

Servant Leadership in the Classroom

Serving Adult Students While Maintaining High Academic Standards

Richard Olsen, DMin

Abstract

The philosophy of servant teaching is incorporating the concept of servant leadership inside the classroom. The concept of servant leadership was first developed by Robert Greenleaf, who maintained that leaders who are empathetic, helpful, and good listeners are more effective than individuals who are leader-first with little regard for the needs of his or her followers. Servant teaching involves caring for both the professional and personal needs of students. Current research points to a strong correlation between servant teaching and an overall positive learning environment. The servant teacher must be academically tough, yet caring and approachable; therefore, strategies for balancing high standards with compassion are laid out.

The concept of servant leadership, first developed over forty years ago by Robert Greenleaf, addresses the natural desire to help others. In his groundbreaking work, Greenleaf listed ten characteristics of servant leadership: (1) listening, (2) empathy, (3) healing, (4) awareness, (5) persuasion, (6) conceptualization, (7) foresight, (8) stewardship, (9) commitment to the growth of people, and (10) building community.¹ In his book, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Greenleaf pointed out that a person who is a servant leader is vastly different from a person who is leader-first; namely, the servant leader cares about the needs of others and seeks to help those in his or her circle of influence.² On the other hand, the leader-first person is often driven by the power to succeed and rarely takes the time to listen to the concerns of others. Greenleaf maintained that servant leaders are trusted leaders who exhibit understanding and compassion, yet remain goal-oriented and proactive.

As evidence accumulates regarding the positive impact of servant leadership on teaching outcomes, servant-leadership ideas and frameworks have found their way into teaching literature.³ Current research demonstrates that servant leadership concepts

inside the classroom bring about desired classroom outcomes such as student retention and motivation.⁴ Several scholars have developed models using student feedback to test student perception of the value and effectiveness of servant-leadership attributes. The literature reviewed below provides evidence that servant teaching is positively associated with student engagement and indicators of learning.⁵ The purpose of this article is to discuss the on-the-ground process of integrating servant leadership into an adult learning community from the unique perspective of a retired military officer and professor of military leadership. Additionally, this article provides specific ways in which adult education practitioners can incorporate a servant-leader philosophy in the classroom so that the academic environment is conducive to candid discussion, critical thinking, and a higher level of learning. The ultimate aim is that students will gain the knowledge and skills needed to better impact their field of study.

Servant Leadership in the Classroom: Servant Teaching

Servant teaching is about putting a comfortable method of teaching aside and learning from the students which teaching methodologies work best for them. J. Martin Hays found that “students with servant teachers were more empowered, confident, and invested.”⁶ Richard Bowman described the teacher as servant leader:

Servant leadership as an idea or theme has a lineage as old as the scriptures. Yet, the principles that ground servant leadership mirror a universal ethic: humility, honesty, trust, empathy, healing, community, and service. On the other hand, servant leadership in the classroom speaks to the universal human longing to be known, to care, and to be cared for in pursuit of the common good. At its core, servant leadership involves creating and sustaining faculty-student relationships around a shared sense of purpose and accountability for the whole.⁷

The ten characteristics of servant leadership developed by Greenleaf continue to be the foundation for scholars investigating its utility and effectiveness in the class-

Rick Olsen, DMin, is a team leader and associate professor of military leadership (supervisory) in the Department of Command and Leadership, Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He holds a BS in criminal justice, a master’s degree in counseling, and a doctorate in leadership. His dissertation focused on over-domineering leaders and how to lessen domineering tendencies to become more of a servant leader. Olsen is the coauthor of one article concerning toxic leadership and another on dealing with domineering personalities. He has always been fascinated with the two extremes: toxic leadership (it’s all about me) and servant leadership (it’s all about others).

room.⁸ Contemporary research has demonstrated that servant-leadership principles positively influence the learning environment. The practice of servant leadership in a learning community creates a supportive, respectful, and demanding environment, which is conducive to cultivating learners with grit and a growth mindset.⁹

These findings reveal the necessity of becoming competent in the characteristics of a servant leader, such as being a good listener, displaying empathy, and building a sense of belonging.

