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Empowering Sustainability Leaders: Developing an Authentic Leadership Identity

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Empowering sustainability leaders:
Developing an authentic leadership identity

Heather Diamond

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Table of Contents

	Page
Part I: Preamble.....	3
Principles That Guide My Practice.....	3
Reflective Narrative.....	4
Part II: LSE Comprehensive Project.....	8
Introduction.....	8
Literature Review.....	11
Leadership.....	11
Traditional Leadership.....	11
Sustainability Leadership.....	12
Leadership and Authenticity.....	14
Leadership and the Self.....	16
Learning Theory.....	19
Transformation Learning.....	20
Experiential Learning.....	21
Solution: Components of a Leadership Training or Course.....	22
Conclusion.....	31
References.....	33

Part I: Preamble

Guiding Principles

“One can lead with no more than a question in hand” (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001, p. 14). Since reading this quote during my first term in the LSE program, I began to redefine what leadership means to me. Prior to LSE, while I had been working in roles that identified me as a leader, I saw leadership as positional, situational, or hierarchical, and was hesitant to identify myself as a leader. Over the past two years, I have read about, discussed, and practiced leadership in a variety of different contexts and capacities, and have come to identify myself as a leader in ways that I would not have previously. Being encouraged to see myself as a leader for who I already am has felt tremendously empowering, and has led me to want to facilitate similar understanding in others. I have come to a deeper appreciation for how leadership, sustainability, and education are interconnected and hope to move forward from LSE as a leader who supports growth, learning, and sustainable practices in my own life and the lives of others.

The principles that guide me in this goal are possibility, connection, passion, and integrity. Possibility, to me, means being open to continued learning in new ways and contexts, of maintaining hope in the face of challenge, and of allowing that we are all capable of more than we think. Possibility allows for alternative ways of approaching problems, for diverse perspectives, and for new models of leadership. As a leader, I try to see the possibilities in a given situation, individual, or group, and try to empower others to see the possibility and potential within themselves.

Connection has many different facets. First, I try to stay connected with myself and to reflect on whether or not there is alignment between how I am living my life and what my values are. I also strive to create connection within communities and groups, to bring people together

around common goals, and to work towards learning or change. Additionally I hope to foster connection to place. I believe that where we are matters! Too often in education, I feel that location is not seen as relevant, and I try to make learning relevant to learners in their places and environments. Lastly, I try to see the connections between problems and solutions, and try to remember that everything is more interconnected than it may appear on the surface.

I believe passion is a very important part of practice. Without passion, it would be difficult to continue as a leader for sustainability with all the challenges that exist in the world. I think that, in any field, passion keeps people from burning out and keeps them working for what they believe in despite the odds. Passion can also help generate energy that will ignite excitement and action in others and help to build community. Living a life that I am passionate about will not only be more fulfilling, but also not only keep me committed to working towards what I believe in.

Finally, I believe integrity is very important in life and leadership. While it's wonderful to be able to identify and describe my guiding principles, it is another thing entirely to live my life in alignment with those principles. Throughout my time in the LSE program, and I hope throughout the rest of my life, I have been working to both clarify what my guiding principles are and find a way to live my life in agreement with them, and while that has not always been easy, it is something I continue to strive towards and a process that, as a leader or educator especially, I would hope to model.

Reflective Narrative

Effectively communicate ideas in discussion, presentations and in writing

Effective communication is helpful in all areas of life, and especially in leadership. I have had ample opportunities to practice communication skills throughout the LSE program.

Communication through writing has been essential in most class assignments, though particularly in the hybrid *Philosophy of Education* course, as much class discussion occurred via online forums. During group projects for *Advanced Global Political Ecology* and *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning*, I had to both communicate effectively within a small group and then synthesize our discussions in engaging class presentations. I feel my ability to communicate clearly has improved over the course of the program and will only continue to do so with further practice.

Access, evaluate, synthesize and apply research and information, including grassroots initiatives and knowledge from ELP core studies, to improve sustainability education practice

This has been a major component of almost all of the courses I've taken during the LSE program. In *Developmental Theories of Adult Learning*, I was asked to synthesize a variety of different perspectives on learning and development and, ultimately, focused my final paper on authenticity in leadership, leading into this Comps paper. For my final paper in *Educational Organization and Administration*, I was able to consider the four lenses presented in the course and use those perspectives to create an Ecological Framework for looking at organizations. The further into the LSE program I have progressed, the more I have been able to bring a lens of sustainability to research around broader educational topics and weave ideas around sustainability education into both work in the core GSE courses and my work outside the program with Carpe Diem Education.

Reflect critically on one's own learning, practice, and professional development

During my second year in the LSE program, I spent a term abroad in Southeast Asia facilitating an international experiential education program for gap year and college students. Throughout the term, I kept a journal and wrote reflection papers about my process with

students, looking specifically at how service-learning experiences are successful, based on the expectations and motivations of participants. Through intentionally and critically reflecting on my role as a group leader and facilitator, I was able to deepen my understanding of how theoretical concepts that I was learning in LSE applied to my work with students in the field.

