

# Creating Leaders: A Pilot SoTL Study of an Ontological / Phenomenological Leadership Course

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of a pilot SoTL study re: a non-traditional leadership course delivered in three sections of a foundational General Education course at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada in 2016-17. This non-traditional course focuses explicitly on ontological change (a change in way of being) rather than epistemological change (a change in knowledge or skill sets). The project aimed at two goals: to replicate a pre- and post-course questionnaire study (Carney, Jensen, Ballarini, Echeverria, Nettleton, Stillwell, & Erhard, 2016) and to attempt to surface possible evidence of ontological change (change in ways of being). The pre- and post-course questionnaires replicated the Carney et al. study. Narrative data also indicates some change in self-perception of leadership capacities. These results suggest opportunities for considering moving beyond the dominant epistemological educational paradigm to explore the potential of ontological approaches to learning, at least in the arena of leadership development.

## INTRODUCTION

Educational theory and practice has moved significantly beyond the traditional sage on the stage model of mainly authoritative information transfer (the 'transmittal model'; King 1993, p.30) through the guide on the side model focused more on facilitation and coaching (the 'constructivist model'; King 1993, p.30). Various approaches to active learning and transformational learning find their roots in constructivism, yet their objectives remain determined by the dominant epistemological paradigm of education, where an increase in knowledge (and perhaps skill sets) remains the primary goal. The assumption is that, no matter what the educational approach, if we can demonstrate that our students leave our courses with increased knowledge and skills, we have fulfilled the educational mission. Much educational research, the scholarship of teaching and learning included, is dedicated to demonstrating those epistemological outcomes.

The philosophical realm remains the home of ontology (the study of *being*), and yet inquiry into being might have contributions to make to the way we think about education as a whole. For example, for a toddler, learning to walk (to be a walker) necessarily involves falling (failing to walk) as part of the learning process itself. The same might be said of any human activity which is ontological in nature: the process of becoming and ultimately being anything requires failed attempts before (and perhaps even after) success (for example, a bike-rider, or teacher, or artist, or reader, or ...). And yet, risk-taking and failure, in general, are not rewarded within the dominant epistemological paradigm wherein the expansion and replication of knowledge is the goal. So, while our approaches to education have been changing, the still predominant restriction of its objectives to the epistemological realm might now be seen as a potentially limiting view in relation to the larger potential of formal education. As Hyde and Kopp (2019) note:

For half a century, postmodern and poststructuralists theories across many disciplines have theorized a new freedom from the constraints of the Cartesian model of human being. Human subjectivity has been decentered; the self is no longer understood as the fixed and self-certain *cogito* but is open to creative reinvention; language does not merely

re-present a preexisting world of objective meanings, but in fact generates the meanings that constitute that world. These theoretical assertions concern being. But their effective communication in the universities has been hindered by our epistemologically-based academic tradition, which assumes that the central dynamic of education is knowing. (p.4)

As an educational/faculty developer, in 2014 I had the opportunity to experience a leadership course with a decidedly and explicitly ontological outcome, *Being a Leader and The Effective Exercise of Leadership: an ontological / phenomenological model* (henceforth "the leadership course"). My goal in participating in this course was to explore possibilities for opening up conversations with faculty about leadership both within classrooms and outside of them. While I found the course personally and professionally transformative, the then Director of our Teaching and Learning Centre's Director was admittedly cautious about linking the terms 'faculty' and 'leadership' in any faculty development program, concerned that senior administration might find such an initiative unpalatable in some way; therefore, faculty development programming based on this ontological leadership course was not then a possibility. Nonetheless, in academic year 2016-17, I had the opportunity to deliver this leadership course to three classes of a General Education foundation course, and I crafted a SoTL study around that opportunity.

Some background: this leadership course has been in development for the past seventeen years (Erhard, Jensen, & Grainger, 2012, p.1) and is currently being delivered in institutions of higher education around the world. Challenging the dominant educational paradigm of epistemology and information transfer, this course aims to produce an entirely ontological learning outcome: the promise of the course is about the being of leadership, rather than knowing about leadership. "The sole objective of this ontological approach to creating leaders is to leave students ... actually being leaders and exercising leadership effectively as their *natural self-expression*." (Erhard et al., 2012, p.3)

The course fulfills this promise through a well-developed epistemological model of what generates leader and leadership,

delivered in the context of ontological learning utilizing phenomenological methods, and through participants' engagement with their individual leadership projects. As the editors of *The Handbook for Teaching Leadership* note in discussing the chapter on this leadership course, "...by following a rigorous, phenomenologically based methodology, students have the opportunity to create for themselves a context that leaves them actually being a leader and exercising leadership effectively as their natural self-expression." (Snook, Nohria, & Khurana, 2012, p.xxiv)

The principal differences between this leadership course and what might be termed epistemological leadership courses (or traditional or conventional leadership courses), both in terms of substance and assessment of impact, are discussed in a pilot study of a delivery to members of the public rather than students in a university (Carney, Jensen, Ballarini, Echeverria, Nettleton, Stillwell, & Erhard, 2016, p. 51). Notably, traditional leadership courses provide students with access to vast amounts of information about the characteristics of effective leaders, best practices, and the like, and they also often provide numerous case studies of how (not) to lead as well. In short, students of many traditional leadership courses learn all about leadership and the characteristics and behaviors that are empirically associated with success in that realm, but are given no access to how they, themselves, might become leaders or lead effectively.

