

Learning Partnerships: Distributive Leadership in the Foundations Classroom
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One of the overarching goals of higher education has been to prepare students to lead change and innovation in the workplace, in their disciplines, and in social and civic life. This has led institutions and educators in recent years to focus upon the concept of student leadership by adding courses, programs, or institutes, and has served as a long-standing justification for funding student clubs and organizations on campus. These curricular and co-curricular initiatives have largely been centered on teaching organizational and interpersonal skills or on cultivating “leadership qualities”, that mold future leaders by providing opportunities for student initiative and team building. While few college art instructors would take issue with the notion of promoting student leadership, there are some real difficulties both philosophical and practical to attempting to bring leadership initiatives into art courses. Traditional understandings of leadership can reinforce unhelpful popular perceptions of “heroic” leadership with its attendant hierarchical power structures, narrow focus on control, individual achievement and cult of personality. Additionally, the unfortunate truth is that much of the discourse that surrounds student leadership is often rather shallow and sloganeering, offering little real guidance as to how to actually foster and encourage student leadership in the classroom. Contemporary theories of leadership can help to overcome both of these issues in that they eschew the traditional “command style” conception of leadership in favor of more nuanced and flexible “post heroic” models. One such model, distributive leadership, can provide a useful framework that can allow foundations instructors to explore new ways of forging learning partnerships and offers opportunities to creatively re-imagine what and how we teach art in the freshman year.

Distributive leadership is an idea that came to prominence through the writings and lectures of Richard Elmore, a professor of educational leadership at Harvard. He believed that the traditional notion of leadership as one person at the head of a group, directing, teaching, and encouraging others was ill suited to creating the kind of institutional change needed for schools to successfully adapt to standards-based school reform. Elmore advocated the de-romanticizing of leadership, of moving the discussion about leadership away from analyzing what leaders know or do, to focus instead on the interactions of people with each other and their situation. In essence his conception of distributive leadership is one where leadership functions are shared on various levels and so is less concerned with considerations of management and control, replacing them instead with skillful facilitation that empowers of all members of the organization. According to Elmore, “...the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge

of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result.” Now if you go back and re-read the quote again this time substituting the word “instructor” for “administrative leaders” and inserting “class” every place that he mentions “organization” then it becomes pretty clear that Elmore’s notion of distributive leadership can serve as a useful framework for reconsidering college instruction as learning partnerships made up of instructor to student, student to instructor, and student to student interactions. The curriculum and the classroom environment are two of the most important ways that instructors can shape these interactions with the aim of converting student anxiety or apathy into individual agency and collective responsibility.

Before we consider specific implementations of distributive leadership principles in foundations courses, it is important to note some of the trade-offs to adopting this approach. One major consequence for instructors is a loss of some control and predictability. As more of the responsibility and initiative for the course is vested in the students, project solutions and materials can become more individualized and diverse, student run critiques can be less predictable and in general, academic conventions and authority, including your own, will be more open to challenge. Additionally, because distributive leadership facilitates student initiative, focuses on the decision making process, and is intent on creating a culture of active questioning, shared discovery and critical analysis, there will consequently be somewhat less time for presenting specific facts. The focus of the curriculum necessarily shifts away from delivering information to students to center instead on facilitation-- teaching students how to gather, evaluate and use information. Partnerships require flexibility and an active, open negotiation of roles and expectations. “Learning partnerships” is not only a label for a teaching style, it is a process that must be cultivated and a two-word learning outcome that will require some instructional time to be effectively realized.

According to best practices, learning outcomes are instructional goals that are observable and measurable. During the most recent Think Tank our breakout group identified four broad categories of distributive leadership descriptors that we felt memorably express the overall classroom dynamic while providing specific descriptions that can serve as a general guide for establishing goals and measuring success. So just what do learning partnerships based on the principles of distributive leadership look like in the classroom? Simply stated, they are noisy, busy, and thoughtful:

Noisy

- Students actively engage in peer exchange; one-on one and in small learning groups.
- Students passionately participate in discussions, research and critiques. Dissent is open and constructive.
- There is a strong sense of classroom community and communication.
- Students help and mentor each other, often working collaboratively on projects or research. Many of these relationships extend beyond the classroom.

