Can we create the 'being' of leadership? A mixed-methods study of two leadership pedagogies at a southwestern, U.S. university

Elissa A. Adame, Sarah J. Tracy, Sophia Town, Megan Towles, Robert Razzante, Cristopher Tietsort, Jessica Kamrath, Louise Clark, Rikki Tremblay, Jonathan Pettigrew, Matthew Donovan & Katie Becker

Check for updates

Can we create the 'being' of leadership? A mixed-methods study of two leadership pedagogies at a southwestern, U.S. university

Elissa A. Adame [a], Sarah J. Tracy [a], Sophia Town[b], Megan Towles[a], Robert Razzante[a], Cristopher Tietsort[a], Jessica Kamrath[c], Louise Clark[a], Rikki Tremblay[a], Jonathan Pettigrew [a], Matthew Donovan[d] and Katie Becker[a]

[a]The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA; [b]The Department of Communication and Media Studies, Fordham University, New York, NY, USA; [c]Department of Human Communication Studies, California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton, CA, USA; [d]Independent, Tempe, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT

The leadership crisis globally, and in the U.S. specifically, draws concern for educators, leadership professionals, and organizations at large. This study evaluates two ways of teaching leadership courses in higher education: a conventional approach where students learn epistemological knowledge and apply such knowledge to case studies, and an ontological, phenomenological, phronetic, transformative (OPPT-in) approach that asks students to practice the *being* of leadership. Each OPPT-in student was paired with a conventional student as well as a professional role player in a leadership simulation scenario. External auditors evaluated video recordings of the simulation to determine each student's hireability for a job requiring leadership skills. OPPT-in students were selected as hireable for a job requiring leadership more often than the conventional students. Qualitative data suggest that this may be due to differences in students' relational invitations, request-making, task ignition, collaborator enlistment, and forthrightness in apologizing for work undone.

The global demand for effective leaders has never been greater, but confidence in leadership is low. Some 86% of organizational experts say the world faces a leadership crisis with global leadership confidence indices well below 5/10 on average and U.S. confidence at a mere 3.93/10 (World Economic Forum, 2015). This global leadership crisis has vast consequences. Gallup (2018) estimates that poor leadership costs U.S. corporations $550 billion annually. Poor leadership also results in employee disengagement, decreased morale, and burnout, but evidence shows that skillful leadership can mitigate these outcomes (Gill et al., 2006).

With confidence in U.S. leadership at an all-time low, investment in leadership development is soaring. Business executives in the U.S. continue to cite leadership as a top

priority (Wakefield et al., 2016) and invest an estimated $20-31 billion annually in leadership training and development (Pfeffer, 2016). Despite investments, most attempts to train and teach leadership fall short of creating employees who lead wisely and well (Allio, 2018). Given the current leadership crisis and the failure of most educational interventions to produce effective leaders, innovative approaches to leadership education are critical.

Communication scholars – especially those studying discursive leadership – are positioned well to innovate training solutions that leave students 'being' leaders. Discursive leadership is a foundational communication approach to leadership that challenges the traditional psychological models abundant in the management discipline (Fairhurst, 2007). Unlike psychological models that focus on traits and behaviors presumed to demonstrate leadership, discursive leadership highlights the way communication is *constitutive* of leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). In other words, communication not only reflects leadership contexts but, rather, constructs and reconstructs those contexts (Barge, 2014). Through linguistic frames (Fairhurst, 2010), leaders create and shape contexts for a situation and therefore influence the organizational reality of that situation (Barge, 2014). From a discursive framework, people talk leadership into being.

In light of the current leadership climate, a question remains about how we might teach leadership in a way that not only communicates the theory of discursive leadership but also leaves students using communication *as* leadership. Despite recognizing the importance of language, leadership courses often unfold with little communicative practice. While students learn *about* the importance of communication and even apply it to case studies, students do less to *practice* leadership communication which, from a discursive approach, is the *being* of leadership. Moving the pedagogical focus from learning *about* communication to practicing the *being* of leadership requires educators to be critical of how, why, and to what end they are teaching each lesson.

Our project examined differences between two semester-long pedagogical conditions. The first (conventional approach) focused on learning leadership theory as third-party knowledge and examining case studies that highlighted others' leadership in action (Souba, 2014). The second (ontological, phenomenological, phronetic, transformative [OPPT-in] approach) aimed to facilitate students' first-person access to the *being* (talk and action) of leadership (Tracy & Donovan, 2018) and analysis of one's own personal leadership situations. At the end of the semester, students from each class engaged in a ten-minute leadership scenario. Afterward, external auditors (human resource professionals) chose one of the students for hire for a job requiring leadership. Before describing the methods and results, we first explain the two teaching approaches.

Approaches to teaching leadership

Banking and epistemological approaches to leadership pedagogy

In a banking model of education, information-rich teachers 'deposit' knowledge into the empty student 'accounts' (Freire, 2000). Instructors teach, think, talk, and enforce choice, while students are taught, are thought about, listen, and comply. This model has been critiqued for asking students to memorize mechanically, which 'turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher' (Freire, 2000, p. 73).

Banking models of education tend to rely on what some scholars have called an epistemological approach (Erhard et al., 2012; Souba, 2014; Tracy, 2016; Tracy et al., 2015). While every pedagogical approach has a way of knowing (an epistemology), these scholars describe the 'epistemological model' as an approach focused on episteme. Episteme, in the Aristotelian sense, concerns scientific universals, the production of rational knowledge, and a-contextual rules that do not vary across time and space (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The epistemological model focuses on a third-person stance in the world in which 'the nature of human being is quantifiable, formalizable, or computational' (Tieszen, 2013, p. 115). Such an approach focuses on the question 'What is a leader?' This, in turn, encourages the inquirer to identify and analyze certain traits, behaviors, and skills. This focus helps students know *about* leadership but does not necessarily equip people with how to *be* and *enact* leadership themselves in ways that connect with their unique contexts and ways of being. As summarized by Souba (2014), an epistemological approach to teaching leadership (1) provides learners with third-person access to leadership by teaching someone else's knowledge, (2) establishes knowing as the foundation of leadership, which is anchored in theories and explanations, and (3) describes leadership as a person in charge who wields clout, controls resources, and has answers.

