A Classroom on Water: Experiential Leadership Development Through Sailing

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Abstract

Despite the significant investment in leadership development, and widespread recognition of its importance to the future of churches, conventional programs fail to affect leader performance. Over the past three decades, experiential learning has emerged as an effective pedagogy that has a particular application to leadership development. Key elements of effective experiential learning include personal reflection, peer-feedback and coaching. However, its use in seminaries is largely confined to field education and internships where one or more of these components are missing. A five-day experiential leadership development through sailing course has been developed at Ridley College (Melbourne) to address the leadership needs of local churches, Christian schools and other not-for profit organizations. Recent experience of the program has demonstrated its potential and helped identify key components for an effective experiential program. While running a program based on sailing will be beyond the reach of most seminaries, this paper offers ideas and impetus to develop experiential leadership programs around other activities.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review an experiential leadership program being offered at Ridley College (Melbourne) and explore the potential of experiential learning for leadership development in seminaries. This program has been developed as part of a wider

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leadership development initiative in response to stakeholder feedback on the poor leadership outcomes of graduates. Ridley College is not alone in this challenge. A consistent finding over many years is that seminaries fail to develop the leadership skills of their students.[1] Skip Bell and Roger Dudley found that among Seventh-day Adventist pastors those possessing a formal theological degree did not score significantly higher on five leadership practices than those without formal training.[2] This finding has been reproduced in other denominations using comparable methodology.[3] Using a qualitative approach McKenna, Yost, and Boyd found that just 8.2% of the senior pastors studied considered formal education to be a key event in their own leadership development.[4] This has been found to be the case also in non-Western contexts.[5] A recent graduate survey of congregational leaders by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) found that the top three responses to the question "What was not offered, but you wish you could have

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[1] Association of Theological Schools-ATS. "The Future Face of Church Leadership: A Snapshot of Today's MDiv Students," *Colloquy* 201 (2011): 34-36; Skip Bell, and Roger L. Dudley, "Leadership Formation in Ministerial Education Part 2: The Impact of Graduate Theological Education on Leadership Development in the Local Pastorate," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 42(1) (2004): 10; Timothy Drake, *The Impact of Leadership Development Training Experiences on the Development of Senior Pastors' Effectiveness as Leaders in an American, Evangelical Denomination* (Doctoral dissertation, Regent University, 2003); G. M. Hillman, "Leadership Practices and Current Ministry Experience of Master's Level Seminary Students," *Christian Higher Education* 5(2) (2006):141-159; Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, "Nurturing Leadership Development for the Now and the Next: A Denominational Perspective," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 38 (2018) 25-38; Valerie A. Miles-Tribble, *Assessing Student Leadership Competencies and Adequacy of Preparation in Seminary Training* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University, 2015).
[2] Bell and Dudley, 210-211.
[3] Lizardy-Hajbi 2010; Cory D. Hines, *A Study of Pastors, their Leadership and the Results of their Churches* (Doctoral dissertation, Dallas Baptist University, 2012).
[4] Robert B. McKenna, Paul R. Yost, and Tanya N. Boyd, "Leadership Development and Clergy: Understanding the Events and Lessons that Shape Pastoral Leaders," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35(3) (2007): 179–189.
[5] Albert Bon-Hock Pua, *Perceptions of Leadership Development in Chinese Churches* (Doctoral dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2006).

learned, in seminary/theological school?" concerned leadership and management, amounting to 68% of responses.[6]

This problem is not confined to the development of religious leaders, but exists in formal leadership development in corporate contexts despite the significant financial and other resources being applied.[7] Cromwell and Kolb report that only 10-15% of employee training results in long-term transfer of learning to the workplace.[8] In a 2013 survey of 329 organizations by research firm Brandon Hall Group, 75% of respondents described their leadership development programs as ineffective.[9] A 2014 global survey of over one thousand respondents by Delloite found that only 13% of respondents say they do an excellent job developing leaders at all levels.[10] When it comes to developing Millennials, these organizations felt even less prepared with only 5% rating their capacity with this generation as excellent.[11]

With so much concern for leadership development over several decades, why is leadership development so ineffective? The nub of the problem appears to be training design.[12] Programs are pedagogically weak, and "leaders, no matter how talented, often

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[6] Judith Lin and Deborah Gin, "What Do Alums Wish They Had Learned in Seminary?" *Colloquy Online* (October 2020).