Busy

- Students display increased work ethic; they are personally invested in their own and their peers' success.
- Students hold themselves and each other to high standards. Students freely offer both criticism and support. They are accountable to each other as well as the instructor.
- Students take risks; they recognize and value experimentation.
- Students take initiative. There are opportunities for students to lead the course of discussions, research and critiques.
- Students are invested in their investigation; they push project parameters and research in search of novel and parsimonious solutions, not just easy ones.
- Students are more self-motivated (intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation). Grades are understood as feedback on progress, not as ends in themselves.

Thoughtful

- Students are more self-aware. Responses, observations and assignments are more nuanced and insightful.
- Students are more intellectually engaged with the material. They read more, write more, and attend more art events connecting their coursework to their other courses, their experiences and their interests.
- Students challenge their own assumptions and the authority of convention. Solutions are more unique and individual.
- Students display increased confidence and trust in themselves and their intuition, but are open and receptive to new perspectives and challenges.

- Students actively debate ideas and perspectives.
- Students are able to shift perceptual frameworks; they are more aware of micro/macro contexts.
- Students are able to hold two frames of references simultaneously and are more comfortable with ambiguity.
- Students draw freely from their past and present experiences and sense perceptions to make connections with the material.

As we were elaborating on the broad observations of noisy, busy and thoughtful it quickly became apparent that there were a few general themes that underlie many of the more specific descriptions. We kept coming back to issues of trust, empowerment, risk and flexibility as common characteristics or preconditions of distributive leadership when applied in an art foundations context. Instructors must trust that students can grapple with challenging issues and assignments. Instructors must also trust themselves to flexibly respond in the moment, to capitalize on unforeseen opportunities, and trust their ability to defend their positions, values or grades without squelching discussion. Students must trust their instructor and each other if they are to speak freely, criticize honestly or work productively in teams. Students must be empowered to personally invest in their projects and coursework, connecting the material to their experiences and interests. Instructors must empower or equip students to be critically self-reflective and prepare them to recognize complexity and grapple with ambiguity. I could go on, but the pattern is clear. The first two traits, trust and empowerment, are crucial for student risk-taking, our third hallmark of distributive leadership. Without risk choices become less meaningful-- one option serves just as well as another. Without experimentation there is little growth. And finally, our group came to recognize flexibility as the fourth key characteristic of applied distributive leadership because it is common to all successful partnerships. Additionally, flexibility is the primary means by which students become receptive to new ideas or perspectives, and is essential if instructors are to learn from their students.

We believe that trust, empowerment, risk-taking, and flexibility can serve as reliable benchmarks when applying the principles of distributive leadership to foundations classes. To demonstrate their usefulness our Think Tank breakout group applied these benchmarks to identify examples of distributive leadership initiatives that could be applied to important teaching considerations such as the teaching environment, the curriculum, and evaluation.

Building Trust applied to Teaching Environment

- Create an atmosphere of shared endeavor. Treat and respond to students as fellow artists.
Facilitate research rather than provide answers.
- Schedule student cohorts that move through the foundations courses together.
- Literally build a community. Create an art student residential learning community.
- Cluster tables or desks into “working pods”; no “front” to the classroom.
- Build community by providing a common open work studio.
- Build community through social media.
- Build community through shared experiences such as field trips, collective art making events, movie nights, design charettes, and student organized exhibitions.
- Studio time is community time. No personal electronic device “bubbles”.

Building Trust applied to the Curriculum

- Teach methodology that stresses trusting process. Solutions are discovered through interactions with materials, not determined ahead of time and then executed.
- Teach methodologies such as association and synaesthesia that stress students learn to trust their sense perceptions to guide their design choices rather than symbolic thinking.
- Include differentiated interest-based collaborative projects or presentations.
- Include dynamic, collaborative research opportunities such as fieldwork or material blitzes.
- Have students engage in Think-pair-share.

