

Using Action Research To Improve Tier II Leadership Preparation:

A Play-within-the-Play

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Abstract: This paper recounts one instructor's importing action research into teaching to improve a Tier II Professional Administrative Services Credential program at a public university in California. The state and local context is described, why and how the action research was conducted, and the lessons that emerged about what advanced students need, prefer, and value are included. The findings of this case are of interest to leadership preparation faculty in general, and specifically to those faculty redesigning credential programs to compete with the growing number of newly authorized non-university credential paths.

Prologue

Student evaluation comments BEFORE using action research into teaching:

The whole Tier II program is a huge burden for anyone who is working as a full time administrator; I am participating in this course because it is required by the state; content needs to be presented more practi-

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cally and feasibly; in attempting to accommodate the needs of the students, the focus of the class was compromised; changes in plans, assignments, directions and due dates were confusing; it needs more structure. (Fall 2001)

Student evaluation comments AFTER using action research into teaching:

The course is very helpful and useful; the class provides many opportunities for observation, reflection and constructive criticism of my own practice; the flexibility to alter expectations to adjust to the demands and needs of the learning community is greatly appreciated; we continually see evidence that a lot of organization, thought and consideration went into every aspect of our instructor's planning; the year has been a shot in the arm for me; it has had a tremendous impact on my actions and my decisions for the future. (Spring 2003)

The contrasting student evaluation comments depicted above are part of an ongoing action research project to find ways of improving student engagement in a year-long, cohort-based professional level (Tier II) leadership preparation program at a public university in California. This paper describes the state and local context for teaching, why and how action research was conducted about teaching, what was learned, and how what was learned was used to make adjustments in teaching and in the overall design of the Tier II credential program at the university. This case study is a *play-within-the-larger-play* of a department's commitment to attract and engage credential candidates in powerful learning consistent with the department mission to prepare *bold, socially responsible leaders* (BSRLs) who will transform the world of schooling.

Do it better, make it better, improve even if it isn't broken, because if we don't, we can't compete with those who do. (Masaaki Imai, 1986)

Act I: State Policy and Departmental Context

Accredited leadership preparation programs in California operate amidst a swirl of complex, simultaneous forces including: a shortage of principal candidates; a severe and continually worsening funding crisis; an unending torrent of district, state and national mandates to implement prescribed testing, accountability, curriculum, and reform initiatives; and, recent adoption of alternative, non-university-based Tier II credential programs. These dynamic realities combine to create a default definition of educational administration as largely a management and implementation function, and of the corresponding preparation for such leadership as relatively expedient and reductionist.

In this statewide context, the Department of Educational Leadership at the university in this study consciously chose to take a position against the prevailing mechanistic assumptions about educational leadership and leadership preparation. Department members collaboratively developed and tenaciously held a shared definition of BSRL as well as an evolving theory of action about how educators learn to lead (Szabo, Storms, Rodriguez & Gonzales, 2003; Szabo et al., 2002, 2001). In such a context, how can the department and its instructors create programs that continue to attract prospective and continuing school leaders while maintaining the commitment to BSRL? This case study is about one instructor's exploration of this question, and begins with a description of the assumptions driving the instructor's teaching.

The account which follows takes place in this new landscape of heightened market-driven dynamics. The description of research in this paper sits within a larger story that concerns the future of a university department of educational leadership which chooses to swim up stream against the prevailing current of mechanistic assumptions about leadership and leadership preparation. The long-term question becomes: *In such a context, how can the department create programs which continue to attract prospective school leaders while maintaining its commitment to BSRL?* The story told here zooms in on this overall landscape to describe one instructor's exploration of this question, *kaizen* was embraced through action research.

Act II: Teaching Philosophy and Theoretical Perspectives

Constructivism and Anti-Racist Leadership

Every leadership preparation program in California rests, whether implicitly or explicitly, on at least two interrelated sets of assumptions about: (1) the *kind of school leaders* California needs; and (2) *how educators learn to lead*. Consequently, department programs are guided by a heart-felt, research-based commitment to constructivist teaching and learning, anti-racist leadership and systems thinking (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Lambert, 1998; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1992; Szabo & Lambert, 2002).

