
Transformative Leadership Learning: Reimagining the Student Journey

Chantal Soeters

Hotelschool The Hague

Abstract:

Leadership education should shape students into leaders who create positive impact and drive meaningful change. To do this, programs need to move beyond knowledge transfer and support transformative learning, learning that is deeply personal, relational, and ongoing. This means integrating reflection, feedback, social learning, and real-life leadership practice to help students grow from novices into independent, impactful leaders who continue developing long after the course or program ends. To support this process, assessment should be diagnostic, formative, challenging, and empowering, helping students expand their view of who they can be as leaders and how they can drive change in the world.

Key Words: leadership education, leadership development, transformative learning, experiential learning, lifelong learning, social learning

Theme: Transformational Leadership Learning

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Reimagining the Student Leadership Journey

Leadership development is not a fixed outcome, it's a lifelong, iterative process of becoming. It requires critical self-reflection, experimentation, and meaningful feedback. If we want to support transformative leadership learning in higher education, then our goals, assessments, and feedback must reflect this transformational journey. These elements should not merely certify learning but actively contribute to it diagnostically, developmentally, and relationally.

This session invites educators to reflect: What if assessment weren't the endpoint but a powerful part of the learning journey? What if assessment were reimagined not just as a reflection

on what students have done but as a demonstration of how they've grown and how they will continue to grow, not just for themselves, but with others and for others? Used this way, assessment and feedback go far beyond measurement. They become catalysts for personal ownership, fostering motivation, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In doing so, they also activate Fink's (2013) dimensions of the Human Dimension, Caring, and Learning How to Learn, elements essential for developing self-aware, values-driven leaders.

Grounded in theory on leadership identity development (e.g., Komives et al., 2006; Petriglieri & Petriglieri., 2010; Day & Dragoni, 2015; Zaar, 2024), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), and focused on the multidimensional nature of leadership development, this session explores how feedback, peer dialogue, coaching, diagnostic self-assessment, and reflection can become powerful tools for deep, personal development and transformative leadership learning. Drawing on insights from my master's thesis, I invite you to reflect on the design of leadership learning in higher education and to engage in an open dialogue on how leadership education can meaningfully contribute to SDG 4 by supporting lifelong learning and cultivating the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values students need to drive lasting, positive change. In doing so, we must also turn the mirror on ourselves: Are we, as leadership lecturers, equipped with the very capabilities we hope to instill? Transformative learning demands that we go beyond the traditional role of lecturer to become coaches, mentors, and facilitators, continually developing our own capacity to model the change we teach.

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