Lights, Cameras, Behaviour! Teaching Leadership Through Filmmaking

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It is now common practice to use film and video in leadership classrooms (Billsberry, 2013). Most instructors will focus on the learning objectives and incorporate whatever is the most effective method of achieving them. In a behavioural subject like leadership, audio-visual media that can depict the richness of human action, emotion, and communication is a natural choice. Such material is commonly used to illustrate behaviour and to critique theory (Billsberry, 2009). We have taken the use of audio-visual media a stage further in our teaching of leadership and have students, working in pairs and after appropriate introduction to filmmaking, construct their own short films on leadership.

To most people, leaders are great people who did great things, and naturally many people want to learn from such people and do great things themselves. Unfortunately though, the great things that great people did are grounded in the specific events and environments of the past and in the particular characteristics of the leader. As a result, students have difficulty replicating such behaviours. The differences between their own situations and challenges and those of the leaders they study are usually enormous. In addition to these constraints, teaching leadership in a practical way is complicated by the lack of generic advice that can be offered: Every person’s leadership challenge is different. Not surprisingly, therefore, courses on leadership tend to eschew the development of leadership skills and opt instead for the study of leadership as an academic subject thereby frustrating faculty and students alike, as they would like to address their contemporary leadership challenges.

The social construction perspective on leadership, put simply, places leadership in the ‘eye of the beholder.’ In this approach, leadership is not a quality of leaders per se; instead it is quality of observers who develop their own lay theories of leadership (Pearce, 1995). Scholars variously describe it as a perception or an emotion (for a review see Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Although it is commonly used as a critical counterpoint in leadership studies (Grint & Jackson, 2010), it possesses an important quality that may help the development of a practical leadership curriculum. That quality is that it carries a generic commonality. By containing something that is common to all participants, it becomes possible to teach a skill-based approach confident that it is relevant to all students. This commonality is the definitional location of leadership in observers’ minds. By placing leadership there, skills such as identifying and appreciating other people’s perceptions, understanding how perceptions are formed, how they are shaped, and how they might be influenced become a legitimate and practical leadership curriculum. This locates leadership within the disciplines of social and I/O psychology and on the topics of personality, perception, behaviour, persuasion, and change.

Filmmaking offers huge advantages when teaching leadership from a social constructionist perspective. Primarily, this is due to the analogy of the filmmakers’ task and what leaders must do to be perceived as leaders according to the social constructionist theory. When filmmakers make films in which they wish to depict a character as a leader, they must quickly convince the audience that their chosen person is indeed a leader. Like leaders, they must also construct their social context where leadership is perceived to be evident (Grint, 2005). In the limited time available in a film, they must do this quickly and effectively using all the tools at their disposal (e.g., manipulating the actors’ behaviour, mannerisms, and decisions, viewpoints, lighting, costume, dialogue, sound, semiotics, and reactions). In social constructionist theory, someone wishing to be regarded as a leader must be seen doing the things that other people regard as leadership. In effect, the students must manipulate their behaviour, emotions, decision-making, costume, and dialogue and, amongst other things, must be seen in the most appropriate light even going beyond the emphasis on language inherent in social constructionism and embracing the broader theme of communication (Barge & Little, 2002). The analogy is strong and by making their own films, students get the
opportunity to explore different ways to manipulate perceptions and an appreciation of how leadership is situated by actively participating in the construction of their own leadership reality. For us, it offers the opportunity to focus more intently on lay actors’ constructions of leadership, following the work of Maxwell and Greenhalgh (2011).

In this presentation, we shall begin by looking at how leadership is taught, with a particular focus on how it is taught in universities. We shall discuss the difficulties that universities encounter teaching leadership and the problems that students have taking practical lessons from traditional leadership teaching. We shall contrast this by looking at an alternative approach based on social construction. We shall outline the theoretical approach and then explain how this is converted into a teaching curriculum illustrating our argument with leadership films produced by our students in week-long intensive courses.

References