The department faculty in this action research case study continuously refines an explicit vision of effective leadership, BSRL, as well as a set of ideas about how educators learn to become such leaders (Szabo et al., 2002). Faculty members take as given that educators are unlikely to close the achievement gap and create more equitable learning results for students of color in K-12 schools until those of us who train leaders support them in new, more systemic ways of thinking, learning, acting

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and leading (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Meier, 1995; Miron, 1996). Because the faculty in this action research believe that leadership, learning and teaching are strikingly similar and interconnected, the programs in the department aim to help students entertain new ways of seeing and thinking about the world of schooling, ways that surface hidden assumptions, challenge the status quo, create disequilibria, stir emotions, and generate a desire to become the lead learners in their own educational setting (Fullan, 1999; Hilliard, 1991; Howard, 1995; Lambert, 1998; Reeves, 2004; Weissglass, 1991).

Systems Thinking and Action Research

The very substance of effective educational leadership revolves around the skillful design and use of systems for adult learning and continuous improvement (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). Accordingly, class learning activities and assignments were designed as a nest of *plays-within-the-play* focused on leadership and learning systems. The instructor demonstrated strategies and engaged school leaders in the types of leadership activities that was hoped they would employ in their own schools (Fullan, 2001; Szabo, 1996). In addition, action research (i.e., a system of collaborative inquiry and action) was emphasized as a key skill of educational leaders and, simultaneously was modeled as a tool for improving the course along the way (Reeves, 2004; Stringer, 2004).

Improving teaching and program design over time involves close observation of the reciprocal purposes, needs, and learning style preferences among students in the cohort, between the cohort group and the instructor, and between individual students and the instructor (Szabo & Lambert, 2002). Action research methods are an ideal way to observe, collect and analyze student comments, responses and feedback about the course as a basis for identifying where adjustments may be needed (Mills, 2003; Patton, 2002; Stringer, 2004). Moreover, the instructor in this action research case study was explicit with students about why feedback data were being collected, and how this ongoing cycle emulates what effective collaborative leaders do to foster lasting school improvement (Calhoun, 1994; Lambert et al., 2002; Lee, Storms, Camp, & Bronzini, 2002). In order to strengthen teaching continuously, the instructor was also interested in observing indicators that demonstrated students were growing over time, both *as learners* within the cohort context and *as collaborative leaders and systems thinkers* at their sites (Lee & Storms, 1999).

Act III: Methodology and Findings

Focus Questions

The objective of the ongoing action research was to find ways of continuously improving student engagement in the department's year-long, cohort-based administrative credential programs. The Tier II credential program involved 25 students who were guided by one instructor through a nine-month (24 quarter units) set of integrated leadership development and learning experiences. During the first two years of the Tier II courses, student evaluation responses revealed that some students remained relatively resistant or apathetic despite attempts to be flexible and make adjustments in the conduct, expectations and design of the program. Accordingly, the following central questions guided the ensuing action research:

- ◆ How and why do student evaluation responses vary?
- ◆ What adjustments in instructional practices and in program design generate greater student excitement and engagement in learning activities?

Data Sources and Uses

Like many institutions, the university collected and summarized anonymous student course evaluations each quarter for each instructor's courses. One part of the evaluation was a set of seventeen bubble-in questions, each scored on a four-point Likert scale. The other part of the student evaluation was open-ended comments about the course and instructor.

For the purposes of this study, the quantitative data included the mean of the scores for all seventeen of the Likert scale questions. However, actual use of this data by the instructor involved perusal of each individual question, with particular attention paid to the 4-5 items with the lowest mean scores. This analysis helped to guide the reading and analysis of the written comments to discover details, reasons, and specific needs related to the *red flag* items. In addition, several times per quarter student comments and feedback about what was working/helpful and what was not working were collected.

Within-year analysis of the data focused on feedback about feelings, tone, content, materials, and workload. End-of-year analysis revolved around returning to the year's accumulated data to identify key assumptions and core design features which needed to be re-examined and adjusted for the subsequent year.

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Findings

Action research for this case, revolved around three variables that the instructor wanted to impact and change for the better: (1) instructional practices within a given cohort year; (2) course design features from year-to-year; and (3) the quality of student experiences as reflected in student evaluations and feedback.