Demonstrate a theoretical understanding of leadership, and the skills needed to offer effective leadership for sustainability

Sustainability leadership has been the focus of my Comps project, and in considering how to best facilitate sustainability leadership development in learners, I have had to reflect on both the theory and practice of leadership. My understanding of this topic was greatly enhanced in the *Advanced Leadership for Sustainability* and *Spiritual Leadership* courses, and both have contributed to the synthesis I hope to offer in the rest of this paper.

Critically examine dominant systems and paradigms and analyze complex sustainability issues locally and globally

In *Advanced Global Political Ecology*, I examined the role of consumer choices and industrialized lifestyle on global environmental and social sustainability through a research project on conflict minerals, specifically looking at how the use of Coltan in consumer electronics has impacted life for local people in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This project re-emphasized for me both how intricately interconnected sustainability issues are worldwide and how, despite the seemingly overwhelming challenge of changing a global systems, there are groups organizing and working to raise awareness and work towards a more sustainable model.

Articulate a broad-based understanding of sustainability education including its interconnected relationships between ecological, socio-cultural, political, economic and ethical aspects

In many ways, I feel like I have to do this every time someone outside the LSE community asks me what I'm studying! While sustainability is understood within our program,

for many people outside LSE, and especially outside Portland, the concept of sustainability and how it relates to all our lives can be very new. In my work with students in Asia, I tried to engage them in dialogue around what living sustainably might mean for them and how it might be different for people in other parts of the world. Moving forward I hope to be able to articulate how sustainability is woven through everything we do, how individual actions do have an impact, and how coming together in community, we have the capacity to change systems or patterns in our lives and our world that are unsustainable.

Envision and create sustainable solutions using a whole systems perspective

Throughout the LSE program, I have been asked to look at the bigger picture, to see both problems and solutions as interconnected, to try and step back from individual fragments of issues and consider how various problems and solutions are interconnected. My awareness of *what* to look for and consider has expanded as I have learned more about how organizations and living systems work, and I have applied this perspective to my Comps project as I look at how to craft a solution that is both structured and flexible. In my work designing experiential education programs abroad for Carpe Diem, and I am trying to apply a whole systems perspective as well, to consider what is important and how to meet diverse needs in a sustainable way.

Educate others about complex sustainability issues using participatory, place-based, transformational, and culturally relevant pedagogies

Much of my learning about how to do this came from *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning*. In studying and presenting on varying styles of pedagogies related to sustainability, I was able to gain a broader understanding of ways of connecting with students that respect place, community, and culture. Ultimately, this was something I worked to put into practice during the term I spent with students in SE Asia. I tried to facilitate understanding of a

variety of different sustainability issues in a way that was relevant both to the places we were traveling and to students' lives back home.

Work collaboratively, create learning communities and develop networks with diverse others

In almost every class I've taken, I've had to work collaboratively with others. In *Advanced Leadership for Sustainability*, *Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning*, and *Advanced Global Political Ecology*, group projects and presentations were a large component of the courses. In both the *Spiritual Leadership* and Comps courses, outside study groups were a requirement, and I feel these outside learning communities have helped me to build relationships and allowed me to more deeply learn from and appreciate the insights and support of my peers.

Establish a commitment to leadership in bio-cultural sustainability education

While I saw myself as a leader in certain situations prior to the LSE program, I feel like my definition of what leadership has expanded, and has allowed me to see both others and myself as leaders in situations that I might not have previously defined as leadership roles. Broadening my definition of leadership has allowed me to feel more confident in stepping forward as a leader, because I can do it in a way that feels authentic to who I am. This has led me to a stronger commitment to leadership, especially in education, with the hope of empowering students to see themselves as capable of learning and leadership, in whatever capacity they feel most captivated by.

Introduction

Throughout the world, in every facet of our lives, the future is less and less certain. In the US, there is a daily barrage of bad news – about climate change and pollution, economic collapse and corruption, and societal breakdown and fear. The speed with which information reaches us has increased drastically and, more and more often, individuals feel overwhelmed by

the complex problems the world is facing. Part of the challenge is that problems are often presented as disconnected from one another, implying a need for endless individual solutions to solve each problem. We need a new way of framing the problems we face, in order to see them as less insurmountable (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998). Sustainability offers a worldview through which we can see the problems the world faces as interconnected and, subsequently, a framework to work towards long-term solutions.

The Brundtland Commission, an organization formed at the request of the UN to focus on environmental and development issues, defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (as cited in Edwards, 2005, p. 4). Sustainability is how we go about living in a way that is in harmony with the goals of sustainable development. In tying development together into a single goal – meeting our needs while not compromising future generations – sustainability reminds us of the importance of relationships and interconnections, without forgetting ecological, economic, or social concerns (Edwards, 2005). While the actions of individuals are needed to achieve greater degrees of sustainability in the world, individual actions alone are not enough. Leaders are needed - to ask questions, to involve groups and organizations, and to mobilize around and publicize sustainability concerns (Hay, 2010).

Unfortunately, we are not preparing people to step into these much-needed leadership roles. Leadership, when it is taught at all, is typically taught in a traditional and linear way – as a set of skills, a particular role to be filled, or as a hierarchy of one person above others. This type of leadership is not effective in solving today’s problems. First, it is fragmented and specialized while the world’s problems are complex and interconnected. Second, it is exclusive and disempowering. By defining leadership as a specific role or skill set, fewer people are likely to

see themselves as capable of stepping forward as leaders. In contrast, sustainability leadership proposes that everyone is a leader and encourages community and collaboration.