This leadership course, by contrast, deploys a strong theoretical model (including four foundational factors, a contextual framework, and an exploration of ontological constraints) and, through having students explore and discover their real-world, as-lived experience phenomenologically, gives them access to their being a leader and exercising leadership effectively as their natural self-expression.

A caveat: this article discusses leadership development very much from a North-American point of view. My own experience, and indeed my delivery and study of this unusual leadership course, is grounded in western Canadian culture and the teaching and learning context of a relatively small, undergraduate, teaching-focused university. No doubt there are many and varied understandings of and approaches to leadership itself and to leadership education or development around the globe, many of which are culturally distinct and specific. This particular leadership course, with its ontological/phenomenological model, while created by North American authors and, in this case, delivered in a North American university, could be delivered in a wide variety of contexts and cultures (as indeed it currently is) because its focus is on the being of being a human being who leads, one who ultimately creates change.

In some ways, the (ontological) transformative aspect of this leadership course aligns with Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. "As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, and because circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings." (Mezirow 2012, p.73). This course creates a new conversational domain for leader and leadership in which current understanding, received wisdom, and ongoing assumptions are challenged by linguistic distinctions created to open access to new ways of being. While this leadership course does not intentionally or explicitly replicate the ten phases Mezirow associates with transformative learning (p.86), by introducing students to a discourse designed to create cognitive dissonance with what they think they know for sure about themselves and leadership,

this course sets up something similar to Mezirow's disorienting dilemma.

The course challenges students' (and our own) implicit theories about leadership. These might include any or all of the following misconceptions about leadership as identified by Souba and Souba (2018): that positional power is the leader's most important lever; that leadership works by cause and effect to produce 'good' or 'bad' outcomes; that leadership is based on the objective facts; and that knowledge is the foundational pillar of effective leadership (p.196). The purpose is to have participants question their frames of reference and worldview, to try on new distinctions and practice them in their daily lives, building confidence in the shared discourse and its practice. The final phase in Mezirow's theory, reintegration to one's life with the new perspectives in play, is the ultimate objective of this leadership course and often occurs for students/participants as 'transformational'.

In addition to the Carney study mentioned above and discussed in some detail below, Sarah Tracy and her colleagues at Arizona State University have recently completed an experimental design to assess the efficacy of teaching leadership via a traditional, epistemological course as compared with this ontological approach (Adame, Tracy, Town, Towles, Razzante, Tietsort, Kamrath, Clark, Trembay, Pettigrew, Donovan, & Becker; in press). They note, following Friere (2000), that conventional approaches to leadership pedagogy often rely on the banking model of education, wherein "...information-rich teachers 'deposit' knowledge into the empty student 'accounts'" (p.6), what we commonly refer to as the model of knowledge transfer, as opposed to an ontological model (the model of development of *being*) deployed in this leadership course. The research team examined the most widely-use leadership textbooks in the U.S. and selected Northouse's (2016) *Leadership: theory and practice* for the conventional course. For the ontological course, they used this leadership course, *Being a Leader...*, and its slide deck textbook (Erhard, Jensen, Zaffron, & Echeverria 2019). "External auditors, blinded to class condition, evaluated video recordings of the simulation to determine each student's hireability for a job requiring leadership skills. Students from the [ontological leadership] course were selected as hireable ... more often than the conventional leadership class students. Qualitative data suggests that this may be due to differences in students' relational invitations, request-making, task ignition, collaborator enlistment, and forthrightness in apologizing for work undone." (abstract).

*Being a Leader and the Effective Exercise of Leadership* was delivered once or twice a year to members of the public (corporate leaders and the like; see <https://beingaleader.net/> for more information). In addition, it is currently being offered by 45 faculty around the world in their home institutions of higher education (Echeverria, May 20, 2019). As evidenced, research on this leadership course is in its early stages and this inaugural SoTL study on the leadership course as delivered to undergraduate students is meant to complement the quantitative work already undertaken in the Carney et al. pilot study.

Previously published in *The Journal Of Leadership Education* (Carney, Jensen, Ballarini, Echeverria, Nettleton, Stillwell, & Erhard, 2016, pp. 50-56), the Carney et al. pilot study (henceforth, "the Carney study") was the first foray into a systematic attempt at demonstrating the impact of this leadership course through participants' self-reported gains in their leadership effectiveness in four areas of their lives: Relationships, Vocation, Avocation, and Self.

“Average scores for participants’ effectiveness as leaders in the domains of Relationships, Vocational, Avocation, and Self increase from pre- to post-course by 1.9, 1.86, 1.64, and 1.85 respectively ( $p < 0.0001$ ).” (Carney et al., 2016, pp.50-51) The format for that study was an 8-day intensive course, offered to the general public, in Singapore in 2014.

