

Advancing Through the Murky Waters of Self-Leadership

Kevin L. Splichal
Fort Hays State University
Hays, KS, USA

Abstract

Instruction in a 100% online environment is lonely work. Couple the online environment with remote instruction and the result, while not blatantly obvious to the outside observer, contributes to faculty attrition, burnout, and sub-par performance. Even prior to the pandemic, which exacerbated these concerns, faculty burnout and isolation has increased [1]. What have we learned about leadership, online instruction, student relationships, and self-care in the remote world? What strategies are faculty using to combat the destruction of a professional collaborative culture in the work environment? Additionally, student - faculty relationships in an online course are brutally difficult to establish, compared to those in a face-to-face setting, compounding the effect on faculty performance and mental fortitude. Finally, the administration fails to recognize or address the impact this is having on the culture of the department, which contributes to faculty attrition, burnout, loneliness, and reduced effort [2]. This narrative presents the author's perspective on the root causes of loneliness in a 100% online graduate program in a midwestern rural state university and offers insight into combating loneliness by advancing through the murky waters of self-leadership.

Keywords: online instruction, remote work, leadership, self-leadership, relationships, self-care

1. Introduction

What did we learn from the pandemic?

Human beings are resilient. Challenges, trials, and tribulations can be conquered, and conquered triumphantly! Yes. All of this is true. There are numerous examples throughout history which bolster this fact. But we also learned that human beings need other human beings, creating a robust dynamic that promotes mental resilience. Our skills, talents, and successes are compounded when working together. Experiences are shared, deconstructed, and valued. We celebrate victories and console in the failures with mutually accepted values and purpose [3]. The intersubjective nature of this communal proposition, whereby we encourage others to take part in the subjective analysis of oneself and share it with others,

is where personal narratives can be prescribed. These narratives are reflexive in nature. Being reflexive is a process that not only asks us to reflect upon past events but pushes us to criticize and subjectify our own thinking of those events in order to grow [4]. Alternatively, isolation caused panic, fear, anxiety, depression, and loneliness during the pandemic. The levels to which these symptoms impact certain individuals can be connected to numerous factors such as a person's education level, support systems, spousal relations, children, and more [5]. Regardless of your position, title, status, salary, or work environment, the effect continues to linger. McMurtrie [1] emphasized, "Burnout is a problem in academe even in the best of times. Shrinking budgets, growing workloads, and job insecurity in a profession where self-sufficiency is both expected and prized put many faculty members at risk before Covid-19 placed higher education on even shakier footing." Coupling these examples with an individual's self-efficacy, personal and social factors such as divorce, chaos, or a simple lack of communication and interaction, can result in significant psychological loneliness [6].

2. Loneliness

There has been little traction with research connected to higher education faculty loneliness. Burnout and attrition seem to lead the field of research in this regard. It is worth clarifying the fact that loneliness has many psychological and physical interpretations. One's loneliness could be felt from the lack of companionship and physical touch. Loneliness could be felt by the absence of psychological stimulation achieved through scholarly discourse. When analyzing what it means to be lonely, I can only describe what it means to me, in my situation, in my environment, and in my mind. Pinar, et al., [7] stated that the course of one's life should encompass a shift from biographical text to autobiographical text. This means that we must avoid the simple act of reflection on one's life through biographical text and explore the deeper meaning of one's life through a reflexive approach in autobiographical processes, an excavation of self. Coles [8] clarifies,

"How to encompass in our minds the complexity of

some lived moments of life? You don't do that with theories. You don't do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story."

As a graduate faculty member in a department of over 20 full-time faculty members, and twice that number of adjuncts, loneliness seems far from an area of concern, yet I am lonely. I am not referring to my life outside of work. I am a father to three adult children, and a grandfather for the first time. My family absolutely defines the meaning of my life. Two of my children are married, which means I also have a wonderful son-in-law and daughter-in-law. There is nothing that brings more joy to my life than sharing in their lives. I also own a 160-acre farm where I revel in total solitude. It offers a profound, meaningful connection with nature where I can physically and psychologically recharge. Yet work at the university has become lonely. Work, like with many, is a large part of my life but it contradicts and battles against the joy I find in all other parts of my life. There is real disharmony, which clearly affects my performance as a scholar, teacher, and member of the university community.

Aristotle said if you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development [9]. I hope to describe the factors that lead to my loneliness, why it developed, and where to go from here. I am reminded of Schon's [10] reflective practitioner where he described the murky waters. At times we may be engulfed in the murky waters with little light at the end. Emergence is not only necessary but required for proper growth and joy in our lives.