[7] Charles Hobson, David Strupeck, Andrea Griffin, Jana Szostek and Anna Rominger, "Teaching MBA Students Teamwork and Team Leadership Skills," *American Journal of Business Education* 7(3) (2012): 191–212; Warren Bennis and James O'Toole "How Business Schools Lost Their Way," *Harvard Business Review* 83(5) (2005) 96–121.

[8] Susan E Cromwell and Judith A. Kolb, "An Examination of Work-Environment Support Factors Affecting Transfer of Supervisory Skills Training to the Workplace," *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 15(4) (2004): 449–471.

[9] Laci Loew and David Wentworth, *Leadership: The State of Development Programs* (Delray Beach, FL: Brandon Hall Group, 2013), 10.

[10] Adam Canwell, Heather Stockton, Vishalli Dongrie and Neil Neveras. "Leaders at all Levels, Close the Gap between Hype and Readiness," *Global Human Capital Trends 2014: Engaging a 21st-century Workforce*, Delloite Insights (2014): 25–34.

[11] Cranwell, Stockton, Dongrie and Neveras, 25.

[12] Richard K. Ladyshewsky, "A Strategic Approach for Integrating Theory to Practice in Leadership Development," *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28(5) (2007): 426–443; Timothy T Baldwin and J. Kevin Ford, "Transfer of Training: A Review and Directions for Future Research," *Personnel Psychology* 41(1) (1988): 63–105.

struggle to transfer even their most powerful offsite experiences into changed behavior on the front line".[13] One consistent finding is that these programs are content driven and lack integration with leadership practice.[14] Without "contextual anchors" that serve as a basis for grounding the theory abstract leadership principles are unlikely to become embedded. Where these subjects are taught, classroom learning of these key skills is particularly difficult to transfer into practice.[15] For those studying full time, the time gap between learning leadership in seminary and practicing it in church leadership—a period that might span several years—means that lessons have long been forgotten when they are needed. Furthermore, many important leadership capabilities are soft skills that are not readily taught in a classroom setting.

Experiential Learning

Over the past three decades experiential learning has emerged as an effective pedagogy which has a particular application to leadership development. Based on John Dewey's early work bringing experiential learning into traditional education, and heavily influenced by social psychologist Kurt Lewin, the experiential learning model is most closely associated with David Kolb.[16] He conceived of learning as a four-stage cycle, based on the four dimensions of Lewin's model.[17] The first stage begins with the concrete experience, followed by reflection upon that experience. Reflection involves consideration of the process and outcomes, feelings, and current practice. Conclusions are then drawn from

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[13] Pierre Gurdjian, Thomas Halbeisen, and Kevin Lane, "Why Leadership Programs Fail", *McKinsey Quarterly* (2014): 3, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/why-leadership-development-programs-fail.

[14] Ladyshewsky, 426–427; Jeffrey Pfeffer, and Christina T. Fong, "The End of Business Schools? Less Success than Meets the Eye," *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 1(1) (2002): 78–95.

[15] Henry Mintzberg and Jonathan Gosling, "Educating Managers Beyond Borders," *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 1(1) (2002): 64–76.

[16] John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, Kappa Delta PI Lecture Series (London: Collier-Macmillan Books, 1963 (1938)).

[17] David A. Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984).

this review and reflection. In the fourth stage the outcomes are developed and applied to a new experience. The cycle then begins again. This four-stage model has subsequently been expanded and developed by others.[18]

Underlying this approach is a constructivist epistemology that recognizes learners actively construct "their own knowledge frameworks using personal experience to structure their rules, concepts, hypotheses and associations."[19] For deep learning to occur new knowledge must be related to existing knowledge frameworks through a process of association, integration, validation, and appropriation. Formal learning environments alone are insufficient to provide the context needed for deep learning because it does not take place purely at an abstract level but through personal experience.[20] Experiential learning allows theoretical concepts to be applied as the situation "recasts the information into a more densely textured form."[21] Experiences provide the moments of truth and clarity that can shift existing frameworks.[22]