In contrast, this SoTL study illustrates the impact of this same leadership course on students in a foundation General Education course at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada. One purpose of the present study was to replicate the use of a pre- and post-course survey instrument (modified in consultation with and used with the permission of the authors; included as Appendix 1) in three classes of undergraduate students in the leadership course as delivered in a semester-long format. The primary research question was whether the results from the Carney study would be replicated in an undergraduate population taking the leadership course for credit in a university. The other purpose of this study was to explore the potential impact of the course on participants through the surfacing of student voices in their written submissions for the course, principally in the final examination. The secondary research question concerned exploring the possibility of evidencing ontological change: how might we begin to do this? It is hoped that this foray into a SoTL study of this ontologically-focused leadership course may provide a starting point for similar investigations of ontological outcomes going forward.

This paper will delve deeply into the data and results of the pre- and post-course questionnaires, and will also introduce more evidence of the student voice as expressed in the course final exam.

## METHODS

### Study design

This mixed-methods study focused on the quantitative data produced in pre- and post-course questionnaires as well as other narratives of leadership capacity in the questionnaires and other written assignments for the course, notably the final exam papers.

The use of the pre- and post-course instrument was a prospective, comparative study using student participants as their own controls. Pre-course questionnaires were completed by students participating in the course on the first day of the course (at the start of the semester), and post-course questionnaires were completed by those students in attendance on the last day of the course (at the end of the semester). Of the 92 students who completed the course, five students missed the last class and completed questionnaire within a week of the course completion and before sitting the final exam.

All exams, written papers, and student submissions comprised potential data, but I chose to focus on the written responses in the final exam for two reasons: firstly, by then, the students had completed and experienced the course in its entirety; and secondly, it was my final opportunity to formally seek their comments on the course and its impact on them. In general, due to the acknowledged power imbalance between instructor/researcher and student/participants, our university does not generally provide ethical clearance to follow up with undergraduate students, especially in foundational courses, given the likelihood that they might encounter the instructor/researcher later in their program. My ethics clearance concluded at the end of the course and therefore, there was no possibility of following up with students later on,

even though I have run into several of them ongoingly and have received email communications from several others since then.

### Setting

The study was undertaken in an undergraduate teaching-focused university in western Canada in three separate undergraduate General Education classes of Community and Society. The research was approved by the Mount Royal University’s Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) and I, as the Principal Investigator, was the sole investigator and instructor in the three classes. Students were invited to consider the purpose and nature of the study prior to being given the opportunity to provide informed consent to use their data. Of the 92 students registered in the three classes by the end of the semester, 79.3% provided informed consent.

### Participants

Participants in the Carney leadership course were adults between the ages of 18 and 79 years; 78% had an undergraduate or master’s degree. By contrast, in this current study, students were in an undergraduate degree program; ages ranged from 18 years to mid-20s, with the exception of two who were over 40 years of age. Because the leadership course was offered as a foundational General Education course, students from a variety of faculties and programs participated; their previous years of academic experience at an institution of higher education varied from none (first year students) to three (fourth year students).

## THE PRE- AND POST-COURSE QUESTIONNAIRES

### Variables and data

All pre- and post-course data were self-reported on handwritten paper questionnaires which were completed in-person and in-class, with the exception of five students who missed the final class and completed the post-course questionnaire within a week thereof. Students self-reported their leadership capacity in the domains of Relationships, Academic Life, Avocation, and Self by means of circling a numerical response on a Likert-type scale from 1 (least effective) to 10 (most effective). Students were also asked for narrative responses to the following questions:

1. How do you define leadership?
2. Do you consider yourself a leader? Why or why not?

### Procedure

On the first day of the course, students were invited to complete the questionnaire (see Appendix 1 for the survey instrument) and submit it to me, the instructor, before the close of the class. The pre-course questionnaires were stored securely in my private office at the university after being photocopied for return to the students at the end of the course. The students had no access to their pre-course questionnaires throughout the rest of the term. Late in the semester, the research project was described to the students and their informed consent for the anonymized use of their responses was requested. On the last day of the course, the post-course questionnaire (the same instrument as was delivered at the start of the course) was administered in the same fashion. The original pre- and post-course questionnaires were returned to the students at the final exam; the photocopies became the principal data set for this study (after removing

questionnaires completed by students who did not provide their informed consent for use of their data).

### Data analysis

The analysis for this report includes quantitative results from the pre- and post-course questionnaires, as well as some narrative responses about definitions of leadership along with additional comments about whether they see themselves as leaders (or not) and why (not). The inclusion of narrative responses contributes an additional dimension to the Carney study and is supplemental to the goal to replicate the Carney study. For analysis of the quantitative data, the methods used by Carney et al. were replicated: change scores were calculated as the difference between self-ratings in the pre-course survey as compared with the post-course survey; both means and medians were derived. Statistically significant differences between mean scores from pre- to post-course were determined using Students t-test for paired samples with a 2-sided significance level of <math>0.0001</math>. To confirm the robustness of the analysis, a Wilcoxon Sign-Rank Test was also carried out. To account for the potential for response bias, we conducted sensitivity analyses, and assumed the value of “no change” from pre- to post-course scores for all non-respondents.