While there is a need to teach about sustainability leadership, it is not enough to simply tell learners about it. In the United States, typical methods of teaching and learning are informational. In most public school environments, there is a focus on what students know and whether or not they can provide the correct answer. This view holds teachers as experts, qualified to know truth, and students as amateurs, qualified to receive truth (Palmer, 1998). Teaching sustainability leadership in this way would be counterproductive because it would reinforce the myth that knowledge and power flow from the top down. To more effectively support students in learning about leadership and making it more personally meaningful, educators need to consider theories around how students learn in ways that are transformational, not just informational. Whereas informational learning changes what learners know, transformational learning changes how they know and how they view the world (Baumgartner, 2001). To more effectively support students in integrating the idea of sustainability leadership into their world view and ultimately identify themselves as potential leaders for sustainability, educators also need to consider theories around how learners develop their identities, integrate new learning into their sense of self, and ultimately come to see themselves as leaders in both their own lives and in the world around them. In order to empower and prepare learners to identify as sustainability leaders in their communities and the world, as well as in their own lives, there is a need for training in sustainability leadership that is grounded in learning theory and identity development theory.

Literature Review

Leadership

Traditional leadership

What is good leadership? There are widely divergent models for what ‘good leadership’ means, and the variety of perspectives leave the impression of an “elusive, complex phenomenon” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 1998, p. 10). However, for individuals, groups, community members, and nations, answering the question of what type of leadership is most effective is of vital importance. The ideal of a leader who can come forward with vision, direction, and an almost enlightened view of how to handle a given situation is both accepted and strived towards in U.S. culture. Despite this ideal, there remains confusion about exactly what leadership implies. Are leaders authority figures, managers, or something else entirely? (Bolman & Deal, 2008). People look to leaders at the top to provide “guidance, direction and answers and are often comforted by the sense of stability and predictability” (Ferdig, 2007, p. 30) that such a leader seems to provide. However, leadership doesn’t have to come solely from those in high positions. It can also come from within a community or organization.

The idea of a leader who can wisely guide followers through linear, organized solutions is based in an individualistic and non-systemic worldview; one that assumes that there is one correct answer to a problem that can be arrived at with scientific objectivity. This model of leadership may have worked in the industrial era, where goals were primarily efficiency and production, and environments seemed stable and predictable (Komives, Owen, Longerbean, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). However in today’s world, problems are increasingly being recognized as interconnected, non-linear, and ever changing. While certain technical problems will perhaps need an individual with specific knowledge to step forward and address an issue with linear precision, there are many problems for which there is no one easy solution.

In addition to being increasingly ineffective, traditional models of leadership are also disempowering, as the role of leader as authoritative expert is naturally exclusive. Everyone can't be the CEO, the president, or the commander of a given situation or organization. Perceived lack of experience, knowledge, or the right personality traits might cause an individual to shy away from stepping into a leadership role. A view of leadership that only includes those in positions of high power can be both intimidating and seemingly self-aggrandizing for the average person to step into. Additionally, there can be some level of cynicism towards leadership, as so many public figures throughout the world are seen as self-serving or corrupt (Palmer, 2000). Senge (1996) writes that the learning capabilities of teams deteriorate the higher up the corporate ladder one goes, because people in perceived positions of power have gotten there through their independence, their willingness to set themselves apart, their ambition and perceived insights. Issues in sustainability, however, require leaders who are willing to learn from and with one another. Problems are complex and interconnected and require a variety of perspectives to understand the full picture.

Sustainability leadership

New approaches to leadership are developing which are more effective in working towards a more sustainable future. All across the globe, thousands of individuals, groups, and communities are beginning to work together and take action. Slowly, movements are evolving that are placing people, rather than commodities or economies, at "the heart of the world and of life" (Hawken, 2007, p. 14). Through decentralized and non-hierarchical organizations, by stressing innovation while focusing on everyday life, citizens are working to create more sustainable and meaningful economies, communities, and relationships with the natural world. Mary Ferdig (2007), president of the Sustainability Leadership Institute, describes sustainability

as “each of us doing our part of build the kind of world that we want to live in and that we want our children and grandchildren to inherit” (p. 28). Sustainability leaders are ordinary people taking action to create the world they want, and encouraging others to do the same. Living together in the “close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone leads and everyone follows” (Palmer, 2000, p.74). Leadership is not the exclusive domain of the few; it is inclusive of everyone. It is not a rare, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity but something that needs to happen everyday (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001).

According to Ferdig (2007), “sustainability leadership reflects an emerging consciousness among people who are choosing to live their lives and lead their organizations in ways that account for their impact on the earth, society, and the health of local and global economies.” (p. 26) This perspective assumes that everyone has the capacity for leadership; that a leader’s role is not to lead over others, but rather to lead with them; and that a leader must work within the holistic interconnections that are present between people and the natural world (Ferdig, 2007). What it doesn’t assume is that the leader has all the answers. It acknowledges that today’s challenges are complicated, interconnected, and will need everyone to work towards creating a more sustainable future. Thus, sustainability leaders, rather than providing a solution, “create opportunities for people to come together and generate their own answers” (Ferdig, 2007, p. 31).