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[18] Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön. *Organisational Learning: Theory, Method and Practice* (Reading: Addison Wesley 1996); David Boud and Helen Edwards, "Learning for Practice: Promoting Learning in Clinical and Community Settings," *Educating Beginning Practitioners: Challenges for Health Professional Education* (Elsevier Health Sciences, 1999): 173–179; Roger Greenaway, "A view into the future: the value of other ways of learning and development," in *Other Ways of Learning: The European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning 1996–2006*, eds. P. Becker, and J. Schirp, 347–367. (bsj: Marburg, 2008).

[19] R. Ladyshewsky and J. Ryan. "Peer Coaching and Reflective Practice in Authentic Business Contexts: A Strategy to Enhance Competency in Post-Graduate Business Student," in *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education*, eds. T. Herrington and J Herrington, 61–75 (Hershey, Pennsylvania: Idea Publishing Group, 2006), 64.

[20] Biehler, R. F. and J. Snowman, *Psychology Applied to Teaching*, 8th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1997).

[21] C. Graham, "Conceptual learning processes in physical therapy students," *Physical Therapy*, 76(8) (1996): 856–865, cited in Ladyshewsky, 2007, 3.

[22] Ron Cacioppe, "An Integrated Model and Approach for the Design of Effective Leadership Development Programs," *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 19(1) (1998): 47.

It has been widely reported that experience has a significant place in leadership development.[23] Yet, despite the number and the force of these claims, there is surprisingly little evidence that experiential learning is more effective than formal instruction in the classroom. For example, Morgan McCall provides no evidence to support the contention that "The primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience. The role played by training and other formal programs is relatively modest in comparison to other kinds of experiences."[24] Indeed, Stephen Kaagan considers the preference for experiential learning activities outside the classroom is misleading.[25]

While this is an area that urgently requires further investigation there are some studies pointing toward the particular value of experiential learning. We note that the previously cited study of McKenna, Yost and Boyd, which found that only 8.2% of key lessons in clergy leader development were learned through education, training and seminars, also found that 81.6% of key events came from experiences of some kind.[26] Hillman, when comparing the leadership scores of Dallas Theological Seminary students, found students with ten or more weekly hours in ministry while in seminary scored higher in all five categories of leadership, three of which were statistically significant.[27]

Kaagan observes that, "experiential learning does not have to mean extreme, remote, and costly. It can mean mild, proximate, and inexpensive. Low-intensity experiences provided to participants within the four walls of a classroom can lead to vigorous discussions,

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[23] Pua, 211; Pfeffer and Fong, 85; Srikant M. Datar, David A. Garvin and Patrick G. Cullen, "Rethinking the MBA: Business Education at a Crossroads," *Journal of Management Development* 30(5) (2011): 451–462; Kenneth E. Clark and Miriam B Clark, *Choosing to Lead* (Charlotte, NC: Leadership Press Ltd, 1994); Jay A. Conger, *Learning to Lead* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992); Daniel Goleman, R. Boyatzis and A. McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

[24] Morgan W. McCall Jr, "Leadership Development Through Experience," *Academy of Management Executive* 18(3) (2004): 127.

[25] Stephen S. Kaagan, "Leadership Development: The Heart of the Matter," *International Journal of Educational Management*, 12(2) (1998): 77.

[26] McKenna, Yost and Boyd, 182.

[27] Hillman, 153.

with great potential for leadership learning." [28] To this we could add that it is not the case of either-or. Leadership development can include engagement with leadership theory in the classroom before a facilitated offsite experience, followed by a series of more dynamic classroom discussions.

The promise of experiential learning can be seen when we consider the relationship of self-knowledge to leadership capacity. Some academics and writers in this field have gone as far as suggesting that improving self-knowledge must be the basis for all true leadership development.[29] A comparative strength of experiential learning is that exercising leadership in a structured context offers an abundance of opportunities for such self-knowledge. Many attributes will remain hidden from the self and from others unless situations are sufficiently demanding that they are brought to the surface. Where activities demand risk and struggle, a participant's leadership attributes and flaws become apparent and so the leadership lessons are pointed and relevant. While classrooms can offer moments of personal insight, the power of demanding experiences to surface leadership traits is of particular value.