### RESULTS

Each of the three sections of the leadership course was fully subscribed at the start of the term with thirty-five participants, for a total of one hundred five students; ninety-two students were still registered at the end of the term and seventy-three provided informed consent for use of their data (a consent rate of 79.3%). There were 65 complete sets of pre- and post-course questionnaires (8 were missing one or the other); this represented 70.7% of all students still registered in the leadership course at the end of the term.

The average scores for the students’ self-ratings of leadership effectiveness in the domains of Relationships, Academic Life, Avocation, and Self increased by 1.54, 1.25, 1.51, and 1.75 respectively ( $p < 0.0001$ ). A sensitivity analysis was conducted for each domain to account for missing data from non-respondents. A value of “no change” from pre- to post-course was assumed for all non-respondents; a statistically significant increase in scores was maintained ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

Given that average scores can be skewed by outliers, median scores were also calculated. The median increase in median scores was 1.00, 1.00, 1.00, and 2.00 respectively.

Visually representing the data disaggregated by class, the improvement on mean scores from pre- to post-course questionnaire responses is obvious. As shown in Figure 1 below, in all four domains, and in all three classes of students, mean scores improved from the start of the course to the end of the course.

### Additional results from the Pre- and Post-Course Questionnaires

In an effort to capture the students’ understanding of leader and leadership at the start and end of the course, they were also asked two narrative questions which were on both the pre- and post-course questionnaires:

1. How do you define leadership?
2. Do you consider yourself a leader? Why or why not?

Definitions of leadership changed from pre- to post-course in all students’ responses. Below are three examples, one from each class, which represent typical shifts in student perceptions of their definition of leadership as a result of participating in this ontological leadership course (all names are pseudonyms).

**Table 1. Aggregated student self-assessment of leadership effectiveness**

	mean pre	mean post	difference	median pre	median post	median of diff.
Relationships	6.49	8.03	1.54	7.00	8.00	1.00
Academics	6.45	7.70	1.25	7.00	8.00	1.00
Avocation	6.04	7.55	1.51	6.00	8.00	1.00
Self	6.31	8.06	1.75	6.50	8.00	2.00

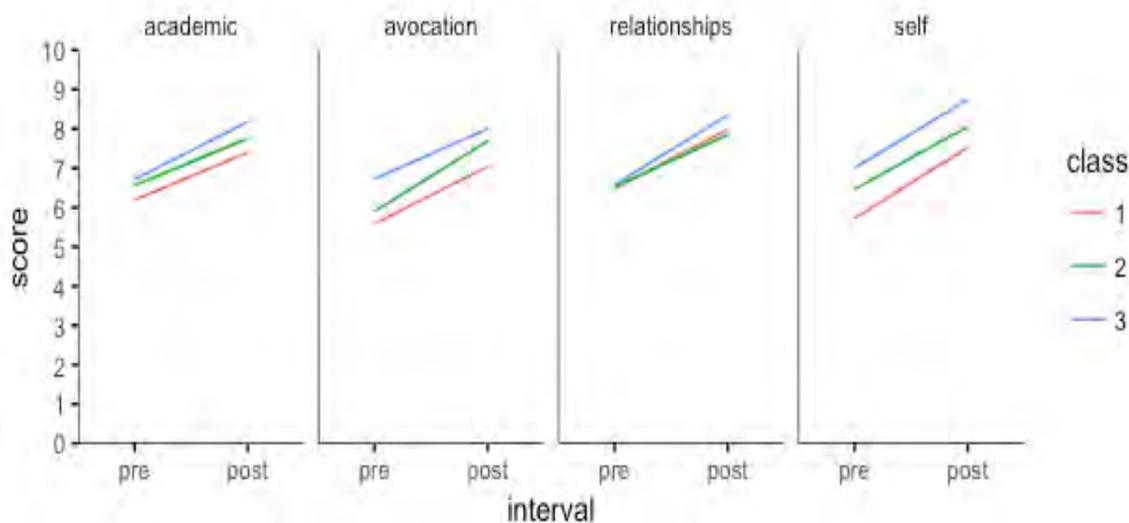


Figure 1. Change in mean scores disaggregated by class

Tom

pre-course: “The power to have complete control over external asset[s] and people.”

post-course: “The act of living and acting life beyond the restraints that one enforced upon oneself.”

Nancy

pre-course: “Taking control of a situation and being a positive influence on others”

post-course: “When someone uses specific actions or words to create a different future, either for themselves or for others. Being able to see things differently and know that you have a choice.”

Sarah

pre-course: “An authoritative figure that provides you with the opportunity to learn & grow without concrete limiting factors.”

post-course: “As creating/realizing a circumstance/situation in which you can help yourself or others to enter into a new world of opportunities.”