Examples of sustainability leadership in action are found in Paul Hawken’s book *Blessed Unrest*. Hawken’s description of the unnamed movement that is slowly changing the world is one with no single leader, no unifying ideology, and no clear followers. What it has are “ordinary and some not-so-ordinary individuals who are willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to the world” (2007, p. 4) This worldwide social movement is made up by individuals who are trying to

make the world a better place, in whatever ways they can. It comes from sustainability leaders stepping forward with questions, with passion, and with hope that all the interconnected actions of people around the world will make a difference.

Leadership and Authenticity

While in many ways the idea of everyone as a leader is empowering, it may also be intimidating. Individuals who are used to thinking of leadership as a set of skills or characteristics might struggle to see themselves as leaders at first and wonder where to start. Rather than providing a list of traits or abilities, sustainability leadership allows for all different types of “personalities, preferences, values, and ways of being in the world” (Cranton and Carusetta, 2004, p. 5). However, in order to lead sustainably, and indeed, to live sustainably, self-awareness is key. Being true to one’s self is the best place to start as a leader.

In their in-depth study on leadership development, George, Sims, McLean, and Mayer (2007) found that the most common quality that good leaders have is self-awareness. It is in listening to oneself, learning from one’s life story and being true to one’s values, ideals, and sense of self that authentic and effective leadership develops and evolves. Leaders who try to imitate the leadership of someone else, or to mold themselves to a role that doesn’t fit who they are or what they believe will not inspire trust, as they are not being true to themselves.

According to Eriksen (2009), “leadership is an expression of authenticity” (p. 751-2). Rather than just leading from the head, authentic leaders also listen to their hearts and, with a sense of caring and compassion for others, cultivate connections and develop trusting relationships with their communities. The concept of authenticity has been defined in many ways, but “involves features such as being genuine, becoming more self-aware, being defined by one’s self rather than by others’ expectations...and critically reflecting on self, others,

relationships in context” (Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt, 2007, p. 40-1).

It is especially meaningful in relationship with others and in the context of crucial issues.

Sustainability leadership values the unique and diverse skills that each individual brings.

Authenticity is applicable to sustainability leadership as it considers how leaders know who they are, how they stay true to themselves, and how they incorporate their passions and gifts into their leadership.

Authentic leaders “demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are” (George et al., 2007, p. 130). If learners are unable to see themselves as leaders in their own lives, they will be even less likely to see themselves as leaders of others. Authentic leaders find their power not in titles or positions; rather they find it in their own hearts. It is important that leaders dedicate time to understanding themselves and what is in their hearts, as “when we are insecure in our own identities, we create settings that deprive other people of their identities as a way of buttressing our own” (Palmer, 2000, p. 86). However when a leader’s identity is not dependent on lessening the identity of those around him or her, he or she is able to enhance a sense of self in others. In knowing that identity is not dependent on a role or position, leaders are free to act without fear (Palmer, 2000). But how can leaders become secure in their own identities, know what is in their hearts, and lead from a place of authenticity and compassion? Considering how individuals construct their identities can provide insight into how to weave authentic and sustainable leadership into a learner’s sense of self.

Leadership and the Self

One theory that looks at the process of identity construction is self-authorship. Marcia Baxter Magolda, a Professor of Educational Leadership who has conducted studies on identity development, defines self-authorship as “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identities, and social relations” (2008, p. 269). Self-authorship leads to learners seeing themselves neither as passive observers of their lives nor as objects being acted upon, but rather as individuals who take ownership for their actions and develop self-awareness from their experiences (George et al., 2007). While self-authorship doesn’t necessarily mean leadership, sustainable leadership requires self-authorship. To better understand others and engage effectively in groups and communities, a sense of one’s own values, commitments, and beliefs is key (Komives et al, 2005). In order to develop as a leader, learners need to commit to developing themselves.

Baxter Magolda (2008) identifies three key elements in constructing a self-authored system, the first of which is learning to listen to and trust one’s internal voice. Trusting the internal voice means “knowing [one]self deeply enough to determine when to make things happen versus when to let them happen” (p. 274). This is neither an easy nor straightforward process, and typically involves a period of questioning, listening, cultivating, refining, and ultimately coming to trust the internal voice. Through coming to understand one’s self and beliefs, individuals can be better prepared to both author their own lives and also to step forward in leadership positions. Reflection is essential to this process, as it allows learners a space to begin to understand their attitudes and actions. In particular, reflecting on challenging experiences can aid learners in creating a clearer vision of themselves and lead to cultivating greater confidence in their ability to author their own lives.

Once learners begin to develop and trust their internal voice, they can start to act with more intention. Baxter Magolda (2008) found that once participants in her self-authorship study

trusted their internal voice, they “set about creating a philosophy or framework...to guide their reactions to reality” (p. 280). This often meant incorporating personal components of themselves into their identities and starting to act based on their own perceptions of self rather than other’s expectations or projections. As learners begin to clarify their internal values, they are better able to understand why they make certain decisions or take certain actions, and better able to explain their actions when in leadership positions.

However, this is a complex and nuanced process. George et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of balancing internal and external motivations in leadership development. While developing and committing oneself to laudable goals and values helps to attract and inspire followers, staying dedicated to those goals despite pressure or opposition requires a strong value system that provides an “internal compass” (Hay, 2010, p. 167). It can be easy to get caught up in the expectations of others, but ultimately, self-authored individuals are able to both listen to feedback and ask for support, while also staying true to their values and sense of self.