Reflection and Feedback

The key to effective experiential learning is the learning cycle, in which the learners "engage in direct encounter, then *purposefully* reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing."[30] As Morgan McCall notes, "People don't automatically learn from experience. They can come away with nothing, the wrong lessons, or only some

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[28] Kaagan, 77.

[29] Chinwe Esimai, "Great Leadership Starts with Self-awareness," *Forbes* Feb. 15 (2018), https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellevate/2018/02/15/self-awareness-being-more-of-what-makes-you-great/; Mike Pedler, John Burgoyne, Tom Boydell, *A Manager's Guide to Self Development* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1986): 3.

[30] S. Warner Weil, and I. McGill, "A Framework for Making Sense of Experiential Learning," in *Making Sense of Experiential Learning*, eds. S. Warner Weil and I. McGill, (The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1989): 248.

of what they might have learned."[31] There is no obvious meaning to be found in an experience, meaning is made.[32] It follows that learning will be more effective where a reflective process that brings theory and practice together is established.[33] David Bubna-Litic and Suzanne Benn argue that more learner engagement and critical reflection are needed to assist learners in transferring their learning to their work and practice experiences.[34] Fowler states that to be meaningful, "reflection is dependent upon the tools used to aid reflection, the ad hoc or planned nature of the activity and the behavior of the learner in the reflective process."[35] Moving from engagement to making meaning requires intentional opportunities for reflection and feedback.

Personal Reflection

Personal reflection is the key process through which human beings extract knowledge from their experiences.[36] This was captured by Dewey in the core proposition that "experience plus reflection equals learning."[37] Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles and Angela Schmiede suggest that specifically structured reflection is the critical element for students to learn from experiences.[38] According to transformative learning theory, change occurs only when

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[31] McCall, 128.

[32] Marilyn Wood Daudelin, "Learning from Experience through Reflection," *Organizational Dynamics* 24(3) (1996): 36–48.

[33] Iain L. Denstenand Judy H. Gray, "Leadership Development and Reflection, What is the Connection?" *The International Journal of Educational Management* 15(3) (2001): 119–124; Joseph Raelin, "A Model of Work-Based Learning," *Organization Science* 8(6) (1997): 563–578.

[34] David Bubna-Litic and Suzanne Benn, "The MBA at the Crossroads, Design Issues for the Future," *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management* 9(3) (2003): 25–35.

[35] John Fowler, "Experiential Learning and its Facilitation," *Nurse Education Today* 28(4) (2008): 432.

[36] Tara J Fenwick, "Tidying the Territory: Questioning Terms and Purposes in Work-Learning Research," *Journal of Workplace Learning* 18(5) (2006): 265–278.

[37] Fowler, 427.

[38] Janet Eyler, Dwight E. Giles, and Angela Schmiede, *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning: Student Voices and Reflections* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, 1996).

there is critical reflection on experiences, including recognizing, acknowledging and processing feelings and emotions.[39] Therefore, moving from engagement to meaning-making requires intentional opportunities for reflection. Reflection makes tacit knowledge explicit. Through deliberately reviewing their thoughts and actions, students gain a deeper understanding of the leadership and learning episodes they experience.[40]

The importance of reflection goes beyond the meaning and self-understanding that it promotes and becomes a vital leadership skill in itself.[41] Reflective practice becomes "a life-long habit of the mind, a habit that is characteristic of highly skilled professionals."[42] When this activity becomes habitual it promotes continuous learning that means leaders adapt their leadership to the situation, recognize where their natural approach is not working, and continue to grow.

The kind of reflection activities that might be offered include journals in which students record their thoughts, observations, or questions.[43] Personal journals offer an unstructured way for students to reflect on their experiences, while directed writings provide more targeted reflection. The process makes thoughts visible and concrete, allowing participants to interact with, elaborate on, and expand ideas.[44]

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[39] Edward W. Taylor, "Fostering Transformative Learning in the Adult Education Classroom: A Review of Empirical Studies" *The Canadian Journal of the Study of Adult Education* 14 (2000): 1–28.