Table 2 illustrates responses to the question about whether or not the students defined themselves as leaders. They were also asked to comment on why (not) with some explanation or rationale.

	pre-course	post-course
yes	29 (43%)	53 (79%)
no	18 (27%)	7 (10.5%)
sometimes	20 (30%)	7 (10.5%)

By the end of the course, the number of students seeing themselves as leaders had increased to 53, up 36% from the 29 who saw themselves as leaders at the start of the course. This accompanied declines in the numbers of students who did not see themselves as leaders (to 7 from 18) and those who saw themselves as leaders only some of the time (to 7 from 20). It appears that the course impacted students’ perceptions of themselves as leaders.

In the pre-course questionnaires, students who did not consider themselves to be leaders noted their inability to handle people and situations in ways that resulted in the desired outcomes.

“I can’t stand up in front of people and tell them what to do or motivate them.”

“... I do still feel anxiety when I stand in large groups giving presentations. I have to learn to let go of what others may think of me.”

For students who could see themselves as leaders by the end of the course, the change was remarkable:

Jordan

pre-course: “No, I’ve never been particularly good at getting people to do anything (including myself). I much prefer to be told what to do than to tell other people what to do.”

post-course: “Yes, because if I want, I can choose to lead and create for myself or others greater opportunities.”

Annette

pre-course: “I would consider myself more of a follower and not a leader because I often find it difficult to make up my mind and make a decision. I find it easier to follow others instead of leading the group.”

post-course: “... I have now learned how to truly be a person of integrity, and learned that I do have a voice and the things I have to say are in fact valid.”

### Other narrative evidence

Ultimately, this leadership course defines leadership as the ability to make change – to have participants create futures that weren’t going to happen without their leadership. The final examination papers proved to be a rich source of student reflection on their experience of themselves, the course, and their leadership capacity at the end of the experience (the final exam question paper is Appendix 2). While we cannot know whether these students’ attitudes were sustained over time or not, there is certainly evidence that, at least at the moment of the final exam, many students felt empowered and changed, transformed in some way. And although some might suggest students will always write to the exam, that does not discount their ability, demonstrated in that exam, to use the distinctive concepts of the course and apply them to their own lives in very authentic ways, at least to this reader’s eyes. Indeed, that is the primary mechanism of ontological change provided by this particular leadership course: it introduces participants to a distinctive and disruptive discourse (termed a conversational domain), the use of which provides access to making change.

Below I present a thematic analysis of responses to the final exam questions as well as some representative student quotations from the final exam. Following Van Manen (1990), I used an iterative approach to reading and re-reading the final exams, selecting repeating themes, and trying to assess their relative importance to the writers.

### Themes emerging from the final exam

The final exam (see Appendix 2) was structured in two parts, A and B, each worth 50 marks. There was also a bonus question (optional and worth up to a maximum of 10 marks), not addressed in this paper. Sixty-eight students wrote the final exam; not all students answered all available questions, and six students did not respond to the bonus question.

Part A had but one question:

How do you understand the conversational domain we have developed in this course over the term? How do you live it, or not?

In response to Part A, most students talked about **integrity** (which, in this course is described as honoring your word: keeping it when possible and, when not, communicating immediately with everyone impacted and dealing with any impact). They most frequently mentioned their shock when they realized just how out of integrity they were prior to being introduced to this concept, and what a struggle it is for them to apply this model of integrity in their lives. Many also referred to how this practice of integrity improved their performance in relationships, at work, and in school. The second most referred-to concept was **authenticity**, with students questioning their authenticity and noting particular arenas in which their inauthenticity was obvious to them. Examples included getting by in school with as little effort as possible, gaining approval rather than really listening, and pretending to be generous while implicitly expecting something in return. The power of **context** was the third most-referenced concept, with students noting their default contexts (‘frames of reference’ in

more common parlance) at the start of the semester for school, for this course, for people and situations, and for themselves.

In response to this question, simple regurgitation of course concepts also occurred in eight students' responses (12%), where it was clear that students were responding in a rote manner to mention all aspects of the course, rather than focusing on how they have applied these concepts (or not) in their lives. I did not see this kind of rote response to any of the other questions.

Part B had three questions, and students were invited to choose and respond to two questions for 25 marks each. B1 was the most answered question, with over 60 responses (44%), while B2 garnered just over 40 responses (32%), and B3, just over 30 (24%).

B1 was:

As a result of participating in this course, has anything transformed in your prevailing contexts, your way of being, how you occur for yourself, and/or the future you are now living into?

The vast majority of students talked about **how they now occur for themselves differently** than they did at the start of the course, with many noting they now recognize that they have the power to choose and change their contexts, ways of being, and future if they like. Students noted that their way of being is not fixed and that they can choose to be, think, and behave differently than they have in the past. The second theme to emerge from these responses was the **distinction between default and created contexts** (the former being what automatically arises in the face of certain situations or persons and the latter being articulated by them to replace a default context). Several students gave powerful and moving examples of this recognition and shifting of contexts. One student talked about the default context of her life being given by her experience, at a very early age and over a long period, as a victim of child sexual abuse. She intentionally shifted that default context to one of being an authentic person who is creating her life (no longer at the effect of her past). The third theme to emerge was the difference in **the future** students now describe themselves as living into (full of possibilities, powerful, positive, with better performance in school, and better health). One student noted that they are living into uncertainty and another said that they are living into humility. One student said that the entire world has transformed for them since taking this course.