Epistemological approaches elevate the role of observation, discussion, and analysis in the learning process – practices that are common in communication pedagogy. To wit, a study examining organizational communication syllabi and textbooks (Tracy et al., 2015) found that typical organizational communication course objectives ask students to 'analyze,' 'critique,' 'understand,' 'assess,' and 'describe.' Like explaining any craft practice such as teaching, cooking, or playing soccer, *understanding* the episteme of leadership does not provide first-person access to the *being* of leadership.

In characterizing epistemological approaches, we are not claiming that they are devoid of practical application or collaborative learning. Leadership communication classes regularly ask students to participate in case study analyses and practical application activities. Such activities are known to move students from memorization of concepts to *applying* ideas in context (Flyvbjerg, 2012). However, case study analysis 'still relegates students to being spectators; the theory is "out there" to be "understood" and then applied to a situation "out there" that students may (or may not) personally encounter' (Tracy et al., 2015, p. 323). Analytical skills are useful, but there is a vast difference between being a skilled *art critic* and being a skilled *artist*. Therefore, epistemological approaches, even if unintentionally, may result in students becoming skilled leadership critics rather than skilled leaders.

OPPT-in approach to leadership pedagogy

An OPPT-in pedagogical approach (Tracy et al., 2015; Tracy & Donovan, 2018), draws from an **O**ntological-**P**henomenological model (Erhard et al., 2012), **P**hronesis (practical wisdom) (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2012), and **T**ransformational learning (Mezirow, 2003). Furthermore, the approach incorporates ideas from experiential learning (Frey & White, 2012) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000).

An ontological-phenomenological model is designed so that students have access to the real-time, 'on-the-court' phenomenon of leadership – in contrast to a hypothetical, third person 'in the stands' perspective (Erhard et al., 2012, p. 246). The focus in this

model is on how the ontology of leadership shows up in time and space. Specialized expertise and leadership theory serve as resources to illuminate current situations, rather than as starting points for application and analysis. Indeed, phenomenology (Vagle, 2014) encourages temporarily setting aside assumed theories, opinions, and facts to experience a situation with a beginner's mind. A phenomenological approach is also characterized by the notion that language is not just symbolic, but constitutive of our mental models (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Leadership, existentially and ontologically, manifests largely in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication. Through language, people can strategically recontextualize leadership challenges in productive ways (Souba, 2014).

Another aspect, and the second P, of OPPT-in is phronesis or 'practical wisdom' (Flyvbjerg, 2012). Phronesis asks questions such as 'Where are we going? … Is this desirable? … What should be done?' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 60). This focus on normative action and virtue in context suggests that students should consider, reflect upon, and create tangible and valued outcomes in the world. Gaining practical wisdom requires experiential learning and knowing through interacting in the here and now (Frey & White, 2012). Indeed, Weick (1995) suggests the value in scholars using 'their own life as data' and interrogating the worn and comfortable scripts they are using for interpreting, managing, and making sense of life.

A final goal, and the T, of the OPPT-in method is to facilitate transformation. Identifying sensemaking patterns is a key part of transformational pedagogy and the OPPT-in approach (Moore, 2005). Transformation is accomplished with activities that first encourage students to critically self-reflect on their assumed contexts and scripts (Cunliffe, 2004). Students consider the consequences and effects of their viewpoints and actions, and their own agency over these ways of being. For many, taking this personal ownership provokes a disorienting, cognitively dissonant, and emotionally vivid moment (Weick, 1995). Through sensebreaking (Weick, 1995), the course material may challenge and disrupt default meanings (e.g. scripts such as, 'I have no control over how I act'; or 'This assumption is natural, normal, and serving me'). Students discover and self-invent alternative options that might serve them better, and then practice these ways of being. Along the way, instructors engage students with vulnerability and humanness, yet ask them to account for their work in compassionate terms (Mortenson, 2007).

As noted, a distinguishing feature of the OPPT-in approach is the way that it galvanizes the above methods around phronesis (i.e. practical wisdom, wise action) (Flyvbjerg, 2012). A phronetic approach addresses the question: *what should be done?* and answers it through students discovering language patterns for themselves. Students determine what they are committed to creating in the world, and practice new ways of communicating to achieve these goals in ways that also benefit the relevant stakeholders. In specific studies of a leadership class using the ontological-phenomenological model, students reported leadership improvements in the domains of relationships, vocation, avocation, and self (Carney et al., 2016). In another study, 80% of student participants felt that the course was one of the most important courses they had taken and that it left them 'being a leader' (Erhard et al., 2012). The current project advances this research by empirically comparing an OPPT-in course and a conventional course, and examining how effectively students enacted leadership during a culminating scenario. To evaluate the differences, we enlisted two external auditors with expertise in human resources to watch the

video-recorded scenarios and ratee students on their hireability for a leadership role. Furthermore, we qualitatively coded the scenarios. These two research questions guided the study:

RQ1: Are students from the OPPT-in course chosen for hire for a job requiring leadership more often than students in a conventional leadership course?

RQ2: What are the communicative differences in the leadership performance of students who participated in the OPPT-in leadership course and conventional leadership course?

Methods

Recruitment and assignment

Students at a large southwestern university self-selected into one of two 400-level communication courses titled 'Being a Leader.' Both courses comprised twice-weekly 75-minute classes, held at midday on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One course used a conventional teaching approach, and the other used the OPPT-in approach. Syllabi were not available to students prior to the first class. A coin toss determined each course's format and curriculum. The same teaching team taught both courses and included a full professor with 21 years of college teaching experience (five years of teaching leadership) and two doctoral teaching assistants (each with over two years of teaching experience). The teaching team was aware of the study but did not participate in data collection nor know which students consented to participate.

