.*

The difficulty of balancing students' developmental levels influenced how the instructor(s) could support different students in the course. While some students connected deeply with the subject matter and at times were personally impacted by the content presented (as in Cai's example), other students served as barriers and/or committed microaggressions against their peers. These instances were handled in the moment if appropriate and followed up with after the class. In this complex environment, the foundational theoretical framework of co-learning, emphasis on marginalized experiences, and relationship building were crucial factors in the courses' success.

In addition to the challengers and students in progression, each course included one or more "clarifiers" or students from both targeted and privileged identities who, through various means, expressed their understanding of grappling with privilege in complex and nuanced ways. These students served as instigators of learning for their peers, allowing for a co-creating of knowledge through their own identity development experiences. Lisa, a white ciswoman, explicated, "Privilege and leadership go hand in hand. Unfortunately, people who have privilege are the leaders in our society and because of this, they only think about helping people on their level." In each class, certain students pushed their peers to deeper learning through their own processing of the content and personal experience. The depth of this knowledge sharing connects with engaged pedagogy and leadership development scholarship on understanding through narrative storytelling.

Discussion

Gender and leadership-focused coursework as investigated in this study can offer intensive, focused identity development within the container of leadership learning in higher education. The intertwining exploration of gender theory, reflection on foundational experiences of gender and leader identity development, and examination of socialization and positionality within inequitable systems allowed students to process complexities within the leadership present and possibilities of leadership for the future. While direct findings from the qualitative data cannot be generalizable, it is important to consider how elements of these outcomes can inform practice in leadership learning and development in higher education. Primarily, these factors can be considered through a lens of building a purposeful environment (research questions one and two) and training leadership educators to facilitate leadership development content for students from varying identities (research questions two and three).

Build the Environment

The study explored the impact of a learning environment curated through CFE pedagogy and purposeful theoretical grounding. It is important to consider how the findings inform our understanding of the skills to build an environment for deeper learning.

Focus on foundations of CFE pedagogy.

Fully integrating foundations of CFE pedagogy allows students a space to engage authentically and vulnerably. This is emphasized in the findings where students noted a deeper learning from peers and across the course content and assignments. Educators who seek to create a brave space in their classrooms must become well versed in these tenants in order to recreate the outcomes of this study. This will be a shift for some students who expect more structure or lecture styles, as noted in the findings as students are accustomed to the "banking model" of education and socialized to understand teaching and learning in restrictive structures (Freire & Macedo, 2000). Re-formulating these expectations to construct a more collaborative space also builds the foundation for collective buy-in to engage in difficult conversations across different identities and experiences.

Integrate paradigms + theoretical foundations.

Although not all students incorporated illustrations for paradigms or metaphors for applying philosophical gender perspectives, Adell and Kloe's depths of understanding are examples of why it is imperative to incorporate foundational tools for students to dissect and understand theory. Students may meet the challenge at varied levels, but avoiding the difficulty because of a fear that students will not be able to grasp the concepts would only hinder learning.

Highlight marginalized voices by de-centering dominant narratives.

In structuring the course, it was imperative to bring in voices not represented by the instructor(s) or (at times) the students. The instructor purposefully curated guest speakers, varied readings from disciplines across academia and outside of higher education, assigned TED Talks, podcasts, and mainstream media articles to include narrative experiences from a multitude of perspectives—eschewing normative leadership narratives (i.e. White, male, western, cisgender, heterosexual, positional, hierarchical) in favor of underrepresented (i.e. queer, transgender, women of color, collective) stories.

This de-centering of the dominant narratives aligns with critical race theory foundations (Brunsma et al., 2013) as well as culturally relevant leadership learning pedagogy (Guthrie et al., 2016) and had a clear outcome of broadening students' understanding of others' experience through introducing them to people's stories they would not have otherwise encountered or considered in standard leadership theory curriculum.

Do the Work: Educator Preparation

Findings addressing research questions on the student learning experience and environment offer implications for the process of learning to create and facilitate the space. In order to create a transformative learning environment, educators must be prepared in teaching an identity-based course such as gender and leadership to meet students "where they are at" and balance the co-learning and co-creation of engaged pedagogy with reasonable expectations of students' individual identity development (Meriwether; 2018; Spencer & Guthrie, 2019).