Building Trust Applied to Evaluation

- Build trust and community by using critique games, (see ITI *State of Play*).
- Demonstrate trust between instructor and students by developing project rubrics that set clear objectives but do not over-determine the outcome or function simply as to-do or checklists.
- Create opportunities for frequent informal in-process feedback by the instructor and peers.

Student Empowerment Applied to the Teaching Environment

- Encourage ownership by access. Provide out-of-class access to facilities and equipment.
- Equip studios well with tools that allow students to work with “non-disposable” materials.
- Integrate foundations studios in with other studios. Do not create a “foundations ghetto” of segregated or inferior spaces.

- Frequently display and exhibit successful work publicly. The bigger and more public the venue the better.
- Address students as practicing artists/designers.
- Establish formal or informal peer mentoring. Freshman share resources, links, “survival strategies” with each other.
- Establish a freshman orientation process for incoming art students that presents them with the values, expectations and the excitement of your creative community in addition to practical info about scheduling, resources or navigating the bureaucracy.
- Have students compete for freshman awards or scholarships.

Student Empowerment Applied to the Curriculum

- Couple projects to national competitions or to community based, service-learning initiatives.
- Create projects that *use* the elements and principles of design, not projects *about* the elements and principles of design.
- Build in project individualization. Design projects that allow for customization in terms of materials, processes and/or content. Ownership, initiative and investment are empowering.
- Design projects to engage student interest not just demonstrate formal competency.
- When in doubt, encourage students to do, not think. Of course doing *is* thinking, but of a different, more visual and less linguistic kind. Create assignments and stress methodologies that privilege “thinking with process” rather than “sketch and kvetch”. A solution is the place that you eventually arrive not the place from which you depart. Doing is empowering.
- Design assignments, demonstrations and research activities that liberate students from their self-imposed limitations and assumptions.

Student Empowerment Applied to Evaluation

- Treat grading as the beginning of a conversation not the end of one. Grading is about feedback, not judgment. Make this explicit to your students. Encourage them to discuss grades with you. If students don’t understand their grades, then they don’t understand the material.
- Don’t give number grades for art projects. Percentages or numbering scales give the illusion of quantitative objectivity where there is none, and have the effect of ending discussions of values, expectations and performance rather than opening them.

Qualitative evaluation must be constantly negotiated and re-defined. Don't hide your values, expertise and perceptivity behind an inscrutable number. Empower students to question authority. This is art's strength; don't run from it in fear of uncomfortable conversations with students.

- Create opportunities for formal and informal peer evaluation.
- Have students do a guided self-assessment.
- Avoid grade inflation. When in doubt, grade *down*. Grading is not about judgment it is about feedback. Honest, accurate grades based on performance, not effort, empower students to make informed decisions about their grasp of the material, their work habits, their priorities and their futures. If you are on the fence, grading down will bring the students running and open a dialogue. You shouldn't justify the lower grade, communicate as clearly as possible why you are on the fence. Allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the material and persuade you to the higher grade, (or not, as the case may be.) You will get a reputation for flexibility; they will feel empowered by their agency and the realization that grades are not summary judgments.
- Do not use grades to punish, reward, or make a point. Do you *really* know how much time, effort or energy students put in? Grade only what is in front of you. Talk about the visual evidence of investment, not about time or effort. Punishment is never empowering. We are providing feedback not judging our students' characters or priorities.
- Introduce student led critiques and critique games.
- In small groups or as a class have students create the rubric for an assignment, or for fun, have them make an "anti-rubric", a class-generated list of ways to guarantee that they will get a C or below. Flip all the statements around and use it as the rubric, (or discuss why you can't!)

Risk-taking applied to the Teaching Environment

- Provide unusual or unfamiliar situations and varied resources and materials. Novelty encourages experimentation.
- Create an emotionally empathetic and supportive classroom environment. Risk-taking is more likely when there is a sense of emotional safety.
- Create an intellectually challenging environment. Challenge cliché, reductive thinking, and convention. Ferret out assumptions. Risk-taking occurs when students are pushed out of their conceptual safety zone.