Participants and consent

Participants included undergraduate students enrolled in the two 'Being a Leader' courses. Of these 58 students, 46 (23 from each class) consented to participate. All procedures were approved by the university institutional review board and the teaching team did not know who consented until after course grades were submitted. Participants included 31 females and 15 males, ranged in age from 20 to 29 ($M = 21.80$, SD = 1.93), and included nine juniors, 35 seniors, and two post-seniors. Of the 46 participants, 36 identified as White/non-Hispanic, six identified as Latino/Hispanic, one identified as Black/African American, one identified as Asian/Asian American, and two identified as Other.

Conventional leadership course

The conventional course was designed based upon a synthesis of existing leadership syllabi from across the communication discipline. Key objectives included learning about theories, applying theories to case studies, and writing papers that used theory to elucidate a case study. We chose one of the most widely adopted leadership texts in the United States: Northouse's (2016) book *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Each chapter covers a family of leadership theories, illustrates problematic leadership situations, and asks students to apply theoretical concepts to case studies. Furthermore, students read chapters on gender and leadership, and ethics (all from Northouse, 2016) with an additional reading about leadership integrity (Jensen, 2009).

Course assignments were adapted from the Northouse (2016) instruction manual as well as from a review of undergraduate communication leadership syllabi. Course

sessions included lectures and small group discussions. Each week, students applied course concepts to case studies via written assignments. In addition to pop quizzes, three multiple-choice and true-false exams assessed student comprehension. The culminating project involved students using course theories and additional research to analyze a case study of leadership as illustrated through an episode of 'Undercover Boss' – a United States television show in which a documentary camera crew films a company's everyday activities, and in doing so, shows how various leadership problems and actions unfold.

OPPT-in course

The OPPT-in course was adapted from the public course materials for *Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership: An Ontological/Phenomenological Model* (Erhard et al., 2017). Course material focused on how language, listening, and neural functioning fundamentally construct what people can perceive and accomplish in their relationships, organizations, families, and societies. Topics included listening, speech acts, requests, acknowledgment, integrity, and authenticity.

Course assignments asked students to practice new ways of interacting with important relevant parties in their life and work. Tasks included: listening in order to 'get' others; making requests that would help create action; and making promises and communicating when promises were not kept. In biweekly course journals students critically reflected on these actions compared to their typical ways of interacting. The journal process helped students identify and unsettle their taken-for-granted assumptions, and in this way, engage in 'unlearning' (Cunliffe, 2004). Students met weekly with a small group of their peers to talk through their activities, breakthroughs, and breakdowns. Students were encouraged not to view breakdowns in their actions as failure, but as indications that they were enacting new and effective ways of leadership. Two take-home quizzes assessed student comprehension.

The semester culminated with a 'Create a Future Adventure' project. Each student identified a situation in their community that was challenging and required leadership to transform it. Students visualized and described an ideal future and identified relevant parties (friends, coworkers, family, etc.) affected by this situation, and actively worked with them throughout the semester to understand their concerns. The project culminated in a paper and presentation in which students talked about their leadership actions and the continued action they might take to create the desired future.

Procedures

Near the end of the semester, the students participated in a video-recorded, 10-minute leadership role-play scenario. Scenarios were scheduled after the completion of core course content. All students received full points for completing the assignment.

Description of the leadership simulation scenarios

Human simulation is used routinely in a range of fields to safely recreate experiences through role play (Gliva-McConvey et al., 2020). In this study's simulations, students were asked to demonstrate the leadership skills honed during their course to create a

graduation celebration. The simulation design presented leadership issues that were covered in both classes, offering students opportunities to demonstrate the relevant skills.

For enhanced realism, we hired role players with experience as 'standardized patients' in medical training simulations to play 'simulated students.' These role players were familiar with enacting simulated scenarios driven by specific learning objectives (Gliva-McConvey et al., 2020) and received training from a member of our research team who is a human simulation expert.

Students from both classes received the same 'primer' document that outlined the important aspects needed to complete the simulation effectively, including a general overview of the scenario storyline. Participants were informed that they would be part of a three-person team made up of students from different leadership classes and that although they would receive an individual role with specific responsibilities, overall success required demonstrating good leadership and putting into practice all their course learning. In reality, the trios consisted of (1) a conventional class student, (2) an OPPT-in class student, and (3) a simulated student. Each participant was instructed to approach the scenario with the mindset that they would be responsible for the outcome reached. Students volunteered for a scenario slot based on their timing preference and scheduling constraints. Students were assigned randomly to serve as either the 'publicity chair' or the 'food and beverage chair' for the graduation celebration while the simulated student was assigned to be the 'entertainment chair.'

During two class periods the week prior to the scenario, and again in a briefing session immediately before the scenario, students were provided with the following information to help them prepare.

'Creating a Graduation Celebration' Scenario

Background

1. Along with two other student leaders, you are planning a graduation celebration for the end of semester for the Association of Human Communication (AHC). You have been working with the AHC staff advisor, but you and the other student leaders are in charge of the event.

2. The event is one week away.

3. It will take place in the Communication Building outside breezeway.

4. There are 5 other AHC members who can help you plan. You just need to ask.

5. You have a budget for the entire event of $500.

6. Your communication about the event has all been done on email and you're unsure whether you have met the other team leaders in person. If so, it would have been from a past class.

Event Goals:

1. Event attracts participation from COM graduates

2. Event includes (at least): publicity, food & beverage, entertainment, and photography

3. You demonstrate exemplary leadership (and thereby earn an internship for next year!)

4. You leave the meeting with an action plan for how to tackle the event

When the OPPT-in and conventional students arrived at the simulation, they were directed to a briefing room where they received information explaining their role as either publicity or food and beverage chair. The information for both roles was almost identical and follows below. For clarity, we have bracketed and underlined passages where instructions differed between the publicity chair or food and beverage chair.