B2 was:

Discuss some of your ontological functional constraints, addressing rackets, life sentences, and winning formulas, both in terms of what you have discovered and what is now opening up for you.

Most students talked the most about **rackets** which, in this conversational domain, are persistent complaints that one has apparently tried to resolve (often many times), but they remain. The purpose of deploying the concept of a racket is to help participants recognize and release their own attachment to that persistent complaint: there is a pay-off they are receiving which needs to be distinguished, along with the costs of keeping that racket in place. Students recognized (and many had resolved) various rackets in a wide variety of domains: about themselves (I'm a complainer but do nothing to improve things; I sleep in but don't want to; my anxiety runs my life); about others (my roommate drives me crazy; my Mum doesn't understand me); and about situ-

ations (like doctor's appointments; school in general or particular courses). **Life sentences**, or core fears, were the next most-mentioned type of ontological constraint. There was a huge list, some examples of which included: I am stupid, not skilled; I'm not smart enough; I'm not pretty; I'm not good enough; I'm anxious; you can't trust people; and so on. Students noted that, by discovering these life sentences they have been operating with, they could start to release or relax some of the grip of them on their lives (one student noted that these ontological constraints will run her if undistinguished). Only four students (10% of respondents to this question) mentioned **winning formulas**, which are compensatory behaviours for the ways you thought you could never be (for example, if I'm not pretty, I'll be smart). I suspect that these winning formulas are more difficult to uncover or admit to. One student admitted that he became mean so that he could fit into the cool crowd; another said she focused on being intelligent in order to gain attention; the third said she became highly active so as to avoid failure; the last recognized that she isn't beautiful and therefore she became creative (she also admitted that this hasn't worked for her).

B3 was:

Write me a response to the question you would have liked for me to have asked you. (Be sure to write the question for me as well, thank you.)

With this question, I hoped to surface what the students thought was important about their experience in the leadership course, things they wanted to be sure that I heard (or read, more accurately). No two students answered this question in the same way, as you might imagine, but a few themes emerged. The most questions generated in one particular area (twelve, roughly a third) concerned **the course itself** (examples: What was the most powerful concept in the course? Would you have taken it had you known it was about leadership? Would you take it again? Have you recommended it to anyone? What did you enjoy most about the course?). The next most popular theme was **the future** (What are you going to do now? Where do you go from here? How do you plan on utilizing what you've learned in the future? What would have been your future if you hadn't taken the course?). Students also asked and answered questions about **the leadership project** itself (How do you think your leadership project will impact you in the next ten years? How did engaging in your leadership project affect any aspects of your life?).

## The students' voices

As I read the students' responses to the final exam questions, I was astonished at my experience that every single paper had one or more gems of insight which could contribute to that student's empowerment and growth in leadership capacity; I believe that my students were being and becoming different human beings with different experiences of themselves, their potential, and their experiences. Below are a few expressions of student voices, often expressed in the terminology of the course, which represent the range and impact of the leadership course on them.

It should be noted that students also undertook a leadership project over the course of the semester and made presentations on those projects: what worked and what didn't, what got in their way and what they learned, particularly about themselves. Projects covered a gamut of topics: from health and wellbeing, to relationships, to work, to academic life. Although the presentations were

assessed as part of the final course mark, artifacts from those presentations were not collected; some of the projects' results are alluded to by the students in these final exam comments.

"One of the biggest lessons I've learned about leadership is that it is not positional."

The realization that it does not require a position, authority, or decision-making rights for a person to exercise leadership offers students a tremendously empowering context within which to explore their own leadership potential. It provides access to them seeing themselves as potential leaders.

"Thanks to this course I am able to completely change my future in terms of my grades. I am now someone who works past their already always listenings and be of integrity; I began to achieve the grades I wanted to see, and with this change the future I was living into."

Anecdotally, we know that many students experience assessments of their academic performance as disempowering (even A- students long for the A or A+). However, one of the principal means of ontological learning (growth) is failure, and failure is not generally rewarded in academic contexts (where epistemological growth is measurable through grades). Rather, failure becomes the reason why students are actually excluded from future learning opportunities at worst, or 'punished' with lower grades, ultimately affecting their academic average or Grade Point Average (GPA). Imagine the kinds of conversations we might have with our students if they actually acknowledged and believed in their own power to affect their academic performance and had access to doing so.

"As I understand it now, leader and leadership are truly the acts of empowering yourself and becoming aware of the different things that hold you back from authentically choosing your actions and your life."

Increased self-awareness and locating the power to choose and create within yourself, rather than being at the effect of others and circumstances, provides access to overcoming what were formerly considered to be obstacles in your way.

"By entering this conversational domain, I have transitioned from "just another person", to a leader. I have realized through the powerful language in the conversational domain, that I have more potential than I ever understood!"

The course creates a powerful conversational domain (linguistic construct) within which the creative power of language is unleashed for students. They come to know and exercise their ability to create change through a powerful and intentional use of language.