While gaining self-awareness and defining personal values are in many ways individual processes, both self-authorship and leadership are very much influenced by community. Initially, community can provide needed support. As learners struggle to analyze and construct aspects of beliefs and identities in various contexts, there may be times of confusion, fear, or despair. Especially in the early stages of self-authorship, the support of friends, family, and community is critical to helping learners feel confident in listening to their internal voices (Baxter Magolda, 2008). As well, observing and learning from others who are going through the same process can help individuals in deciding what kind of person or leader he or she wants to be.

The idea of balance between agency and communion is key in being able to self-author in a

way that respects communities and relationships with others. According to Baxter Magolda and Crosby (2011), agency is the ability to have a secure sense of oneself and one's values, the ability to stay true to oneself while still relating to others. Communion is the ability to connect, build relationships, and to be open to the perspectives and ideas of others. Finding the balance between these two qualities is important both in self-authorship and in leadership. "As students move through the stages of self-authorship, they need to maintain a sense of self-identity, while at the same time recognize the need to compassionately relate to others" (Baxter Magolda & Crosby, 2011, p. 3). While it is important for individuals to be able to listen to their internal voices and clarify personal values, until those ideas are tested in community, they are still just ideas. To become a full self-authored individual, one needs to be able to relate to diverse others whose values may be different from their own. Especially in the later stages of self-authorship, reflection on both one's own perspectives and the perspectives of others is a crucial element. Ultimately, a primary goal in coming to better understand oneself while learning about leadership is to develop awareness that can lead to stronger sense of community and common purpose with others (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998).

Self-authorship and sustainable leadership are complex and nuanced processes. To truly develop as a self-authored individual takes time, practice, and reflection. It requires a level of self-awareness, of internalized values, and of balance between listening to oneself while being able to relate compassionately to others. These are developmental process that may take a lifetime. However, intentional guidance can help facilitate these processes and support learners along the way. By applying the concepts of self-authorship when encouraging leadership development, learners will be more likely to identify themselves as leaders. But again, simply telling students about the process of self-authorship or about the concept of sustainable

leadership is not enough. Educators need to consider what methods of teaching and learning are most effective to help learners integrate new ideas about leadership into their worldviews and sense of self.

Learning Theory

According to David Orr (2004), many of the current problems facing the world are the result of “education that alienates us from life in the name of human domination, fragments instead of unifies, overemphasizes success and careers, separates feeling from intellect and the practical from the theoretical, and unleashes on the world minds ignorant of their own ignorance” (p. 17). Rather than focusing on personal wholeness, the pursuit of truth and understanding, or issues of sustainable living, the current education system aims to prepare students to compete in the world economy (Orr, 2004). Yet education based on competition leads to an atmosphere of secrecy and jealousy, which tends to cause breakdown in community. While dynamic conflict can add to learning by allowing for opposing viewpoints, competition closes learners off to the ideas and contributions of others (Palmer, 1998).

As sustainability leadership aims to enhance community and build relationships, a transmissive model of teaching and learning with a teacher as the sole source of knowledge lecturing to silent students, would be contradictory. Instead alternative models of teaching and learning need to be considered. In addition, teaching or training learners in sustainability leadership will likely challenge currently held beliefs about leadership, and, by incorporating principles of self-authorship, lead to learners identifying themselves as leaders. In order to encourage learners through the process of creating new ways of knowing and being in the world, a leadership course or training will need to be facilitated in a way that supports this type of growth.

Transformational Learning

Transformational learning theory proposes that some types of learning can not only increase what students know, but can lead to shifts in *ways* of knowing. Transformational learning can be very powerful, as it offers learners the opportunity to critically examine assumptions about the way the world works, and to develop “the ability to see new possibilities and create new opportunities” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 438). Transformation can be inspired by any event or experience that leads learners to question and reflect on their habitual expectations about themselves and the world around them (Cranton, 2006). This event can be it a single intense moment, the accumulation of a variety of experiences, a story, an argument, or an interaction. It can take place inside a classroom or in a non-academic setting, with a group, with a teacher or mentor, or on one’s own. While almost anything can be the catalyst, transformation occurs when the catalyst is followed by critical reflection, a revising of one’s view, and, ultimately, a new way of being in the world.

While originally thought to be a linear process, transformational learning is now believed to be an individualized, fluid, and complex process, involving the thoughts and feelings of the learner. Additionally, relationships have been recognized as an important aspect to the transformational learning process. Rather than an independent act, transformation involves “an interdependent relationship built on trust” (Baumgartner, 2001, p.19). Discourse is seen as necessary to transformational learning, in order to validate “what and how one understands, or to arrive at a best judgment regarding a belief” (Mezirow, 1997, p.10). Transformational learning is very much a social process. This fits well with leadership learning, as leadership is also dependent on relationships of trust between communities of people. Studies on how to foster transformational learning have found that ideal conditions include an environment that is safe,

open, and trusting and that allows for participation, collaboration, exploration, critical reflection, and feedback (Baumgartner, 2001).