Changes in Instructional Practice within a Given Cohort Year

By analyzing quantitative and written student responses, the assumptions about the degree to which adult learners need flexibility, latitude, minimal structure, and maximal resources and materials were found to be in error. Accordingly, as the year progressed, the instructor became more explicit and detailed about assignments, requirements, and class activities; provided more time for sharing and networking on self-defined topics; and reduced the quantity of handouts and enrichment resources. The students' spring quarter feedback showed marked improvement and student comments expressed appreciation for the adjustments. The following student responses illustrate the changing trend from fall to spring:

(Fall 2001) Needs more structure, more practical leadership skills; seems like more theory than practice; did not stick to plans; assignment directions and due dates were confusing.

(Spring 2002) Great job of organizing the course; I received a lot of good useful leadership information from this course; this course has prepared me for the future in ways that are invaluable, tangible, and specific.

Table 1 provides an illustration of changes made in selected instructional practices between Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 with the same cohort of students.

Changes in Course Design Features from Year-to-Year

The two selected course design features illustrated in Table 2 changed in major ways from year-to-year in response to student feedback. The general trend and pattern of change from 2001 to 2003 reflected a seeming paradox: the need for clear, streamlined structures and, simultaneously, a desire for greater autonomy and individualization. For example, the Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), small groups of cohort members who met periodically outside of class time to support, advise and challenge each other, evolved from relatively amorphous and low-accountability groups, to more standardized facilitation and specificity of content, to self-run groups built on personal relationships, mutual accountability,

Table 1
Impact of Student Feedback on Instructional Practices
Within One Cohort Year

Fall 01 Selected Instructional Practices	Spring 02 Changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Assignments relatively open-ended with flexibility to “make it what you want it to be” ◆ Often move off the written agenda to pursue issues of interest ◆ Small group work structured by instructor ◆ Many handouts and supplementary materials as <i>extras</i> for personal reference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ More focus and definition of assignments and activities ◆ Fewer <i>in-the-moment</i> revisions; flexibility reserved for pressing issues ◆ More class time for sharing and networking on self-defined topics ◆ Cut down on number of handouts and class materials selected for specific purposes

and self-defined content within a set of clear guidelines. By 2003, the CFGs became simultaneously more autonomous, more rigorous, more accountable and more personally engaging. A comparison of student comments between Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 follows:

(Fall 2001) I would appreciate a more practical curriculum; great—but too open-ended; did not stick to plans; she shows concern and caring for the students, but is too controlling; we aren’t given the considerations of guiding our own learning.

(Spring 2002) Great course; very helpful and useful; the CFG strategy is wonderful! I’ve learned a lot from my peers; well organized and flexible; increased my knowledge of key issues faced by a leader.

Table 2 provides examples of how major course features evolved over a period of three years to ensure that these program elements would better meet student needs and serve the intended learning purposes.

Changes in the Quality of Student Evaluations and Feedback

Table 3 summarizes trends in student evaluation and feedback over time. The table displays data patterns in student written comments and on mean scores taken from the university evaluation survey. Column I of Table 3 shows how comments and scores changed from fall to spring quarter for the same cohort of students. Column II shows how these data changed from the Fall 2001 cohort group to the Fall 2003 cohort group. Overall, Table 3 depicts five kinds of comparisons in student responses over time. In each case the pattern shows a clear trend toward improvement in the course as perceived by students. The

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Table 2
Impact of Student Feedback on Selected Course Design Features Across Three Successive Fall Quarter Cohorts (Fall 01, 02, & 03)

Fall 01 Course Design Features	Fall 02 Changes	Fall 03 Changes
<i>Critical Friends Groups (CFG)</i>	<i>Critical Friends Groups (CFG)</i>	<i>Critical Friends Groups (CFG)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Self-chosen trios; ◆ Site visits required; ◆ No group norms; ◆ No formal facilitator; ◆ Accountability = write an open-ended journal entry for each meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Assigned, five per group; ◆ One “expert” facilitator leads each CFG for the year; ◆ Facilitator works with instructor to plan content; ◆ Groups develop norms as needed; ◆ Accountability = instructor meets regularly with group facilitators; and write a CFG log to reflect on the value of each meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Assigned, six per group; ◆ Groups self-facilitated; ◆ Different group member in charge of each meeting; ◆ Develop own group norms at first meeting; ◆ Develop own content and activity plans within guidelines developed by whole class; ◆ Accountability = to each other; also write CFG log
<i>Readings</i>	<i>Readings</i>	<i>Readings</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 5 required texts for the year ◆ 1 large reader for the year ◆ Same readings for everyone; ◆ Accountability = class discussion and journals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 3 required texts for the year ◆ 1 large reader for the year ◆ One book of your choice and share with CFG ◆ Write a brief critical review of book you choose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ No required texts for the year ◆ 3 smaller readers, 1 per quarter ◆ Book Fair at 2nd class meeting; instructor & students bring books, build list of recommended books ◆ Read 2 books of your choice & share with CFG; ◆ Write brief critical review for CFG & for the end-of-quarter notebook

following is a sample of the change in student comments from Fall 2001 to Spring 2003:

Fall 2001: The whole Tier II program is a huge burden for anyone who is working as a fulltime administrator; I am participating in this

Table 3
How Student Feedback Changed (Within and Across Cohort Years)
As Indicated by Stringer's Index of Engagement (Stringer, 2004)

<i>Written Evaluation Responses</i>	Within One Cohort Year, Fall to Spring		Across Cohort Years						
	Fall 01	Spring 02	Fall 01	Fall 03					
Excitement	Several	Most	Several	Most					
Interest	Many	Many	Many	Many					
Apathy	Many	Few	Many	Few					
Resistance	Few	One	Few	One					
<i>Student Responses to University's Evaluation Survey</i>	Within One Cohort Year			Across Cohort Years					
	Fall 01	Spring 02		F01	F02	F03	S01	S02	S03
Mean Average of 17 Questions on the Survey (1= Outstanding; 4= Poor)	1.82	1.68		1.82	1.59	1.51	2.13	1.68	1.43

course because it is required by the State; content needs to be presented more practically and feasibly; in attempting to accommodate the needs of the students, the focus of the class was compromised; changes in plans, assignments, directions and due dates were confusing; it needs more structure.

Spring 2003: The course is very helpful and useful; the content is very well aligned with the new professional standards for California administrators; her flexibility to alter her expectations to adjust to the demands and needs of the learning community is greatly appreciated; we continually see evidence that a lot of organization, thought and consideration went into every aspect of our instructor's planning; this year has had a tremendous impact on my actions and my decisions for the future; the class provides many opportunities for observation,

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reflection and constructive criticism of my own practice; the year has been a shot in the arm for me.

Act IV: Enduring Themes in Student Evaluations

The review of three years of data conducted in the summer of 2003 revealed several common themes and variations in student evaluation responses, which emerged in differing proportions among the three cohorts of students. Since these themes and variations in student responses endured across three years, particular attention was paid to identifying and understanding them as a precursor to adjusting the course in ways which anticipated and accommodated this consistent range of student needs. For example, each year it is expected that students will differ dramatically with regard to feelings, attitudes, assumptions and preferences about the following issues:

The Legitimacy of California's Tier II Credential Requirement

Some school leaders never questioned the wisdom of the requirement to return to a university program for leadership preparation and training; these folks arrived relatively open-minded and ready to assume a learning stance. Others felt dragged to the program by dint of an unnecessary, even disrespectful, State requirement. A few seemed never to surmount this attitude, participating passively with minimal personal investment.

The Interdependent Nature of Cohort Membership, Cohort Learning, and Site Leadership

American culture, workplaces and schools are rife with an ethos of independence, competition, and pursuit of individual goals. It was no surprise that many students arrived seeking personal knowledge for individual action. For many, the program's emphasis and practice of interdependent learning, teaching and leadership was both novel and uncomfortable.

The Appropriate Role of the Instructor and Role of the Student

The default definition of the role of the student in higher education was one of passively receiving knowledge from the instructor based solely on the instructor's goals. Some students were resistant to self-assessment, setting their own learning goals, and participating in the social construction of knowledge with fellow cohort members.

Willingness to Take Risks and to Experience Discomfort as a Learner in the Cohort

The role of passive learner was found to be inherently more comfort-

able and less threatening than that of actively shaping and participating in the goals and conduct of the course. Moreover, this Tier II program was about transformational leadership and learning and thus, by its very nature, asked individuals to question, take risks, and change and modify their ideas in the context of open dialogue.

Tolerance for Complexity, Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Developing the habit of reflective practice called on leaders and learners to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity in a world of schooling, which increasingly expects leaders to provide closure, certainty, and simple and efficient solutions. Students differed in their sense of safety and readiness to let go of certainty. Some had a strong preference for predictability and linearity in every aspect of the course, while others were comfortable with a more emergent, flexible course design.