Incorporating a Servant-Teacher Mentality in the Classroom

The following practices, grounded in the literature on servant leadership and the broader field of adult education, focus on providing practitioners with tools and self-reflective habits. The central issue is that the adult learning environment is meant to be a lively, active atmosphere in which sophisticated thinking and deep professional learning take place. The goal of the following practices is to minimize strained and uncommunicative learning environments and enhance the teacher-student relationship while maintaining high academic standards.

Empower Through Motivation

Researchers, such as Jeanne Ormrod and Olusegun Sogunro, agree that motivating students from the onset is critical to a healthy classroom environment.¹⁰ Dale Schunk, Paul Pintrich, and Judith Meece define motivation as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained.”¹¹ From a psychological viewpoint, motivation involves processes that stimulate behavior, give meaning to behavior, maintain the behavior, and lead to a preference of the specific behavior.¹² One need only observe the body language and facial expressions of adult students to know whether they are motivated or not. Nonverbals (e.g., preoccupation with a cell phone) signify the learner is bored and uninspired.

In his study, Sogunro found that the top five motivating factors for adult learners in higher education were quality of instruction, quality of curriculum, relevance and pragmatism, interactive classroom and effective management practices, and progressive assessment and timely feedback.¹³ (More information regarding motivating factors can be found in Sogunro’s interesting article, “Motivating Factors for Adult Learners in Higher Education.”) While extrinsic reinforcement (e.g., good grades, feedback, desirable opportunities, and careers) certainly promotes learning, Ormrod insisted that intrinsic motivation is more conducive to academic success.¹⁴ This can be achieved in part, Ormrod explained, by assigning tasks that are challenging enough to instill a sense of competency once they are successfully completed.

Another way to increase intrinsic motivation, according to Ormrod, is to give students some measure of independence and control when it comes to their education.¹⁵ Small-group work, Ormrod maintained, gives students a sense of autonomy. Facilitators, as opposed to lecturers, allow students to take a more active role in their learning, which builds internal motivation.

When adult learners have a solid intellect, they need to be given a chance to demonstrate their communication skills and knowledge of the subject. Encourage students to do independent research of the topic being discussed, and give them the opportunity to facilitate the lesson material by incorporating whatever innovative means (e.g., showing a video or playing *Jeopardy*) they come up with to teach the material. The freedom to be original and creative in their presentations fosters a feeling of competence and fulfills a basic need for self-determination.¹⁶ Ideas for the next year's lessons can originate from the resourceful research and imaginative presentations carried out by previous students.

Servant teachers, Darren Linvill explained, should strive to create a highly collaborative learning environment.¹⁷ When the students are facilitating a discussion in front of the class, it is important that I, as the instructor, still be just as engaged. Give the students some reflective questions to start the conversation, if they choose to use them. If the students leading the discussion are unprepared or inept, I must take the class back. However, it is worth the risk to see the others flourish and create an active, dynamic learning environment.

How comfortable are you in giving up control of your classroom, even for a short time? What are some things you can do to get student buy-in and increase classroom involvement?

Explain Your Reasoning for Teaching the Topic

As mentioned, one of the leading, motivating factors for adult learners is relevance and pragmatism.¹⁸ Learning becomes more meaningful when learners are interested in the topic because of its usefulness. Dismissiveness on the part of an adult learner is bad for the classroom and can spread like a cancer. Occasionally, students who have been successful in the past see no reason to add any other perspectives. When I teach an organizational leadership class to military and civilian students, I usually start with a disarming preface, such as,

I am not here to teach you leadership, but I am here to challenge your thinking in regards to how leadership is applied. You are all proven leaders, or you would not be here. I want to prepare you for positions that will probably entail the leading of large organizations and hundreds, if not thousands, of employees. I see you as adult leaders that will soon have an enormous responsibility as you enter different organizations. What is the number one reason why chief executive officers and

military leaders are relieved or fired? It is almost never because of incompetence or lack of technical proficiency. It is because of poor leadership or unethical practices. Isn't it sad that smart, motivated, and highly capable people are fired for the inability to lead others? The study of leadership is more than management or telling people what to do. In this brief time, we have together, I hope you better understand why the study of leadership is so important. Students, show up to class as mature thinkers. Come armed and prepared for class with these three things: your professional and personal opinion of the assigned readings, your past experiences and lessons learned, and your proposed solutions for challenging problems by using your critical thinking skills.

The one idea I like my students to take away at the end of the first class is, "This is going to be better than I thought."