Experiential Learning

Educational philosopher John Dewey wrote extensively about the experience of education. According to Dewey (1938), teaching in a way that attempts to transmit objective information assumes that what is being taught is essentially static - a finished product that does not allow for personal opinion or for cultivating a personal relationship. Imposition of information from experts above does not allow for expression and cultivation of individuality. Rather, cultivating the full person means considering “manual competence and feeling as well as intellect” (Orr, 2004, p.110). It is not just what students learn that is important, it is how they learn as well. Hierarchical philosophies commonly believe that the mind knows and the body does (Minnich, 1999). Most traditional academic settings teach to the mind, ignoring the need for direct experience to fully integrate knowledge into the learner’s sense of self. In order for learners to identify as leaders, opportunities for gaining experience are key.

The belief that education comes about most genuinely through experience doesn’t mean that all experiences are equally educative. While Dewey (1938) points out that students do still have experiences in the traditional classroom setting, they are often the wrong kind of experiences. Some experiences, rather than inspire openness and growth in students, can lead to closing down and restrict the opportunity for future learning. An experience that causes a student to feel bad about themselves or their ability, or simply feels irrelevant or disconnected from the student’s life, can be discouraging. The key in experiential education is facilitating the kinds of experiences that will foster growth and open students to the learning process. It is essential for facilitators and educators to consider whether the experiences they are creating for

students will lead to openness to new definitions of leadership and, ultimately, empower students to identify themselves as leaders for sustainability in their lives and communities.

While it is important for learners to have opportunities to learn through experience, critical reflection is also an important component to the learning process. Without reflecting on underlying assumptions, beliefs, or habits of mind, learners may not fully grasp the significance of an experience or integrate new ideas into their existing frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Learners can critically reflect about an experience they have had or a new idea or perspective they have heard to consider how it fits into their currently held beliefs. In addition to reflection on outside experiences or views, learners can also reflect on their own assumptions or perspectives, to see how their current worldview fits with new experiences they may be having. Regardless of how reflection occurs – be it individually, in groups or peers, with a mentor or teacher – it is a key element in experiential and transformational education if learners are to ultimately come to identify with concepts of sustainability leadership

Solution: Important Components of a Leadership Course

Educators have much to consider when creating a training or course around sustainability leadership that is grounded in both learning theory and identity development theory. As sustainability leadership is fluid and dependent on individuals, communities, and places, it seems counterproductive to suggest a rigid or highly structured format for a course. As Heider interprets in *Tao of Leadership*, “specific actions are less important than the leader’s clarity or consciousness. That is why there are no exercises or formulas to ensure successful leadership” (1985, p.75). Rather, providing a framework will hopefully allow educators to develop trainings or courses that meet their needs and the needs of learners in their particular place and context. It is important for both learners and facilitators to recognize that the process of redefining one’s

sense of identity can take time. While some groups of learners may come to a course with a strong base of knowledge about sustainability, leadership, and themselves, others may be starting with little to no background on these subjects. Flexibility and meeting learners where they are at will be vital if a course is to be optimally effective.

There is no one ideal context for leadership development and this type of course could be facilitated in myriad ways and locations. Particularly effective contexts could include senior year of high school, throughout college, for new staff in a workplace, for teachers or educators, or for community groups looking to effect change. While various styles of leadership can and should be introduced to children, self-authorship is a process that adult learners go through, starting in their late teens or early twenties and moving into their thirties and beyond (Baxter Magolda, 2008), and thus this type of learning model wouldn't be appropriate for students in junior high or early high school.

When beginning to plan a course or training, it is essential to consider who is facilitating. As the facilitator or educator will be a role model for sustainable leadership, it is important to identify the facilitator's intentions and understanding of the subject. Creating positive energy and space for learning starts with the educator or facilitator. As self-awareness and authenticity are central to sustainable leadership, a facilitator should be willing and able to lead authentically and support the process of the learners.

It is also important to consider the context and the space. Where is the course taking place? Who are the learners? What is important to them? What is the time frame? What is the impact of the course on the environment and community? In encouraging learners to lead by example, facilitators should do the same, taking care that a course itself is in line with principles of sustainability, and being open to dialogue with learners around what may or may not be

sustainable about the context or situation where the course is taking place. Once the context is considered, facilitators can find ways to most appropriately put the following components into practice.

Observation and Awareness

Creating space for observation can help learners to cultivate increased awareness – both about themselves and important issues in their communities and lives. Slowing down, learning to see and listen, and sharpening powers of observation will allow students to learn more, both from other people and the natural world. By taking time and considering how to make the least amount of change with the largest amount of impact, leaders and learners can become more effective change agents in their communities (Starhawk, 2004).

By starting with careful observation, leaders reduce the risk of rushing in and making careless mistakes. David Orr (2004) reflects on sustainability problems such as pollution, poverty, injustice, and instability that are occurring in industrialized civilization and concludes that many of them result from a lack of intentional design. He argues that industrialization “was not designed at all; it simply happened” (p. 104). As leaders and community members, it is important to take a step back and observe before taking action. Acting without trying to cultivate some understanding around the potential implications of actions has a higher likelihood of leading to greater problems in the future. Oftentimes leaders try to do or change too much and “few leaders realize how much how little will do” (Heider, 1985, p. 85). By taking time to start with observation – of place, of people, and of oneself – learners and leaders will be better prepared to act authentically, sustainably, and effectively.