The Types of Content Deemed Most Relevant and Useful

Initial expectations regarding content ranged from a desire to acquire discrete knowledge, concrete facts and practical know-how to a desire to explore more global and abstract topics and skills such as systems thinking, questioning assumptions and exploring new ideas. Concrete, sequential, management and efficiency-orientations to content were initially the most pressing issues on the minds of most full-time, over-worked administrators. Some took more easily than others to the transition to an emphasis on leadership and process skills over management.

Each of these thematic variations required meeting the students *where they live*, acknowledging and respecting the stance each individual brought to the cohort, and finding safety zones and practice fields where initial, comfortable stances may be set aside for a time to try out alternative assumptions and approaches.

Act V: Crosscurrents and Lessons

The themes described above present challenging crosscurrents, enduring tensions surrounding instructor assumptions, design choices and instructional practices. As a result of valuing and using student feedback, three questions emerged as central to improving teaching emerged as follows: (1) How can a course be designed that accommodates varying student needs? (2) How are common destinations selected? and, (3) During the journey, how does an instructor navigate through the crosscurrents of students' differing preferences and goals? In struggling with these questions, several insights emerged.

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Relationships

Leadership, teaching and learning are inextricably grounded in relationships. Reciprocal relationships generate the energy, direction and sustenance for individuals and groups to learn their way through obstacles and challenges. As relationships improve, leadership, teaching and learning activities are imbued with greater energy, direction, creativity and shared commitment. Not surprisingly, attention to developing and nurturing personal relationships and interdependent learning activities becomes the instructor's highest priority.

Listening

Leadership, teaching and learning are also fundamentally about listening. Listening for evidence of engagement, challenge, and growth, as well as for apathy, resistance, boredom and unproductive discomfort (Stringer, 2004). The instructor becomes increasingly explicit about the value of feedback and critique; about what is being observed and heard; and about what, specifically was changed or done in response to the change implemented.

Modeling and Practicing

Students and faculty are simultaneously co-inquirers and co-consumers of what is discovered about what is working and what is not working. Modeling and then providing opportunities for students to practice the modeled behavior is an essential teaching strategy. For example, projects require students to model relationship-building processes in their own site leadership work. These site practice experiences are shared, debriefed, and critiqued in CFGs, which becomes another practice field for continuous improvement.

Surfacing Assumptions

When tempted to whine about "students who just aren't getting it," the instructor needs to stop and check the assumption that it is the student's responsibility to have *gotten it*, rather than the instructor's responsibility to have found a way to support their *getting it*. Supporting leaders to stop to check assumptions about the causes of the events they are facing is one of the most dramatic ways to help them find more effective action strategies. By the middle of the program, instructors should be listening for students to ask one another questions like, "Why do you think that keeps happening? And what is that incident a case of?"

Distinguishing Productive vs. Erosive Discomfort

Instructors need to beware of prematurely adjusting or over-adjusting teaching strategies when a strong complaint is heard or a student's acute discomfort is observed. Instructors need to learn to accept their own discomfort in the face of resistance and, consequently to delay responding with adjustments until they have paused to observe, ask questions, and understand the reason and extent of the problem.

The Search for Structural Balance

Underlying nearly all of the feedback is a central tension between the needs of those who want more clarity, certainty, and predictability surrounding their learning, versus those who enjoy the explorations and detours, which often arise in a constructivist-learning environment. The trick is to discover ways to provide an overall course design, a structure of purposes, content, processes and expectations, which better meets the needs of those on both sides of this teeter-totter. The structure of quarterly assignments in the reflection notebook, self-organized and facilitated CFGs, and the move to reading choices rather than required texts are examples of such *teeter-totter-tolerant* strategies. As one student commented on an end-of-year feedback sheet in Spring 2003, "You used the course assignments to meet each of us where we were, and hold us tenderly."

Epilogue

In summary, through systematic, ongoing use of student feedback, a great deal was learned about what matters most in teaching. It was learned, for example, that while instructors cannot please all the people all the time, more of the people can be pleased more of the time, while continuing to challenge students to take risks, persevere through discomfort, speak hard truths, question their own assumptions, and grow as bold, socially responsible leaders.

Enrollment trends to date suggest that university-based credential programs continue to attract the interest, participation and commitment of a new generation of school leaders and the support of their prospective employers. It is hoped that this *play-within-the-play* action research case study and ongoing, explicit, and transparent action research about the effectiveness of teaching may be one contributing factor to extend this trend.

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