- Allow a bit of messiness and chaos in the studio. Risk-taking thrives in a dynamic environment.
- Provide a flexible studio space apart from the teaching space.

Risk-taking applied to the Curriculum

- Offer novel perspectives, examples, and approaches to familiar concepts in lectures and demonstrations. Occasionally offer “shocking” or challenging examples to spur discussion and debate.
- Provide situations, assignments or research activities that de-center students. New territories beg for exploration and discovery. De-centering turns familiar territories strange again.
- Use time limits, but judiciously. Time pressure can release creative energies and risk-taking, but this works best when the stakes are fairly low, like during fieldwork or material blitz research activities and when students work in groups. Avoid grading the quality of time-pressured activities, however rewarding quantity can be effective.
- Have students work with unfamiliar materials with which they don’t have a history.
- Actually teach a variety of creativity techniques and strategies. Teach how to “fail with confidence.” The unforeseen or unintended is often the basis for the greatest intellectual or artistic strides.
- Model risk-taking with your teaching. Openly experiment with your teaching. Allow students to help you assess its effectiveness.

Risk-taking Applied to Evaluation

- Rubrics are articulations of our values. Demonstrate that you value risk and experimentation by explicitly including it in project or course rubrics.
- Offer or require students to turn in multiple solutions to projects or assignments that demonstrate an exploration of materials and a range of approaches.
- Offer the option to redo and renovate assignments provided that they met the original deadline with a “good faith” effort. This measure of “grade safety” raises students’ risk tolerance.
- Model risk-taking by varying the critique format. Use role reversal, peer, small group and large group critiques. Use game show and reality show models.

Flexibility Applied to the Teaching Environment

- Teach in alternative spaces. Move the class to other spaces and locales.
- Select studio or classroom furniture that is portable, storable or easily reconfigurable.
- Create an atmosphere of open discussion and negotiation. In general if there are no compelling reasons to not allow a student or the class to try something different it's best to go with it.
- Permit students to customize and individualize the workspace to the degree possible.

Flexibility Applied to the Curriculum

- Create projects that allow or require students to choose from various media options.
- Include new media or interdisciplinary solutions to some projects.
- Provide opportunities to propose changes in projects.
- Offer a variety of content delivery methods and research opportunities to accommodate various student learning styles and interests.

Flexibility Applied evaluation

- Do not use exactly the same rubric for all projects.
- Avoid over- determining project solutions with rubrics that are too detailed and specific or function as checklists. Goals and objectives must still be made clear, but the specific parameters can be more fluid and open.
- Allow students to help generate or negotiate rubrics.
- Use a variety of formal and informal, in-process and finished evaluation processes

Some of the initiatives suggested above, such as creating an art learning community or designating a common open work studio, may require additional resources or can only be initiated by foundations program coordinators or unit chairs. Most, if not all, of the proposed changes would prove more effective if implemented at the programmatic level. Distributive leadership is largely about creating a community of mutual responsibility and shared expectations. Enhancing student agency requires influencing student attitudes and behaviors such as work ethic, curiosity, creativity/experimentation and critical self-reflection. These kinds of changes can take place faster and more fully if students have the opportunity to rehearse these skills and behaviors repeatedly in a coordinated sequence of courses over their freshman year. But change should not be held hostage by the ideal. This article concludes with specific examples of projects and activities that feature some of the implementations of distributive leadership principles suggested above. Every class is a

community, and every assignment is an opportunity to create learning partnerships. Individual instructors have the ability to enact meaningful change by applying the principles of distributive leadership to their own courses. Assignments can be modified include collaborative projects and research such as fieldworks and material blitzes. Assessment strategies can be altered to reinforce course content, not just serve as evaluative feedback. Instructors can reconfigure their course curricula so that the elements and principles of design are investigated in a larger context that foregrounds methodology: research strategies, ideational processes and active, ongoing analysis. Establishing learning partnerships with our students help to develop the kinds of skills that are highly transferrable and are proving ever more essential to our students' academic and professional success.

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