Self-awareness is critical in self-authorship and authentic leadership. Palmer (1998) writes about the importance of knowing oneself in order to better serve students and any other

greater purpose. If a leader is confused about their own purpose, they will not be as effective in working with others. Through practice observing patterns of thought and patterns of action, and, in turn, cultivating self-awareness, learners can begin to build a foundation for moving forward as confident sustainability leaders.

Reflection

From observation, learners can begin to move towards understand. A course might begin with learners observing their ideas or attitudes about leadership and their actions within community. Once there is awareness, learners can begin to question and reflect on why things are the way they are, what has caused certain thought patterns or attitudes, and whether or not these patterns are useful in their lives. Self-authorship, authentic leadership, transformational and experiential learning theory all identify reflection as a key part of the learning process. On an individual level, reflection is necessary for staying in touch with internal values and principles and maintaining a sense of self. From a leadership perspective, reflection allows for a leader to take a step back, consider all the options, and carefully think through multiple aspects of a situation. Reflection can also offer an opportunity for renewal, a chance for individuals to reconnect with themselves, their goals, and their communities, in order to move forward from a place of calm rather than a place of confusion or stress (Komives, Lucas, & McMahan, 1998). Within a community, “when group members have time to reflect, they can see more clearly what is essential in themselves and others” (Heider, 1985, p. 23). Allowing time for reflection throughout a group process will allow community members time to digest what is happening and distill what is most important.

Reflection can take myriad forms. Journaling, discussion, art, and meditation, as well as dialogue with a mentor or support group, are all examples of reflective practices, and there are

many others. Once learners become aware of currently held beliefs or worldviews, they can begin to question more deeply where those views came from and whether they are relevant and useful.

Defining and Cultivating Internal Values

Observation and critical reflection will ideally lead to learners clarifying their internal motivations and values, and set the stage for authentic action and leadership. To create a leadership identity, students need to increase their sense of self-awareness from a more general or diffuse sense to a clearer identification of strengths, passions, and other important aspects of identity such as race, gender, or ethnicity (Komives et al., 2005). By creating space for learners to identify and articulate their values and beliefs, students can begin to develop “personal leadership principles” (Eriksen, 2009, p. 750) Posing question about values, beliefs, and criteria in effective leadership, learners can begin to not only identify the kind of human beings they want to be, but also they kind of leaders they might become. However, part of self-authorship and authentic leadership is that these leadership principles are based on one’s lived experience rather than simply adopting someone else’s principles, as admirable as they may be (Eriksen, 2009). If one’s values and beliefs don’t come from within, it will be hard to implement them and integrate them into one’s identity.

There can be challenges to facilitating this type of learning and reflection in academic settings. Spirituality often contributes to the development of morals and values, and spirituality is often avoided in traditional learning environments. Educators who want to help students reflect on their internal values need to do so in a way that is inclusive of all belief systems. While looking at decisions of past leaders and considering what moral or ethical principles may have led to those decisions can be helpful for students to gain awareness of how internal

convictions can guide actions, ultimately they need to be able to define their own values if they are going to author their own lives authentically or become authentic leaders.

Diversity

As learners go through the process of exploring new ideas, questioning beliefs, and defining personal values, it is important to expose them to a variety of options, so that, ultimately, they can come to take ownership for the choices they make. Capra (2002) writes about how human communities and organizations can work more effectively by learning from living systems. In looking at successful communities and organizations, Capra found that they shared the qualities of “openness to the outside world, tolerance for the entry of new individuals and ideas, and consequently a manifest ability to learn and adapt to new circumstances” (2002, p. 105). By bringing new and different ideas into a learning community, learners can both practice tolerance and compassion for difference while continuing to refine their own ways of thinking and being in community and leadership positions.

When facilitating trainings in sustainability leadership, it is important to present diverse perspectives on leadership, to expose learners to different models of what leadership can look like. Oftentimes learners have either consciously or unconsciously been taught that leadership looks like *this* or *that*, and in not seeing themselves in one particular version, are hesitant to see themselves in a role that doesn't fit who they are. Just as life manifests in infinitely diverse forms, so can sustainability leaders. By proposing diverse views on what leadership can look like, learners will have more opportunity to expand their definitions of leadership and find a vision of leadership that fits their strengths and passions.

Community

While gaining self-awareness and defining personal values are in many ways individual

processes, both self-authorship and leadership are very much influenced by community and learning to be true to oneself while still relating to others. According to Orr (2004), we cannot say we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities. In redefining one's views of leadership and oneself and going through a process of transformation, the support of a teacher, mentor, or supervisor, or peer can be invaluable.

To encourage self-authorship and authentic, sustainable leadership, learners need opportunities to collaborate with others and reflect on their perspectives and values within group settings. According to Eriksen (2009), "the more deeply a leader understands her followers as human beings and uses this understanding in her interactions with them, the more effective she can be as a leader" (p. 750). Creating environments of collaboration instead of competition can not only give students the opportunity to consider the perspectives of others but also encourage compassion and shared feelings of humanity.