As you reflect on how you communicate your reasoning for what you teach, what are some ideas to better communicate your intent and set the expectations high?

Display Enthusiasm and a Positive Attitude

Patricia Comeaux pointed out that "a knowledgeable and enthusiastic instructor can make a difference in students' motivation and willingness to become actively engaged with the subject matter."¹⁹ Of course, some enthusiasm is more personality or temperament driven. Do not try to be someone you are not. Teachers do not need to have excitable personalities; they just have to be 100 percent emotionally invested in what they teach. Given that enthusiasm is contagious, Sean Bulger, Derek Mohr, and Richard Walls argued that if teachers love to teach it, students would probably love to learn it.²⁰ When a teacher is bored with the subject or generally dissatisfied with his or her working environment, enthusiasm is negatively affected.

According to Bulger and his colleagues, there is a strong correlation between a positive learning environment and student success.²¹ Thus, servant teachers should strive for high levels of student achievement, thereby cultivating enthusiasm in the classroom. Joe Nichols noted that "the best teachers were remembered as being skillful and enthusiastic, having such a solid command of the subject matter that students could 'pick up on their excitement' for the subject."²²

Even if you are a passive or laid-back type of teacher, what are some ways that you can demonstrate enthusiasm for your subject and a positive attitude?

Be Caring and Approachable

Teaching as a servant leader necessitates caring about your students enough to connect to what matters to them both inside and outside the classroom. Pay close attention

to personalities and mood changes throughout the semester. If a student is not him- or herself, ask why and see if you can help. Showing a genuine interest in your students not only models good leadership but also impacts opportunities for transforming them.

Establish a dialog and rapport with your students by asking questions that are not too personal but still convey a sincere concern for their well-being. Seek to be always interested but never intrusive. Servant leaders, Robert Russell and A. Gregory Stone maintained, should practice active listening: “Listening is a critical way leaders demonstrate respect and appreciation of others.”²³ Make an effort to memorize your students’ names before the semester begins or within a week of starting the first class. Of the five essentials of “emotional intelligence” delineated by Daniel Goleman in his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, two essentials pertain to the notion of being caring and approachable. Goleman strongly believes that empathy (i.e., sensing others’ feelings) and social skill (i.e., building rapport with others) are vital to the development of healthy relationships. (Goleman’s other three essentials of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation.)²⁴

It is well documented that teachers who interact with their students daily have the most impact.²⁵ Eventually, I will have the opportunity to cultivate deeper relationships, build further trust, and get past the surface-level conversations. Ultimately, the student will open up about real-life challenges, and this is where the real investment in the student begins. Educators can then speak into the lives of their students, refer them to get professional help if needed, or simply listen to a crucible moment that forever changed them. Carolyn Crippen noted that in servant teaching, students’ problems are not interruptions; they are opportunities for healing.²⁶

Are there some things you can do to appear to be more personable and approachable? Are there stumbling blocks that prevent you from demonstrating your care and concern for students?

Feed Their Intellectual Appetite

All adult learners need to have their minds stimulated and exercised. Bernard Bass and Ronald Riggio maintained this is achieved by “questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways.”²⁷ Kong Wah Cora Chan stressed that learning should be viewed as a journey, and “a servant leader believes that everyone can gain new understanding and skills, as well as produce greater achievement.”²⁸

Make certain the readings and material are not so basic that students get bored and regularly present new concepts, models, and challenging case studies. I learned early in adult teaching that the quality of the questions asked will shape the direction the class takes. Servant teachers must be committed to the growth of their followers, which is a key component of servant leadership, and encourage them to step outside their intellectual comfort zone.

What new tactics to whet and feed the intellectual appetite of your students do you employ? Does your material have an intellectual edge to it, and what is the body language of your students when you present it?

Put the Needs of Your Students First

It is important that I read body language and facial expressions throughout the class period. If the class is distracted and disinterested, I may need to find a new approach. Not all groups or students are created equal. One must ask, “What will be the most effective way to meet the learning needs of these individuals”? Is the class full of extroverts who love to talk, or does the class mainly consist of introverts, who quietly contemplate and evaluate each discussion point and theory? Even when teaching the same topic, the method of teaching employed may vary depending on the makeup of the class. Linvill agreed that acknowledging the individual differences in students increases the prospect of student engagement.²⁹ Strong, extroverted, and independent thinkers must be allowed to express themselves and have an open debate, even at the expense of not covering all of the material. But with a class made up of primarily introverts, one must be comfortable with pregnant pauses and allow for thought and fewer words when responding.