[40] Densten, and Gray, 119–120; K. W Seibert & M. W. Daudelin, *The Role of Reflection in Managerial Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Westport, CT: Quorum, 1999); S. D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995): 8.

[41] Densten, and Gray, 120–121.

[42] Kathy L. Guthrie and Laura Osteen, eds. *Developing Students' Leadership Capacity*, New Directions for Student Services 140 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012): 1976.

[43] Cheryl Riley-Douchet and Sharon Wilson, "A Three-step Method of Self-reflection Using Reflective Journal Writing," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 25(5) (1997): 964–968.

[44] Sandra Kerka, *Journal Writing and Adult Learning* (ERIC Digest 174, Columbus, OH 1996): 3.

Peer Feedback

Quinton and Smallbone found that peer feedback offers individuals an additional experiential base for reflection, while Ladyshewsky and Ryan consider peer coaching vital to the experiential learning process.[45] Cacioppe creates an integrated model for leadership development in which he notes that the peer-feedback process can be an excellent way for team members to develop one another because it is very personal, constructive and deals with the key issues each person feels.[46]

If learning from feedback is to be effective facilitation must set clear ground rules, provide a formal structure, and allow adequate time. Participants need to take feedback in a nondefensive way, and those offering feedback must be encouraged to offer specific examples to support their insights. It is possible for this feedback to be mediated by the facilitator who summarizes and presents written feedback from peers to the individual.

Coaching

Experiential learning contexts that allow for real-time coaching have significant benefits for the learner. Coaching encourages participants to reflect deeper, and to make conclusions about the situated experience and set goals for reapplication. Coaching provides immediate feedback which captures the context, emotions, and other dynamics of a situation so that every element is on view. The coach can present an alternative approach or solution to a problem that may be implemented immediately, and its execution and effectiveness assessed in real time. These can provide important reference points for later feedback.

A great deal of learning occurs through transference—from one human being watching another. While a classroom teacher may be an excellent leader, conventional learning contexts typically

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[45] Sarah Quinton and Teresa Smallbone, "Feeding Forward: Using Feedback to Promote Student Reflection and Learning—A Teaching Model," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 47(1) (2010): 125–135. Ladyshewsky and Ryan, 426.
[46] Cacioppe, 50.

provide only limited opportunities for their leadership attributes to become visible to the students. However, in directing a complex and intensive experience over a period of some days the coach of an experiential learning exercise is able to model thinking, behavior and interpersonal skill for the participants. While wanting to allow the leadership of the participants to emerge, the coach will invariably demonstrate leadership as they conduct the experience, set expectations, manage group dynamics, and engage with participants.[47]

Experiential Learning Through Field Education

A significant challenge for experiential learning is finding leadership experiences that will provide the opportunity for structured reflection, peer feedback and real-time coaching. As McCall reflects, "While experience is at the heart of development, not all experiences are created equal."[48] Experiential learning may involve on-the-job training whereby an emerging leader is given extra responsibility and carries that out under the supervision of a mentor. In the seminary context this is typically provided through pastoral internships, supervised field education, and student placements. As Hillman notes, "Educators see internships as helping to overcome the inability to create real-world learning experiences in the formal classroom setting."[49] Within the Roman Catholic context, the *Program of Priestly Formation* stipulates the necessity of leadership development, noting that such learning will take place mainly in the parish.[50]

Field education has much to commend it. In surveys conducted in the 1990s by the ATS of graduating seminary students it was found that 82.9% of master's-level students found their internship experience important for their development.[51] Within the field of social work the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation

[47] Cacioppe, 50–51.
[48] McCall, 127.
[49] Hillman, 142.
[50] Mark Fischer, "Preparing Seminarians for Pastoral Leadership," *Seminary Journal* 26(3) (2010): 5–17.
[51] Association of Theological Schools-ATS, 7.