Communication with Relevant Parties

In a one-on-one meeting with the Association for Human Communication (AHC) advisor earlier this semester, you volunteered to take the lead on event [**publicity**, and therefore publicize the event through flyers, social media, and invitations OR **food and beverages**, and therefore find donated and/or inexpensive food]. During that meeting, the advisor told you that a second team leader volunteered to help [find donated and/or inexpensive food OR publicize the event through flyers, social media, and invitations], and a third team leader volunteered to find inexpensive and fun entertainment for the event.

Last week, the AHC advisor sent a group email to you and the other two student leaders. In that email she asked YOU to bring [publicity materials and ideas to the meeting today OR a list of food and beverages, their costs and where you were getting them from]. You replied to her and the other student leaders saying, 'Sure, no problem.' In that same group email, the second student leader agreed to bring [a list of food, beverages and their cost OR publicity materials and ideas] to today's meeting.

What you've done since the email:

Since that email and your promise of 'Sure, no problem' to the group, [you called a copy shop who had originally offered discounted copies of flyers, but they did not return your phone call OR the company who had originally offered to donate and provide inexpensive food did not return your phone call]. You have not made any progress and are showing up empty-handed to this meeting!

Also, nobody has said anything about creating good photo opportunities, the budget, or any other goals for the event. Finally, no one has reached out to the other 5 students who could help.

Your objective:

In relationship to this scenario, to SHOW and COMMUNICATE (verbally and nonverbally) what it means to be a leader and exercise leadership effectively. In other words, based upon the key ideas and distinctions from class, show us what a good leader would do in this situation.

The simulated students received the same information, however, they were trained to play a student who was quiet and disengaged. They were not given a specific script but rather briefing pints to assist with their character development and improvization, as follows:

Background

1. You are doing this event mostly because you feel you need to have some sort of 'leadership experience' line on your resume.

2. You have a friend at student services who could easily help with the publicity and food. However, since you only volunteered to help with entertainment, you haven't taken them up on their offer – and you certainly don't want to seem like a know-it-all or control freak. Therefore, you're not going to bring this up right away. Furthermore, the other two student leaders said via email that they had these aspects figured out anyway.

3. You technically have the time to do more to plan for the event in the next week.

Your objective

Show up to the meeting and provide space and ample opportunity for the other two students to show leadership. If asked, share that you secured the entertainment, and otherwise respond to others' questions and requests. In the first five minutes, do not disclose that your friend at student services has volunteered to help with publicity and food. In the second half, volunteer this information at your discretion … e.g. if one of the other students shows interest or concern for you by asking questions, praising you, or making requests.

To begin the scenarios, students were led to the role-play room where the simulated student was waiting. The simulated student did not know which student was from which class. Each group had 10 minutes to create a plan. Following the scenario, each participant completed a manipulation check and was debriefed.

Analysis techniques

Manipulation check
To verify that participant perception the scenario in a way that was consistent with the research objectives, we conducted two manipulation checks. First, students completed a realism measure consisting of three items measured on a 7-point semantic differential scale: The scenario was 'realistic/unrealistic,' 'practical/impractical,' and 'true to life/fake.' Items were coded so higher scores represented higher realism. The scale was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) and a one-sample t-test revealed the mean score ($M = 5.93$, SD = 1.27) differed significantly from the mid-point, $t(45) = 10.29$, $p < .001$, suggesting students viewed the scenario to be realistic.

Second, participants answered another set of items measured on the same scale to rate their own skills during the scenario: 'effective/ineffective,' 'expert/inexpert,' and 'experienced/inexperienced.' Items were coded so higher scores represented more skillful performances. The scale was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$). A one-sample t-test demonstrated that the mean score ($M = 5.41$, SD = .96) differed significantly from the mid-point, $t(45) = 9.90$, $p < .001$, indicating that students believed their own performance to be skillful.

Ratings by external auditors on hireability for leadership
Two external auditors rated the likelihood of hiring students for a job requiring leadership. Each auditor had more than 10 years of human resource experience hiring skilled corporate-level positions. Prior to their assessment, the auditors were given the leadership simulation details, including the instructions provided to all participants. Importantly, the auditors were blind to the research questions and the pedagogical approaches used to teach the students. Each auditor was asked to watch all videos and then identify which of the two students they would hire.

Qualitative follow-up: participants and analysis
To identify any communicative differences between the two groups that might influence hireability, we conducted a qualitative analysis of all scenarios. Each video was transcribed, resulting in 169 single-spaced pages of data, and analyzed using a multi-step phronetic iterative approach (Tracy, 2020).

The research team began by simultaneously considering the leadership literature and open-coding the data – paying specific attention to communicative characteristics positively associated with leadership. This iterative approach resulted in a start list of sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2014) such as listening, perspective-taking, charisma, likeability, invitations, taking responsibility, praising and acknowledging others, making requests, and delegating, among others. Then, codes were defined and redefined, condensed, clarified, and focused. The guiding codebook included 18 codes, each with a definition, examples, and 'close but no' examples (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) (See Table 1).

To ensure consistent application of the codebook, the research team engaged in five rounds of intercoder reliability checks. In the first round, two research team members (blind to the students' course condition) collaboratively coded a scenario, and then talked through choices with two other members of the research team to clarify consistent application of the codes. In the second through fifth rounds, the two coders separately coded two scenarios, then met with the larger team to merge, compare, consistency check, and clarify their coding choices. Consistent code application was calculated by taking the number of coded excerpts the two researchers coded the same and dividing by the total number of excerpts coded. An agreement rate of 80–90% is considered appropriate for qualitative coding (Tracy, 2020). In the fifth round, the two coders reached an intercoder reliability of 96% for two complete scenarios, at which time they divided the data to code independently.

We used a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design (Ivankova et al., 2006), analyzing the qualitative data to explain and elucidate the quantitative findings. This approach differs from an approach where the qualitative data are fully explored– something that promises to be an interesting future direction. We ran a query on the coded transcripts via Nvivo qualitative data analysis software that compared how the coded behaviors differed between the two classes. Results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses are presented next.