3. 100% Online Instruction

Developing a rigorous and meaningful online course tied to objectives, outcomes, standards, and licensure is not easy. Kranzow [11] offers guiding questions for assessing the quality and effectiveness of an online course: Is there an avenue for open communication and discourse? Do online activities offer opportunities for reflection, interaction, and problem solving? Are there mechanisms for frequent peer interactions? Has consideration been given for evaluation of technical skills? Are adaptations offered for students with various learning needs? Do directions offer guidelines and examples of student work? Whether it is synchronous or asynchronous, self-paced or structured, philosophical or more objective, the course design contributes to both student and faculty satisfaction. Xavier and Meneses [12] stated, "It seems that the ideal balance is between structure and flexibility."

Stickney, et al., [13] investigated faculty satisfaction with online instruction and analyzed two key components as contributing factors: flexibility with the online medium and support for online instruction. Instructional support in my department is

not an issue. I have the support of the department, college, and university for online instruction with technology, course design, open education resources, and research. Alternatively, the flexibility component is both a blessing and a curse. Yes, flexibility with the job is a benefit. I enjoy setting my own office hours. I appreciate being able to dedicate more time to my adult children and grandson. I love not being tied to a 9:30 Monday, Wednesday, Friday course, and so do my colleagues. But this also contributes to the deconstruction of the collegial environment when a faculty member may not engage and interact with his or her colleagues in the same room except for three or four times throughout the year. For much of my time, in my office and on campus, I may encounter two or three departmental colleagues two or three times per week. The hallways are quiet. I cannot run next door for advice with my research. I do not take part in coffee breaks with my colleagues. No one is asking me about my day or weekend. I see undergraduate students passing by with the occasional smile or hello but that is the extent of my interaction with others outside of a computer screen. Communication, interaction, discourse, and the energy those things provide rests solely on my relations with students.

4. Student Relationships

Yes! It is a computer screen that houses my world of instructor - student relations. My students are names on a spreadsheet, not faces in a brick-and-mortar classroom. I hate to provide the impression that I have dehumanized my students. I work very hard to create meaningful relationships in my courses between course content and student experiences. Velez-Cruz and Holstun [14] stated:

"In typical situations, faculty members of all disciplines and status seek meaning through their work activities, such as teaching, research, outreach programs, and other duties assigned. However, many of these demands may expose faculty to burnout, lack of compassion satisfaction and secondary traumatic stress."

I find great value in my job and a tremendous amount of satisfaction with the interactions I have with students. This takes pointed and diligent work, however.

4.1. Assignment Feedback

Through no fault of theirs, students have been trained to complete tasks for grades. Sadly, this means going over and above the specified task is rare. After every learning module I send "follow-up" emails to my students in every course. Young [15] clarifies my actions, "Participants in an online course have a responsibility to each other to communicate in a

timely and professional manner. Effective instructors model good communication skills and, following their example, students learn to do the same.” I attempt to provide real-life context to course content. I encourage the sharing of student experiences and how their experiences connect to the content. Relevancy is key. Their candid, “not for a grade” sharing of experiences have contributed to my satisfaction with instruction. As a result, however, because these communication attempts are just that, “not for a grade,” I may only receive a 20% response rate in the email replies. I have adapted my plan at times, making the emails for a grade, but I found their responses to be less meaningful and tied to course content rather than life experiences. “An effective instructor can provide corrective feedback and encouragement, motivating the students to stay on task and to achieve the learning goals. Online learning should not be an isolated, independent activity but rather one in which students and instructors are partners in learning” [15]. This partnership is tough work for those of us who administer meaningful and rigorous courses in the online classroom. Aristotle [9] commented, “A good result is even better when it is harder.”

4.2. Student Voice

Recently I was engaged in a conversation with one of my students about her educational career choices. After several days of back-and-forth emails, I realized that I was actively engaged in the life of my student, April. Her openness and willingness to share her life story with me, through an autobiographical voice, was enlightening to say the least. Pinar et al., [7] stated, “voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community... The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process.... Voice suggests relationships: the individual’s relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual’s relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process.” This insider’s view of April’s life was what I needed to hear to help answer her life questions. Our students’ voices are rarely considered when developing curriculum for online courses. Too often we deliver content without considering how the content applies to the lives of our students. With more opportunities for their voices to be heard, we will provide more meaningful courses which are tied to their lives, providing knowledge with relevancy and skill that become actionable. I know that the development process of understanding one’s life has underscored the importance of what I do as an instructor. Every day offers new meaning and new direction based on the experiences of my students. Instructors and students can increase self-awareness through pointed

communication and genuine sharing of experiences.