Standards of the Council on Social Work Education elevated field education to the status of being the profession's signature pedagogy.[52] Hillman compared the LPI: Self scores of master's-level students at Dallas Theological Seminary who were active in significant paid or volunteer ministry leadership while enrolled with those who were not active in significant paid or volunteer ministry leadership while enrolled. It was discovered in this study that current ministry experience was a significant factor in higher leadership scores.[53]

While studies on field education demonstrate that the programs are valued for developing competencies in preaching, pastoral care and liturgy, leadership development does not figure strongly. Hillman's study, cited above, is potentially valuable as being one of the few to focus on the relationship between field education and leadership development. However, the demarcation of the two groups was crude and undermines the usefulness of the data. Those receiving no internship were included with those receiving up to nine hours as constituting those "not active in significant ministry." Many would consider a nine-hour placement to be significant. Further, the nature of the experience not identified or discussed. For example, if much of the internship is focused on preaching and service leading then the actual leader development may be minimal. No consideration was given to the quality of supervision, whether formalized reflection took place or the level of engagement beyond time spent. The experience of internship is doubtless of value in leadership development but is highly dependent on contextual factors such as the quality of supervision, the type of tasks and the capacity for reflection. In particular the capacity of the senior leaders to observe and provide feedback cannot be assumed. The senior leader is a pastor and not an educator and does not necessarily employ the pedagogical tools that effectively promote leadership development. The experience is often unstructured, lacks formal reflective elements and limited peer-feedback loops. As this is

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[52] Julianne Wayne, Marion Bogo and Miriam Raskin, "Field Education as The Signature Pedagogy of Social Work Education," *Journal of Social Work Education* 46(3) (2010): 327–339.
[53] Hillman, 153–154.

completed during, and often in addition to, other responsibilities, inadequate time is set aside for the personal reflection that is so vital to learning. Field education also demands hundreds of hours a year, which, if credit is offered, comes at the expense of other courses.

Experiential Leadership Development Through Sailing

Given the preceding discussion, in particular the importance of leadership development in seminaries, the promise of experiential learning and the limitation of much current practice, the challenge for this educator was to find and develop a suitable leadership development experience. It was in the context of crewing on racing yachts that a new possibility emerged as I wrestled with these questions in my own seminary context. Experience of the leadership of a variety of skippers demonstrated that sailing was a powerful context for quickly exposing the leadership style and capability of the skipper and their effect on the crew and performance.

It soon became clear that sailing demands a long list of competencies that have obvious relevance for church leaders. There are several analogies between sailing and leadership. The boat is the church. The crew is the ministry team. The ocean, with the weather, represents the wider culture. There are multiple points that are analogous to leadership in the real world, and the context is sufficiently complex to reproduce the demands faced in ministry. Unlike simulation exercises, sailing presented real-world challenges in which leadership decisions had genuine implications.

One of the challenges of experiential learning is providing a context where adequate observation can be achieved. Sailing on a yacht offers a context where participants can be placed under constant supervision from a qualified leadership coach. This enables the coach to provide immediate feedback, encourage different approaches and set specific developmental challenges in real time. Feedback can be provided and further practice undertaken at other points in the program. A skipper can be instructed to be more encouraging, and the effect discussed. After the events of the day have concluded feedback can be provided and participants can complete their own personal reflection exercises. At the conclusion

of the program each participant might be provided with a one-on-one coaching session in which leadership development goals are developed. Appropriate follow-up will then ensure these new skills continue to be applied.

Initial research determined that a program was already being run by the Goizueta Business School at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Selected students participate in the Goizueta Advanced Leadership Academy (GALA), which features a capstone challenge of sailing in the Bahamas.[54] Over seven days students learn to sail and undertake a series of activities that are largely centered around competing with fellow students in other boats. Daily briefings and debriefings provide opportunities for reflection. This offered a helpful stimulus to craft a program for students at Ridley College.

After developing "Experiential Leadership Development," and having it approved by the Australian College of Theology, a detailed program was created. Rather than simply sailing from point A to point B, which appeared to be the main activity in the GALA program, a more deliberate and intentional series of activities would be provided over a five-day period. Each would take into account the level of sailing skill that would have been reached, with earlier activities requiring no experience. Activities were related to particular leadership competencies and relevant theories. Plenty of time would be given over to debriefing at the conclusion of each activity, with questions developed to guide the coaches.