By engaging in groups, learners also have the opportunity to make new friends, to relate to those different from themselves, to practice communication skills and to start to appreciate diverse points of view. Some students may learn the importance of empathy, appreciation for harmonious relationships, and how to facilitate positive group dynamics. By practicing leadership in a meaningful context, students have the opportunity to support others while also experiencing personal growth (Komives et al., 2005). As well, in learning about leadership in community, students will have the opportunity to articulate their values and beliefs to others, not simply identify them in their own minds. Building trust within a learning community is essential for learners to feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically.

One challenge in teaching or facilitating this aspect of self-authorship and leadership

development in traditional academic settings is that many learning environments emphasize independence and individual achievement. While there are opportunities for joining groups or teams outside of school, students often have to seek those experiences out on their own.

Educators who want to encourage student to identify as sustainability leaders need to promote and provide more opportunities for students to collaborate with others and reflect on their perspectives and values within group settings.

Experience

Essential in learning about sustainable leadership is having the opportunity to experiment with leadership, to practice leading and acting from a place of authenticity. One of the benefits of learning in community is that opportunities for application and experience will inevitably arise. According to Palmer (1998), “community is a dynamic state of affairs that demands leadership at every turn” (p. 161). As experiential learning theory proposes that how we learn is just as important as what we learn, providing a variety of opportunities for experience gives learners a chance to integrate knowledge into their sense of self more deeply. The type of learning experience matters in how students perceive the subject, and facilitating experiences that are engaging and relevant to students’ lives will create a more receptive and positive environment for shifts in ways of thought. According to Robert Greenleaf, “Nothing is meaningful until it is related to the learner’s own experience” (as cited in Eriksen, 2009, p. 762). Working with learners to identify topics they are passionate about or where they see themselves having opportunities to step forward and work for change can help them to take ownership of their experiences and ultimately connect more deeply with the idea of themselves as leaders for sustainability.

Feedback

Creating avenues for feedback will help learners through the process of developing a sustainability leadership identity. There are a variety of types of feedback that are useful to consider: learners to themselves, to one another, and to and from learners and facilitators. According to Ferdig (2007), sustainability leaders model a spirit of inquiry and share their learning process with others. By constantly working to make the process better and critically examining how and what is being shared and understood, learning can be amplified and more deeply reinforced. While constructive feedback can help identify areas of improvement, equally important is positive feedback. For learners who are experimenting with leadership or authenticity, supportive feedback as they push their comfort zones will help to encourage growth.

Feedback can come in a variety of forms. Some learners may prefer written feedback, others verbal. Some may feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback in a group setting, others in a one-on-one dialogue, and still others reading or writing feedback independently. What is important is that learners are able to both share their observations, insights, and challenges with facilitators and the learning community and that those thoughts can be taken into account and responded to accordingly. Allowing for multiple avenues of feedback will allow diverse learners to feel their voices are heard and appreciated.

When incorporating feedback into a training or course, it is important for facilitators to model openness to feedback. It is not enough to simply solicit feedback from learners if it is not going to be acknowledged or acted upon. If learners can observe openness, humility, and willingness to change in facilitators, they then have another model of alternative leadership they can incorporate into their vision of what is possible.

Allow for space and time

Transformation can happen quickly, but can also be slow. Depending on where they are starting from, coming to see themselves as sustainability leaders could be a complete shift in worldview. Meeting learners where they are at and allowing them to move at their own pace, while still encouraging growth and change, can lead to transformation while lessening the chance of learners feeling completely overwhelmed. This can be a fine balance. Palmer (1998) writes about the work of balancing paradox in a classroom, and this is also applicable in life and leadership. He considers the balance between the needs for community and solitude, conversation and independent reflection, thinking and feeling, and structure and flexibility (Palmer, 1998). All of these pieces are not either-or, but rather both-and. All are necessary to create a balanced experience, one that will allow learners to approach new ideas and hold new visions for their own capacity that they have potentially never had before.

While some structures and goals are necessary in a course of training to provide a guide both for learners and facilitators, allowing for unstructured time is equally important. Giving learners time to meet their own needs, to identify what else they need in a course – be that more space for dialogue, experience, or quiet reflection, will allow learning to be more personal and relevant, and thus more powerful.

Conclusion

A course in sustainability leadership can be a starting point in the process of coming to identify as a leader. However, “the self should be seen as a work in progress that must continually be reauthored as one grows and develops” (Eriksen, 2009, p.751). Everyone grows and changes, and the way learners identify at the beginning or even the end of a course will inevitably change with time and new experiences. The skills learned in such a course need to be

transferable. Ideally a course will provide learners with tools to help them continue their process of learning and practice of leadership.

In my work as an educator, it is my goal to empower learners to take ownership of their own learning and, ultimately, their own lives. I believe that learning about sustainability leadership is one way to help individuals realize their own potential as leaders and as human beings. If learners are able to transform their view of themselves from one of simply a participant or object in their lives to one of active authorship and leadership, their sense of what is possible will expand. By facilitating trainings or courses on leadership that are based in learning theories such as transformational or experiential education, learning has the potential to be much more meaningful and relevant. By grounding trainings in theories about identity development, such as self-authorship theory, learners are more likely to begin to identify themselves as leaders. And with more sustainability leaders working for positive change in their lives, communities, and the greater world, the problems we face will begin to seem less insurmountable. We can begin to face our lives open to the possibility of change, build connections between individuals and the natural world and create stronger communities, and live lives with passion and integrity.

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