Results

Quantitative analysis

Two contingency table analyses were computed to evaluate RQ1: Will students from the OPPT-in course be chosen for hire for a job requiring leadership more often than students in a conventional leadership course? Scores were analyzed independently in order to explore whether the auditors (using their unique background and expertise) would be more likely to hire one group of students more frequently than the other. As such, we computed χ^2 for each external auditor separately, labeling them Auditor 1 and Auditor 2.

Auditor 1 chose to hire more students in the OPPT-in class than students in the conventional class, $\chi^2(1, N = 46) = 7.04$, $p = .008$, Cramér's $V = .39$. The effect size was medium. Auditor 1 chose to hire the OPPT-in class student in 70% (16 students) of the scenarios and chose to hire the conventional leadership class student 30% (7 students) of the scenarios. Auditor 1 was about 2.33 times (.70/.30) more likely to hire the student who completed the OPPT-in course compared to the student in the conventional course.

Table 1. Codebook for transcribed scenarios.

Code name	Code description	Number of utterances by student in conventional course	Number of utterances by student in OPPT-in course
Utterances used more frequently by OPPT-in students			
Relational invitations	An utterance that invites the others into a relationship or team.	5	10
Task ignition	Moves the **collective group** into planning or moves them back on track.	2	7
Broken promise admission	Being the first to bring up – without direct prompting – that they did not do their task as they had promised.	2	7
Request	Asks someone to complete a task, usually in the form of a question.	4	7
Help from collaborators	Reminds the group of the other students and advisor as potential people who can help make the event happen.	11	14
Utterances used more frequently by conventional students			
Summative or transition statements	Sums up the work done or not done, or provides an ending to a topic. May have the result of the group being able to move to a new topic.	9	5
Acknowledgment	Acknowledges or praises another's idea, opinion, suggestion, or question.	11	8
Codes with indistinguishable differences between courses			
Inquiries for information and clarification	Questions designed to get at established information or clarify next steps.	10	11
Inviting strategic input	Invites and provides space for another's input, judgement, or opinion on the direction of conversation, usually in the form of a question.	14	14
Mirroring broken promise admission	Admits (after the other person already did and without direct prompting) that they did not do their task as they had earlier promised.	1	1
Acknowledges mess	Acknowledges the mess or impact of not keeping one's word on the broken promise.	2	3
Promise	Confirms that something will be accomplished – could be a declaration or offering.	12	11
Action plan	Any activity associated with the action plan (either asking someone else to write, or someone writing down something themselves.)	20	18
Timeline	Mentions time or timeline.	18	17
Budget	Mentions budget, cost, money, or something for free.	22	21
Gratitude	Voices thankfulness, appreciation, or gratefulness.	1	0
Novel & feasible idea	Brings up an idea not already suggested in the scenario description.	18	16
Command	Tells another person to do something.	0	2

Auditor 2 also chose OPPT-in course students for hire more frequently than conventional course students, $\chi^2(1, N = 46) = 19.57$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .65$. The effect size was large. Auditor 2 chose to hire students in the OPPT-in course in 83% (19 students) of the scenarios and students in the conventional course in 17% (4 students) of the scenarios. Auditor 2 was about 4.88 times (.83/.17) more likely to select OPPT-in course students compared to conventional course students. Thus, RQ1 is supported.

Qualitative sequential analysis

To explore why OPPT-in class students were chosen for hire more often than conventional class students, we used qualitative data to answer RQ2: What are the communicative differences in the leadership performance of students who participated in the OPPT-in course and conventional course? What follows is a discussion of the communicative attributes more prevalent among the OPPT-in students. These attributes might help explain why OPPT-in students were considered more hireable (See Table 1).

Our coding analysis revealed five behaviors more commonly (at least three additional occurrences) associated with OPPT-in students compared to conventional students. First, students from the OPPT-in class were more likely to engage in 'relational invitations' (10 times) than students in the conventional class (5 times). The research team defined relational invitations as utterances that warm up and invite other group members into a team. Examples included: 'David, nice to meet you. I'm Connie. Nice to meet you guys.' and 'I'm Elise, by the way. Nice to meet you.' In these utterances, students introduced themselves and welcomed others before moving on to discuss specific tasks.

Second, OPPT-in students were more likely to 'ignite (or re-ignite) tasks' (7 times) than students in the conventional class (2 times). The team used the code 'task ignition' to label utterances that moved the group into planning or, in the case of (re)ignition, got the group back on track. Examples included: 'Let's get started,' 'Do you guys have any ideas where you wanna start with your sections,' and 'Let's get it figured out.' In these instances, students' talk transitioned the group to a discussion about the task.

Third, OPPT-in students were more likely to be the first to admit that some of their promised work was not yet accomplished, with 7 OPPT-in students being the first to admit their broken promise and 1 conventional student doing so. The research team coded an utterance as an admission of a broken promise when the student was the first to mention – without being prompted or reminded by another student – that they did not complete the task as they had promised (something that all participants learned from the primer scripts). In some cases, this admittance showed up as an apology, as exemplified here:

> I have to apologize. With the food, I told you guys I was gonna have that ready by now, but the company that I was gonna get the food from has not been returning my calls. I realize I haven't really kept my word to you guys, and it's creating a little bit of a mess, cuz we're a week away, and we don't have any food or beverages. I just wanted to apologize to you guys for that, and let you know that I promise you guys I will have that done by Saturday.

Here, the OPPT-in student apologized for not solidifying the event's food details, and also acknowledged that this broken promise negatively impacted the group. Similarly, an OPPT-in student acknowledged that unpreparedness impacted the group's ability to accomplish its goals; additionally she offered an alternative to amend the situation:

> I was in charge of the publicity. Unfortunately, I called the copy people to get copies for the fliers that I was gonna make for the event. Unfortunately, they didn't get back to me, so I have to express that I did not fulfill those concerns. I realize that I'm unprepared for this meeting. However, in order to repair my mess, I have thought of an alternative. I live at The Locale. There, we have a photocopy machine. It's free, and we could just use those resources, so I will be able to complete that by Tuesday.