To provide a theoretical foundation for learning, the existing online leadership course was cannibalized to create a twelve-hour introduction that covered leadership styles, power, self-awareness, team roles, and other topics. Assessment was developed to provide structure for journaling and accountability for pre-intensive study. A final assignment would draw the threads together as students reflected on learning, identified key strengths and weaknesses, and outlined a plan for development.

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[54] See https://www.emorybusiness.com/2015/04/27/mbas-use-sailing-to-learn-about-working-in-high-performance-teams.

Sample Activities

Crisis? What Crisis?

Purpose: To explore the dimensions of crisis management and to test leadership and decision-making under pressure.

Leadership Topics: Crisis management, Decision-making.

Theoretical Models: Rational, Vroom-Yetton decision, Intuitive, Recognition-primed decision-making model.

Activity: COVID-2029 has struck. With half the crew needing to be nursed through the disease the designated leader must sail the crew to safety. Throughout the forty-minute exercise some tough decisions will have to be made as new discoveries come to light.

Blind Helmsman

Purpose: To explore communication, collaboration, and team dynamics.

Leadership Topics: Teamwork and team roles, Communication.

Theoretical Models: Shannon-Weaver Communication Model

Activity: The skipper must sail the boat with a blindfolded helmsman and partially disabled crew.

Fender Retrieval Exercise

Purpose: An introductory activity requiring no sailing skills that helps identify the appropriateness of five leadership styles and assess their effect on team performance.

Leadership Topics: Leadership Styles

Theoretical Models: Lewin's Leadership Styles; Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership.

Activity: With the boat under motor and being steered by the coach the team need to retrieve a fender from the water under

the direction of their designated leader. The leader will be given a leadership style they will adopt. This is repeated five times with a different style each time.

Navigation Rally

Purpose: Allow participants to explore team roles and the relationship of positional power and leadership styles. Highlights how leadership styles affect collaboration and decision-making.

Leadership Topics: Teamwork and team roles, Collaborative decision-making

Theoretical Model: Belbin's Team Roles

Activity: Decide on a strategy to accumulate the most points in ninety minutes and chart a course to your waypoints. Three people will lead the boat for a thirty-minute period. Which leadership styles will emerge and how does that affect decisions, morale and engagement?

Reflection on Learning Activities

The first iteration of the course took place in February 2020, just before COVID-19 hit our shores. Eight students, half from our online program, spent the week on two yachts with evening accommodation in a rented cottage on shore. A second program was run in December 2021 with ten students. In both instances this author coached on one boat, and an experienced lay leader coached the other.

The potential of this approach was immediately obvious. Initial student concerns that their complete lack of sailing experience would be an obstacle were allayed as they developed basic competencies, including helming the boat over just one day. The leadership style and ability of each individual quickly became apparent with the activities giving visibility to their strengths and weaknesses. During the debriefing the effect of each person's leadership was highlighted, and frank feedback was given.

Three examples illustrate the power and potential of this approach. In the Blind Helmsman activity, a student skipper perceived the presence of other boats as a hazard. This generated tension and anxiety as she struggled under pressure to guide the blindfolded helmsman out of danger with a partially disabled crew and on a difficult point of sailing. In the subsequent debriefing she was able to recount her own struggles with stress in ministry to children in a large church and reflect on how her response during the activity mirrors her response in ministry. During the reflection it became apparent that when under stress in ministry, just like in the exercise, she fails to look to the team for support because she was laboring under the preconception that to do so was a sign that she lacked expertise as a leader. It was a moment of deep insight and learning that will build her resilience and help her find joy in ministry.

A quiet, demure student led the Nautical Orienteering exercise that required a complex process of team decision-making. As a democratic leader he sought ideas and engagement from others, but bigger personalities soon dominated the group, and he lost all control over the process or authority over the decisions. This became a powerful teaching moment for him and for the team as we explored the consequences of a leadership vacuum. We were able to explore the idea that even a democratic leader needs to be firmly in control of the process to ensure everyone is engaged and for a good group decision can be found. On being told he needed to be "more present" he reflected that he had been told that by his manager at a nongovernmental organization but was not sure what he needed to do.