5. Destructive Leadership

Out of sight, out of mind! This is the way I feel that many leaders handle remote faculty. One could identify these leadership styles as destructive, narcissistic, abusive, toxic, laissez-faire or other [2]. Faculty in my department are only required to be “on campus” three times per year: two graduations and the campus-wide meetings at the start of the academic year. But let’s not place blame where it does not belong. As a faculty member, with a physical office on campus, I am free to be here every single day if I choose. The same is true for my colleagues. So, what is the problem and why does the leadership contribute to the loneliness and isolation felt by so many? A narcissistic leader is socially awkward and prefers life from behind the computer, away from social interaction, thus creating a toxic and sometimes abusive environment [16]. A cancerous environment grows, and interactions become less and less frequent. Super talented, highly intelligent and high-functioning faculty begin performing far below their potential and avoiding the workplace environment. Why? I’ve asked this question numerous times and the answer is usually, “my leader doesn’t recognize or appreciate my talents and/or hard work.” As a result, many of my colleagues attempt to “lessen” their exposure to these destructive leadership behaviors by staying off campus, thus remaining isolated [2]. A failing, ineffective leadership creates a misalignment of values and the mutually established purpose, ultimately deteriorating the human resource and the professional collaborative culture [17].

5.1. Effective Leadership

The foundational success of any organization is based on the professional and distributed culture of learning and leadership, which results in a shared vision of success. Teachers, staff, and others harmed by poor leadership, inevitably find themselves sitting behind closed doors, leaving work early, and in isolation from social settings within the organization or school, ultimately impacting their social-emotional dispositions. They fail to recognize how the leadership is affecting their performance and emotional status. Teachers, staff, and others fail to speak out and begin doing the bare minimum required by their jobs, putting up armor rather than showcasing their strengths [17]. Whether you believe it to be your responsibility or not, your school or organization cannot and will not nurture student success without effective leadership. Kouzes and Posner [18] stated, “Leadership is everyone’s business. People are watching you, regardless of whether you know it or not. And you are having an impact on them, regardless of whether you intend to or not.” Baylor et al., [19]

contend, school leaders should “believe in the inherent ability of teachers to serve in leadership capacities, provide, encourage and expect participation opportunities for staff and involvement in important decisions, empower leadership teams to make decisions and encourage risk-taking.” This can only be achieved with proper communication of challenges, needs, and solutions. Effective leadership can and should promote a policy of shared governance and collective ownership within the organization. Effective leadership not only forges the way through the murky waters but also empowers others to widen the path. Exceptional leaders communicate, motivate, put forth more than the minimum, collaborate, and build relationships, especially during trying times. It begins with a vision of one’s own leadership talents and beliefs. Through rigorous excavation and reflection self-leaders can grow their leadership capacity and overcome the negative consequences of poor leadership.

6. Leading and Self-Care

I am fortunate to teach a leadership course where the following principles can be applied and practiced. As stated previously, I have had small successes with email communications and reciprocation from students. I have flexibility with course design which allows me to change and adapt my leadership course to meet personal needs and the needs of my students.

One of the most important is critical reflection. While students are regularly asked to “reflect” on certain aspects of their educational journey, this reflection is a little different. Students are asked to explain a “murky waters” experience in their lives and then elaborate on how they emerged from those waters [10]. Some of our life lessons and experiences have resulted from failures, hurts, broken trust, broken relationships, jobs that ended prematurely, etc. These are the murky waters. Did we learn and grow as a result? I should note that students are not asked to divulge any personal information that they are not willing to share. Some past experiences come with deep emotional wounds. Students can share as much or as little as they are able in a confidential manner. The results were tremendous for myself as well as my students. Occasionally, writing about previous experiences brings renewed growth and healing. By deconstructing the way we internalize past events, we sometimes painfully open wounds to cleanse and purify so that strength and endurance can emerge [20]. This process opens the student-instructor dialogue and models a key leadership trait of successful leaders, namely, self-reflection. Students continually remark as to how hard the process was for them. We shared something more than course content. They didn’t realize they were practicing a leadership trait, and a relationship was established between student and instructor.

Secondly, as a follow up to this assignment, students are asked to describe how they take care of “self.” Life, as we know, provides challenges. In what ways are we giving back to ourselves and staying grounded? How do we move from being overwhelmed to being energized? Again, the discourse between student and instructor becomes much more meaningful and relevant. Students are asked to share their experiences of how they look after themselves and how they nurture their own physical and emotional health. Once again, my students find this process of self-assessment very difficult and uncomfortable, but it is a trait that great leaders possess and regularly practice.

7. Growth

Kouzes and Posner [18] state that leadership is everyone’s business. If that is true. If leadership is my business, especially, and maybe more importantly, when my leadership fails, I have a responsibility to lead. I have a responsibility to resist loneliness, and the effects poor leadership has had on my attitude and outlook for teaching online. Loneliness in online and remote instruction is real and should be addressed. What are the consequences for faculty working in this environment, especially when the leadership is sub-par? Further research can identify the extent to which loneliness is affecting the performance of higher education faculty. Coles [8] stated, “How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments of life? You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story.” A qualitative study of faculty who share the same concerns can bring forward new methods that will help us improve instruction, mental resilience, and grit.

I have found renewed energy, enthusiasm, and passion for teaching and my work environment. Both parts of the “murky waters” assignment have helped me to overcome the isolation felt from behind the computer screen and strengthened my relations with students. Additionally, modeling these leadership traits provides real-world applications for future leaders.

8. References

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