In another example, the student did not apologize, but was upfront in stating 'I'm just empty-handed. I promise next time we meet, I'll have a list for you guys.'

As well as apologizing, acknowledging their unpreparedness, and/or admitting that they arrived unprepared, many students acknowledged the 'mess' their broken promise caused and recommitted to what they would accomplish and by when.

Fourth, students from the OPPT-in class were more likely to make requests (7 times) than conventional class students (4 times). The research team defined making requests as an utterance that asked or suggested that someone complete a task. In some cases, the request was made in the form of a question. For example, one student asked: 'Would you want to figure out getting photos taken at the event?' In other cases, the request came in the form of discussion about contacting others to ask them for something, as illustrated by the following: 'Frank, since you're all done, we can delegate the task to you to reach out to the other five students, if you want to see if they can volunteer for the day of the event?' Other requests were made in regard to the timeline: 'I'll just request that you email them by tomorrow at 5:00.' In these examples, the student requested another team member to complete a task on behalf of the group.

Fifth, OPPT-in students were more likely to seek help. The scenario primer informed all students that 'You have been working with the AHC staff advisor' and 'There are 5 other AHC members who can help you plan. You just need to ask.' Students from the OPPT-in course reminded the group of these possible helpers 14 times, whereas conventional students did so 11 times. Examples included: 'I know we have five other AHC members who are willing to donate their time,' and 'There's five other people who could help us.' These comments pointed to the speaker's awareness and willingness to lead others.

Our analysis also revealed that conventional students uttered two messages more frequently by OPPT-in students: summative/transition statements and acknowledgements. Conventional students summed up the work done or not done and/or provided a transition to new topics 9 times, while OPPT-in students engaged in this behavior 5 times. Examples included: 'We have entertainment done. We have publicity in motion, food and beverages … we'll find out what you want me to do with that tonight,' and 'That takes care of publicity.' These statements function to provide closure to an open topic, and then move the discussion to the next topic.

Conventional students were also more likely to acknowledge or praise another's idea, opinion, suggestion, or question, doing so 11 times in comparison to OPPT-in students' 8 times. Acknowledgements involved defining another person's idea as 'good,' 'great,' 'smart,' and a 'good point.' These statements complimented the contributor.

Importantly, all of the preceding actions captured by our codes were covered in the curriculum for both the OPPT-in and conventional leadership course. Although the two groups learned the same content, they engaged with the ideas differently. In the conventional course, students learned theories and engaged in application activities that explained how good leaders engage in task-related activities (such as initiating conversations, solving problems, and making requests to meet a common goal), as well as relational activities such as the importance of being sociable, invitational, supportive, and listening for member concerns. To learn about honesty, trustworthiness and humility, the conventional class took an entire unit on ethics that included a reading and

lecture on integrity (including how acknowledging broken promises is related to improved performance).

In the OPPT-in course, students were also acquainted with these issues and read some of the same material (Jensen, 2009). However, OPPT-in students spent more time and energy engaged in an embodied practice in their activities and assignments. Over the semester, OPPT-in students communicatively practiced: (1) creating a desired future by speaking it aloud; (2) relating and connecting with others; (3) making requests to relevant parties; (4) acknowledging times when they had broken 'promises' (e.g. turned in their homework late); and (5) engaging the input and help from relevant parties. The current study demonstrates that the OPPT-in pedagogical approach was more effective than the conventional approach for predicting that these behaviors would show up in the scenario simulation – and that these behaviors may be significant in someone being selected for hire in a job requiring leadership.

Discussion and implications

Given the current leadership crisis, coupled with the challenges of creating effective leaders, innovative approaches to leadership education are critical. The discursive leadership theoretical model offers a communication-as-constitutive approach that is ripe for practical and phronetic application (Fairhurst, 2007). However, the challenge lies in teaching leadership in a way that moves students beyond theoretical understandings of discursive leadership *as a framework* to the active embodiment of discursive leadership *as a phenomenological experience and craft practice* (Tracy et al., 2015). The current study shines light on applying this theory in practice in the context of leadership education (Keyton et al., 2009).

We explored the outcomes of two leadership pedagogies: a conventional approach and the OPPT-in approach. Results indicated that when students were taught leadership from an OPPT-in approach they were two to four times more likely to be selected for a job requiring leadership compared to students who were taught leadership from a conventional approach. Qualitative analysis identified communication behaviors that elucidated differences in the quantitative ratings.

Limitations and future directions

This study sought to understand the influence of two pedagogical approaches beyond self-report data by incorporating the perceptions of external auditors. However, the ecological validity of the study is limited insomuch as the simulated scenario took place in a laboratory with a two-way mirror where student participants were aware that their teaching team may be watching. This laboratory environment may have influenced students to behave in ways they may not behave otherwise. Future research could valuably explore how, if at all, teaching leadership from an OPPT-in approach leaves students *being* leaders outside the instructional context. This objective could be accomplished through longitudinal studies and following up with students' employers regarding their practice in context.

Second, there were minor design issues worth noting. Participants were not randomly assigned to the classes. However, we mitigated this by labeling both classes the same,

offering them during the same days with similar times, and using the same teaching team. Another limitation is that we only sampled one class from each condition. That said, this semester-long, multi-method experimental design offers valuable data that would be difficult to achieve at a larger scale. Future research could extend the findings herein by testing a larger sample of classes taught by a variety of instructor teams.

Third, the findings of this study should be considered in relation to its U.S. student sample, the use of pedagogical materials authored by white and mostly male U.S. authors, and analyses and hireability audits conducted by white women in the U.S. Even though the main texts of the two courses have been used extensively in universities and institutions worldwide, they have a Western bent. Future leadership research would benefit from analyses that purposefully incorporate Eastern and/or Indigenous approaches to leadership education (Lee, 2006) and examination of how the pedagogies unfold in international, non-U.S. student samples.