On the boat he sought ideas on how he could be more present and several were offered by the coach and his peers. He was then able to apply these ideas when leading another activity later in the week demonstrating a process known as double-loop learning.[55]

The designated student leader of the Bucket Challenge was engaging his team in finding a solution under deadline pressure. It

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[55] Sharon J. Korth, "Single and double-loop learning: Exploring potential influence of cognitive style," *Organization Development Journal* 18(3) (2000): 87

was observed that a woman attempted to provide her ideas but the leader did not engage with her. This was raised by the coach during the debrief, who invited the woman to recount the experience and its effect on her. This was an important lesson for the male student regarding how he engages with and values the contribution of women and how he might be perceived by them.

One aim of the program was to develop the capacity of students to become reflective practitioners so they could incorporate this type of learning consistently in their leadership. At the start of the program, they were inducted into Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. It was utilized and explicitly referenced during several of the debrief sessions and at the conclusion of the week. As the process was repeated over the course of the week it began to instill in students the habit of reflective practice. Post-experience assignments provided an important opportunity for further reflection based on journals kept during the week and ways to consider application of the leadership lessons to their context.

There were many other equally significant learning moments during the week. Generally, students contributed openly in the debriefs and did not hesitate to give feedback. They also learned to receive it well and were able to take what they learned in one activity into the next. However, we have not yet implemented a robust means of evaluating the effectiveness of the program. The Ridley Centre for Leadership has a Leader 360 Assessment, which measures leadership across forty-two competencies in five domains.[56] Future iterations of this program will have students undertake this assessment prior to attending the program as a baseline, and will test some six months after. The data, along with qualitative data derived from structured interviews, will provide some basis for identifying not only general improvement, but which capabilities in particular are developed.

Broader Applicability

There are obvious barriers to a seminary in developing an experiential program based on sailing. To be done well it requires

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[56] See https://www.leadership.ridley.edu.au/leader-360-survey.

personnel with skills in leadership education, coaching, and sailing. Sailing is expensive, and regulatory demands make it even more so. There are perceptions, especially by university boards and potential participants, that the sport is unsafe. Some potential participants will be unsure they have the skills to sail and be concerned about the physical demands of the sport.

While these problems might be surmountable, the more important implication of this case study is that a sustained program of experiential learning has significant potential for leadership development in seminaries. There are contexts other than sailing that could be used to develop programs much like this one. Indeed, the activities in this program, such as the "Bucket Challenge," were not dependent on sailing or require being near the water. Outdoor education has been used as a basis for experiential learning; with intentionality and imagination, and in a reiterative program of action and reflection sustained over time, meaningful activities could be curated that have the same effect as those described here.

What is required for an effective, reiterative learning program is a series of activities in which leadership is demanded, where leadership is visible, and which can be linked to aspects of leadership theory. Creating an environment of honesty, frankness and mutual support is essential. Shorter activities of under an hour's duration with plenty of time for reflection and reimagining leadership will contribute to effectiveness. A framework to assist students to journal and process what they have learned are critical. There appears to be specific value in an intensive, residential context that provides a strongly relational environment, greater immersion and focus, and more opportunity for spontaneous and informal learning.

Conclusion

Leadership development continues to be a particular challenge to seminaries. The classroom learning model used to great effect in courses on the Bible and theology is extremely limited in its capacity to develop leadership. Experiential learning has been shown to have some effect on developing leadership capabilities. However, it has been deployed fairly narrowly through field education or internships. While these have some value, they have

significant limitations. They certainly do not provide the intensity or frequency of learning moments that have been experienced in more intentional programs such as the one reviewed here. Nor do they offer the level of visibility into leadership capacity or the opportunity for peer feedback that we have observed.

We do not expect that offering experiential leadership development through sailing is within the capability of most seminaries. However, the experience recounted here, along with the underlying theoretical basis that we have explored may provide some ideas and impetus for those seeking to be more effective in leadership development. Perhaps readers will consider how they can use their own passions, environment, and context to develop experiential learning that will make a lasting effect on the leadership capacity of their students.