Student development theorists in higher education outline how students from different identity backgrounds in race, class, sexuality, religion, and gender might arrive in classrooms at varying levels of preparation to engage with difficult conversations about social identities (Patton et al., 2016). This was a clear finding of this study, with a range of student learning across identities. Finding balance between students' cognitive dissonance (blowing their minds) and supportive environment (allowing for paced growth) is the dance of teaching both leadership and identity-focused coursework. Educators should prepare for this dance through training in their graduate programs in student development theories, leadership educator development (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2017; Teig, 2018), and through personal work in grappling with their identities in relationship to systems of power, privilege, and oppression that influence leadership understanding and access (Guthrie et al., 2013, 2016). Educators can also rely on a network of critical friends to process with and receive feedback in this work (Owen, 2020).

The incorporation of theoretical lenses of gender and intersectionality as frames to view leadership necessitates preparation from the educator to create a balance in expectation of the learning

space. This requires being a skilled facilitator, navigating encouraging students to be peer co-learners and expand their worldviews by hearing other's stories. However, this peer learning cannot be to the detriment of marginalized students; it is not the job of LBGTQ+ students or students of color to teach their peers (Mahony, 2016; Melaku & Beeman, 2020). Furthermore, allowing this work to fall on these students will perpetuate microaggressions (Nedal et al., 2014; Seelman et al., 2017), trauma, and harm in the learning environment, undermining the sole purpose of an engaged learning space (Ospina & Su, 2013).

Implications

Through this case study, we offer indications of successful learning outcomes for a course on gender and leadership revealing the complexities of teaching identity-based transformative learning. The examination of the implementation of CFE pedagogy clarified how purposeful pedagogy can produce deep community in a course and offer a tool to deconstruct expert power in the classroom. The research also highlights the continued need towards updated, critically-oriented curriculum for learning about leadership and identity as well as the need to develop educator capacity to teach identity-focused courses. CFE pedagogy should be considered by educators to purposefully co-create a brave (Arao & Clemens, 2013) community. The use of narrative assignments, the relevance of taking time to focus on course environment, and the centering of marginalized voices in the course content all can be foundational grounding for developing a co-learning community in the classroom. This aligns with leadership scholar's encouragement towards culturally relevant (Guthrie et al, 2016) and critical leadership pedagogy (Pendakur & Furr, 2016).

The framework of critical feminist thought offered a base for emphasizing relationships to deepen cognitive and affective learning. This purposeful foundation allowed for powerful learning outcomes on understanding constructs of gender, race, intersectionality, and their interactions with and deconstruction of dominant narratives of leadership (Dugan, 2017; Fletcher, 2004; Owen, 2020). Higher education educators should examine where in their curricular or co-curricular structures an identity-focused class, workshop, or training may be implemented and where and how a comprehensive discussion on gender arises as a topic (or is glaringly absent) when exploring concepts. Identity-focused coursework offers a deeper dive into identity-specific issues in understanding leadership. Educators should consider where their curriculum is missing critical feminist perspectives on gender if the topic of gender is only added as an addition, rather than a central lens of focus.

To successfully implement coursework and co-curricular programing that integrates gender and leadership, higher education professionals tasked with facilitating student leadership development need competencies in navigating the complexities of teaching systemic inequities perpetuated in patriarchy and sexism, white supremacy and racism, heterosexism, genderism, and intersectionality. Furthermore, educators must acquire skills in the facilitation of individual identity work. Educators must reflect on their own socialization and engage in self-work to bring their whole selves to educational spaces (Landreman, 2013; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). These competencies align with calls for the formalization of leadership educator training in higher education and student affairs (Andenoro et al., 2013; Guthrie et al., 2013, 2016; Priest & Seemiller, 2018; Chunoo & Osteen, 2016; Seemiller & Priest, 2015, 2017; Teig, 2018) and among leadership scholarship in other disciplines (Ospina & Su, 2013; Sinclair, 2010).

Conclusion

Leadership cannot be fully understood or developed without considering individual identities and their contexts in larger systems. The reconstruction of the leadership narrative has been created in recent years to be process and identity-oriented (Guthrie et al., 2013; 2016; Komives et al., 2011; Ospina & Su, 2009) and considered from a critical lens (Dugan, 2017).

Higher education must reformulate learning so students can grapple with the difficult nature of addressing social inequities, including those focused on gender in transformative ways. Educators must implement critical pedagogies to co-create space for these students to come to their own understanding of

complex ideas and challenges facing our society. This work can serve, as we have seen in this case study, to engender purposeful action for meaningful change in learning through critical feminist, identity-focused content.

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