Fourth, the main outcome measure used here (hireability) offers only one measure of the effectiveness of the class. Future research could valuably consider analyzing a broader array of outcome measures including but not limited to interviews with student participants, perceptions from team members who work alongside these students, student assignments, and longitudinal measures of behavior change. Moreover, our sequential explanatory research design (Ivankova et al., 2006) made use of the qualitative study to explain the quantitative data regarding hireability. Although this approach is stronger than solely reporting on the quantitative results, there is promise in a closer analysis of the qualitative data.

Despite these limitations, this study's findings contribute to leadership communication and pedagogy in four primary ways. These include: (1) empirically evidencing the usefulness and value of discursive leadership education, (2) complicating discursive leadership communication, (3) affirming the appropriateness and use of the OPPT-in approach for teaching discursive leadership in the college classroom, and (4) highlighting the role of dialogue in leadership education.

An empirical study of discursive leadership education

Historically, leadership theories and models have prioritized the rational and cognitive elements over the relational and communicative (Yukl, 2013). Although this trend is changing, the need exists for robust communication-based models of leadership in higher education and organizational training. The current study demonstrates key communicative capacities that leaders can learn and enact to improve their leadership. These communicative behaviors are learnable and teachable in the classroom. However, there is a difference between *learning theories* about discursive aspects of leadership and *practicing* leadership conversations (Barge, 2014) and speech acts repeatedly in context. This research demonstrates the efficacy of the latter.

Extending discursive leadership communication

According to the discursive leadership framework, leadership exists in moments of reframing in which a person actively shapes or reshapes the context of a given situation (Barge, 2014). Our analysis supports this perspective by demonstrating certain framing practices used more frequently by OPPT-in students – *relational invitations*, *task*

ignition, *admission of broken promises*, *help from collaborators,* and *requests* – and connecting those discursive practices to the students' hireability ratings by external auditors. However, our qualitative analysis also demonstrates that conventional students engaged more frequently than OPPT-in students in other discursive practices, including *summative and transition statements* and *acknowledgements.* This finding is important, and surprising, as these utterances could also serve to frame the context of the current situation.

Summative and transition statements provide closure to completed topics and function to direct the flow of conversation. Given that conventional students engaged in this behavior more frequently, it may be that a conventional approach is useful for the development of listening, synthesizing, and knowing information. Moreover, *acknowledgements* create a prosocial atmosphere. The authors expected the OPPT-in students to practice acknowledgements more frequently than conventional students. One potential explanation of the surprising finding may be that people naturally acknowledge each other whether or not they have specifically practiced this behavior in a class. More nuanced research is needed to determine if the flavor or timing of acknowledgements were different between OPPT-in and conventional students, or if the acknowledgements seemed to have different outcomes in the conversation between the two groups. Given that conventional students engaged in summative statements and acknowledgements more frequently than OPPT-in students, yet OPPT-in students were chosen by external auditors more frequently for a position requiring leadership, further research could explore whether the framing created by these utterances is perceived differently than other types of leadership framings (such as task ignition or requests). Such an analysis might reveal the communicative differences that really make a difference for perceived hireability.

The OPPT-in approach for teaching discursive leadership and other topics

Some researchers have asked whether higher education is ready for transformative learning (Moore, 2005). Educators are typically more comfortable transferring knowledge than transforming practice and building practical wisdom and contextual expertise. However, knowledge is not enough. A phenomenological-ontological-phronetic-transformative approach results in the embodiment of leadership (Erhard et al., 2012; Tracy & Donovan, 2018), and therefore can be valuably adopted for leadership instruction in higher education and organizational contexts. Curriculum materials for the course taught in this study are available publicly (Erhard et al., 2017) and a syllabus for the classes taught in this study are available here (www.SarahJTracy.com). Scholars who are interested in transformational learning and the cultivation of practical wisdom are additionally advised to see related pedagogical resources (e.g. Cunliffe, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2012; Frey & White, 2012; Souba, 2014). Indeed, these approaches hold promise for communicative and behavioral education beyond the leadership context – such as small group communication, team dynamics, negotiation, conflict management, cultivation of community, public speaking, and any other topics that benefit from the cultivation of craft practice.

Highlighting the role of dialogue in leadership education

A key result of this research was to translate the premise of discursive leadership into empirically supported, practical implications for developing course material that

moves students from knowing *about* leadership to *being* a leader. By focusing on discursive utterances, this study is one systematic inquiry that serves to clarify the relationship between theory and practice in leadership education. Our findings elevate the role of dialogue in both practice and analysis. Dialogue suggests that meaning in discourse does not belong to individuals but rather emerges in the in-between. In this way, dialogue serves as an 'enlarged communicative mentality' that focuses on people's response, service, and understanding of others, 'not as tellers, but as learners' (Arnett et al., 2008, p. 18). Although dialogic moments occur routinely – on the shop floor, in the classroom, at home, in the doctor's office, 'in the darkened opera-house,' and even 'in the deadly crush of an air-raid shelter' (Buber, 1965, p. 204) – they are hardly insignificant. In fact, dialogic moments are the fundamental basis of purposive and rational deliberations (Kim & Kim, 2008). By elevating the role of dialogue in context our findings clarify the power of discursive leadership, conversation as leadership, and the OPPT-in approach.

Disclosure statement

Funding

ORCID

Elissa A. Adame http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1039-1960
Sarah J. Tracy http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5229-2875
Jonathan Pettigrew http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7938-784X

References

Allio, R. J. (2018). Interview with Barbara Kellerman: There's a better way to train leaders. *Strategy & Leadership*, *46*(6), 22–27. https://doi.org/10.1108/SL-09-2018-0083

Arnett, R. C., Grayson, C., & McDowell, C. (2008). Dialogue as an 'enlarge communicative mentality': Review, assessment, and ongoing difference. *Communication Research Trends*, *27*, 3–43.