"I now occur for myself differently too. When I look in the mirror I see a man capable of anything."

Would that most of our students left their university experience with this self-conception, rather than the more typical sense that they are not capable of much across a wide variety of contexts.

## DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this replication of the Carney study in this SoTL study was to contribute to the quantification of the impact of this leadership course on various cohorts of participants that differ demographically and differ in their motivation for taking

the course. The question was whether a similar, positive effect on self-assessment of leadership effectiveness across meaningful domains of activity would be evidenced by the end of the course. An additional purpose was to pilot a SoTL study which might contribute to an emerging body of knowledge about how ontological change might be effectively researched. While quantitative measurement may not be the most accurate approach to researching ontological change, it is a place to start and, in this project, I reached beyond quantitative data to present some phenomenological data from narrative responses.

These results indicate that – consistent with the public course examined in the Carney study – in an undergraduate, semester-based format, the leadership course produces statistically significant increases in students' self-reported leadership capacities across four domains: Relationships, Academic Life, Avocation, and Self. I further found that the narrative responses in the final exam reflect a fundamental shift in students' understanding of leader and leadership – a shift from *doing* to *being* – and a fundamental shift in their perception of themselves and their ability to be a leader and make change.

Consistent with the Carney study, the principal weaknesses of this study are: "(a) the reliance on self-report as the only measure of change, (b) the short-term outcome measure time-point, and (c) the lack of assessment of the reliability and validity of the instruments" (Carney et al., 2016, p.54). From an epistemological perspective, it may be accurate that self-ratings are insufficiently objective and verifiable to constitute strong research evidence. However, ontologically, some of the most powerful learning is acquired subjectively and can be reported both subjectively and objectively (through the comments and observations of others). In short, quantitative data of this nature may demonstrate that something has happened, but it doesn't reveal what or why or whether it is sustained over time. Only individual reports, qualitative data, whether from the subject themselves or from observers, can contribute the rich explanatory detail of what has transpired.

An example from a similar pre- and post-course self-assessment of prejudice may serve to make the point here. Undergraduate students were given self-assessment instruments to measure their level of prejudice against two target groups both pre- and post- the course, in which different teaching methods were aiming at reducing prejudice (Maurer & Keim 2018). The student co-researcher commented:

In one memorable instance, a classmate who had recorded a higher score (a more prejudiced score) on their ... pretest openly discussed how ... they had never taken the time to think about why they may be prejudiced ... and they realized their prejudice and had become more open-minded to be more inclusive ... and identify the other prejudices in their life. **The richness of the impact of the activity on this student may not be apparent from the quantitative results.** (Maurer & Keim 2018, p.9; emphasis added).

In short, there is a limit to what can be gleaned from quantitative data alone. How might we truly access 'the richness of the impact of the activity' for any participant? And how might we demonstrate ontological change or growth (transformation), rather than epistemological change or growth? These are interesting questions for SoTL practitioners to explore.

Other limits to the more qualitative aspects of this SoTL project include several opportunities I missed. I now believe that interviews with student participants after the course was

completed would have provided information of their experience abstracted from the final exam. The rich potential of data associated with their leadership projects, from start to presentation, was not captured in submitted assignments which would have provided further information on the students' development both epistemologically and ontologically as the course progressed. Several other faculty delivering this leadership course elsewhere in the world require the submissions of regular, structured reflections; that kind of data might also have proved valuable in teasing out any changes in students' language, thought, and ways of being.

Another salient question to ask is to what extent do individuals' *subjective experiences* of themselves as leaders literally generate themselves as agents of leadership and change? At least at the point of the final exam, students saw their own capacity for leadership having been developed through the practice of this conversational domain and many saw evidence in the successful completion of their leadership projects. In the case of this particular research project, our research ethics did not permit ongoing inquiry of students in a longitudinal study. Furthermore, because we offer the leadership course to faculty and staff as professional development (that is to say, not for credit), our Registrar has informed us that we cannot offer it to students at the same time for credit. Consequently, I cannot replicate this study in student classes at this point in time and for the foreseeable future. Carney et al.'s ongoing research into the public deliveries of this leadership course does include longer-term responses, however, which data is currently in analysis.

Nonetheless, future research about the impact of this leadership course on students could continue to explore its impact on individual participants from a qualitative perspective as they move through the course itself. Students' stories, their changing views of themselves, and their changing behaviors as a result of those changing views points towards a potentially meaningful suggestion for a change in perspective or focus on educational outcomes: from an emphasis on epistemology (the transfer of knowledge) to the inclusion of, if not an emphasis on, ontology

(the development of being). In a world where information is now accessible at the click of the mouse or the tap of a digit, this shift in attention to the *being* of our students (specifically towards their empowerment rather than what's wrong with their performance) has the power to transform their experience of education and of themselves. Such transformation is impactful, promising, and inspirational.

In my introduction to this article, I noted the powerful assumption under which many of us still operate exclusively: that if we can demonstrate that our students leave our courses with increased knowledge and skills, we have fulfilled the educational mission. What if the scholarship of teaching and learning could reveal to us evidence of the value of focusing on both ontological and epistemological outcomes in our approaches to education? What might become available to us as teachers if that horizon was opened up to us? More importantly, what might be available to our students if that horizon was opened up to them?

Finally, to close with a connection which is well beyond the scope of this pilot SoTL study, the dominance of the epistemological paradigm, not only in our educational approaches but in our western culture, makes it difficult to face many of the challenges made to and within the contemporary university. The thorny problems of indigenization, diversity and inclusion, and the balance of free speech with academic freedom, to name but three, appear to be irresolvable if the different perspectives on these issues remain grounded solely in epistemologically valid evidence. Not only does that exclusive and limited positioning of knowledge deny the validity of other ways of knowing and being, but the way of being required to uphold that limited view necessarily thwarts real communication except from that epistemological perspective. This creates an artificial barrier between epistemology and ontology, leaving us inaccessible to others while others remain inaccessible to us. This artificial barrier between ways of knowing and ways of being explains some of the limitations extant in our current educational paradigm grounded predominantly in epistemology. It could be both/and, rather than either/or.

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## APPENDIX 1: THE PRE- AND POST-COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE [SPACE COLLAPSED

### BEING A LEADER AND THE EFFECTIVE EXERCISE OF LEADERSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you define leadership?

2. Do you consider yourself a leader? Why or why not?

Considering the potential of leadership in the categories of your Academic Life, Relationships, Avocation/Recreation/Creativity, and Self, please indicate any area within each category that is important to you in taking this course. For each indicated area, please rate yourself as a leader.

#### Academic Life

Please identify important areas of your academic life that require or could benefit from your being a leader; ideally an area you will focus on in taking this course.

\_\_\_ grades

\_\_\_ learning

\_\_\_ skills development

\_\_\_ relationships with instructors

\_\_\_ relationships with student colleagues

\_\_\_ other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate yourself as a leader in this situation by circling one number below. That is, to what extent are you currently effectively bringing leadership to these circumstances? Please use a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being least effective and 10 being most effective.

1 -- 2 -- 3 -- 4 -- 5 -- 6 -- 7 -- 8 -- 9 -- 10

#### Relationships

Please identify important areas of your relationships that require or could benefit from your being a leader; ideally an area you will focus on in taking this course.

\_\_\_ family

\_\_\_ friends

\_\_\_ work colleagues

\_\_\_ creating a relationship with a "significant other"

\_\_\_ other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate yourself as a leader in this situation by circling one number below. That is, to what extent are you currently effectively bringing leadership to these circumstances? Please use a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being least effective and 10 being most effective.

1 -- 2 -- 3 -- 4 -- 5 -- 6 -- 7 -- 8 -- 9 -- 10

**Avocation/Recreation/Creativity**

Please identify important areas of your avocation/recreation/creative activity that require or could benefit from your being a leader; ideally an area you will focus on in taking this course.

- productivity or growth in this activity
- relationships with others in this activity
- a specific project or accomplishment in this activity
- making a difference with this activity
- designing something new; creating new possibilities and/or a new future in this activity
- other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate yourself as a leader in this situation by circling one number below. That is, to what extent are you currently effectively bringing leadership to these circumstances? Please use a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being least effective and 10 being most effective.

1 -- 2 -- 3 -- 4 -- 5 -- 6 -- 7 -- 8 -- 9 -- 10

**Self**

Please identify important aspects of your Self that require or could benefit from your being a leader; ideally an area you will focus on in taking this course.

- health
- satisfaction
- self-expression
- other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate yourself as a leader in this situation by circling one number below. That is, to what extent are you currently effectively bringing leadership to these circumstances? Please use a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being least effective and 10 being most effective.

1 -- 2 -- 3 -- 4 -- 5 -- 6 -- 7 -- 8 -- 9 -- 10

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For any of the areas you identified above, please describe what you would like to accomplish as a result of taking this course. If you need more paper, please ask me.

## APPENDIX 2: GNED XXXX FINAL EXAM QUESTION PAPER

This final exam is in two parts: Part A is worth 50 marks and Part B is worth 50 marks.

Please write in complete sentences, answering the question(s) asked as fully and clearly as you can.

### Part A (50 marks)

How do you understand the conversational domain we have developed in this course over the term? How do you live it, or not?

### Part B (choose 2 questions for 25 marks each)

1. As a result of participating in this course, has anything transformed in your prevailing contexts, your way of being, how you occur for yourself, and/or the future you are now living into?
2. Discuss some of your ontological functional constraints, addressing rackets, life sentences, and winning formulas, both in terms of what you have discovered and what is now opening up for you.
3. Write me a response to the question you would have liked for me to have asked you. (Be sure to write the question for me as well, thank you.)

### BONUS QUESTION (up to 10 marks)

Compare the unique pedagogical approach in this course (the reading aloud of a slide deck textbook) to instructional approaches you have experienced in other courses. Did it assist you in your learning about this conversational domain in any way or for any reason, or did it interfere with your learning in any way or for any reason?