Barge, J. K. (2014). Pivotal leadership and the art of conversation. *Leadership*, *10*(1), 56–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013511739

Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches.* Sage.

Buber, M. (1965). *Daniel: Dialogues on realization.* McGraw-Hill.

Carney, C., Jensen, M. C., Ballarini, N., Echeverria, J., Nettleton, T., Stillwell, M., & Erhard, W. (2016). Creating leaders: A pilot pre/post evaluation of an ontological/phenomenological model. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *15*(4), 50–56. https://doi.org/1012806/V15/I4/R4

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2004). On becoming a critically reflexive practitioner. *Journal of Management Education*, *28*(4), 407–426. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562904264440

Erhard, W., Jensen, M. C., & Granger, K. L. (2012). Creating leaders: An ontological/phenomenological model. In S. Snook, N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *The handbook for teaching leadership* (pp. 245–262). Sage.

Erhard, W., Jensen, M. C., Zaffron, S., & Echeverria, J. (2017). *Course materials for: 'Being a leader and the effective exercise of leadership: An ontological/phenomenological model'.* Harvard

Business School NOM Working Paper No. 09-038; Simon School Working Paper No. 08-03; Barbados Group Working Paper No. 08-02. https://ssrn.com/abstract=1263835 or http://dx. doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1263835

Fairhurst, G. T. (2007). *Discursive leadership: In conversation with leadership psychology*. Sage.

Fairhurst, G. T. (2010). *The power of framing: Creating the language of leadership*. Wiley.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Connaughton, S. L. (2014). Leadership: A communicative perspective. *Leadership*, *10*(1), 7–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013509396

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge University Press.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2012). Making social science matter. In G. Papanagnou (Ed.), *Social science and policy challenges: Democracy, values, and capacities* (pp. 25–56). UNESCO. https://ssrn.com/ abstract=2278218

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Frey, L. R., & White, A. B. (2012). Promoting personal, interpersonal, and group growth through positive experiential encounter communication pedagogy. In T. J. Socha & M. J. Pitts (Eds.), *The positive side of interpersonal communication* (pp. 297–312). Peter Lang.

Gallup. (2018). *Rating world leaders: 2018. The US vs. Germany, Russia, and China*. https://news. gallup.com/reports/225587/rating-world-leaders-2018.aspx?utm_source=rating-world-leaders-2018-report&utm_medium=downloademail&utm_campaign=rating-world-leaders-2018-report-downloademail&utm_content=downloadreport-CTA-1

Gill, A. S., Flaschner, A. B., & Shachar, M. (2006). Mitigating stress and burnout by implementing transformational leadership. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *18*(6), 469–481. https://doi.org/10.1108/09596110610681511

Gliva-McConvey, G., Nicholas, C., & Clark, L. (2020). *Comprehensive healthcare simulation: Standardized patient methodology rooted in best practices*. Springer.

Ivankova, N. V., Creswell, J. W., & Stick, S. L. (2006). Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: From theory to practice. *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 1525822X05282260

Jensen, M. C. (2009). Integrity: Without it nothing works. *Rotman Magazine: The Magazine of the Rotman School of Management*, 16–20.

Keyton, J., Bisel, R. S., & Ozley, R. (2009). Recasting the link between applied and theory research: Using applied findings to advance communication theory development. *Communication Theory*, *19*(2), 146–160. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2009.01339.x

Kim, J., & Kim, E. J. (2008). Theorizing dialogic deliberation: Everyday political talk as communicative action and dialogue. *Communication Theory*, *18*(1), 51–70. https://doi.org/10.1111/j. 1468-2885.2007.00313.x

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Lee, T. S. (2006). 'I came here to learn how to be a leader': An intersection of critical pedagogy and Indigenous education. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, *2*(1). https://escholarship.org/content/qt92m798m0/qt92m798m0.pdf

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *1* (1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172

Moore, J. (2005). Is higher education ready for transformative learning? A question explored in the study of sustainability. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *3*(1), 76–91. https://doi.org/10. 1177/1541344604270862

Mortenson, S. T. (2007). Raising the question #7 should we teach personal transformation as a part of interpersonal communication? If so, how is it done? *Communication Education*, *56*(3), 401–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520701349198

Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Sage.

Pfeffer, J. (2016, January). *Getting beyond the BS of leadership literature*. https://www.mckinsey. com/featured-insights/leadership/getting-beyond-the-bs-of-leadership-literature

Souba, W. W. (2014). The phenomenology of leadership. *Open Journal of Leadership*, *3*(4), 77–105. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2014.34008

Tieszen, R. (2013). Analytic and continental philosophy, science, and global philosophy. In B. Mou & R. Tieszen (Eds.), *Constructive engagement of analytic and continental approaches in philosophy* (pp. 103–124). Koninklijke Brill.

Tracy, S. J. (2016). Practical application in organizational communication: A historical snapshot and challenge for the future. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *31*(1), 139–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318916675736

Tracy, S. J. (2020). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Tracy, S. J., & Donovan, M. C. J. (2018). Moving from practical application to expert craft practice in organizational communication: A review of the past and OPPT-ing into the future. In P. J. Salem & E. Timmerman (Eds.), *Transformative practices and research in organizational communication* (pp. 202–220). IGI Global.

Tracy, S. J., Franks, T., Brooks, M. M., & Hoffman, T. K. (2015). An OPPT-in approach to relational and emotional organizational communication pedagogy. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *29*(2), 322–328. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318915571350

Vagle, M. D. (2014). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge.

Wakefield, N., Abbatiello, A., Agarwal, D., Pastakia, K., & van Berkel, A. (2016, February 29). *Leadership awakened: Generations, teams, science.* https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/focus/human-capital-trends/2016/identifying-future-business-leaders-leadership.html

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage.

World Economic Forum. (2015). *Outlook on the global agenda.* http://reports.weforum.org/outlook-global-agenda-2015/

Yukl, G. A. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Albany, NY: Pearson.