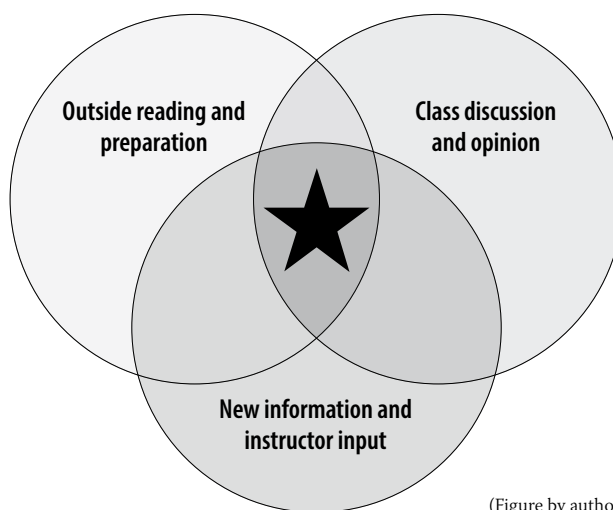
I teach an organizational leadership class to Army majors attending the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I recently taught a class in which I initially misread the learning needs of the group. The students were extroverted and relaxed inside of each other’s small group but highly cautious of me, to the point of being insolent and belligerent. The students were energetic and talkative with each other, but as soon as I walked into the classroom and opened my mouth, the positive energy rocketed out of the class like a missile out of a launching pad. Additionally, four dominant personalities made the discussion time contentious and personal.

Upon observation of their dynamic, I changed my teaching strategy. I divided the sixteen students into four groups of four students according to their personalities and cliques. I gave them an assignment at the beginning of class, which they had forty-five minutes to complete. Then the four groups came together and openly discussed the salient points. I barely said a word except for the wrap-up, which went against my normal teaching style. I generally dislike this particular format because, for one thing, students tend to think that teachers who always break students into small groups do so because they are lazy, ill prepared, or insecure. Secondly, I like to engage my students, listen, and debate. But, in this case, the learning needs of the students were better served with a different teaching method.

Even the most successful U.S. Army generals understood the need to learn to operate effectively in different environments. General of the Army George C. Marshall wrote,

It became clear to me that at the age of 58 I would have to learn new tricks that were not taught in the military manuals or on the battlefield. In this position, I am a political soldier and will have to put my training in rapping-out orders and making snap decisions on the back burner, and have to learn the arts of persuasion and guile. I must become an expert in a whole new set of skills.³⁰

Personality weaknesses that interfere with effective servant teaching must also be addressed. For example, an overly talkative lecturer will inhibit balanced dialogue; therefore, the educator who is in tune with his or her shortcomings will be quick to adjust to the needs of the students, such as their need to have ample time to share. Equally important is the realization that



(Figure by author)

Figure. The Three Essential Parts of Adult Learning

some limitations must be accepted, and time is better served concentrating on the strengths one brings into the classroom. A true servant teacher will also apply this foundational principle to the learners in his or her classroom.

Do you have an established reflection practice in which you consider the effect of your style on the personality of the class?

Invite Disagreement and Debate

An old proverb says it best: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”³¹ It is up to me to create an environment in which disagreement and debate are well encouraged. To keep discussions on course, I require that dialogue and debate center on the new information the students learned in their reading.

In any classroom, a lively debate has advantages for both student and instructor. It stirs up strong feelings and objections that cover all sides of an issue. Open disagreement with a good defense means the class is seeing other points of view probably not previously considered. According to Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, “When participants take a critical stance, they are committed to questioning and

exploring even the most widely accepted ideas and beliefs.”³² It is not enough to say, “If you disagree with something I say, speak up.” Educators must kick in the door of open debate and make it an admirable quality to speak truth to power. If a student practices this with an authority figure such as a teacher, they will be better prepared to speak truth to power outside of the classroom.

According to Nicole Fournier-Sylvester, teachers often evade controversial issues because of the unpredictability of student reactions.³³ While this type of facilitation does require ample preparation, debates have a direct and positive impact on students’ critical-thinking skills. Teachers must be secure in who they are, in their level of knowledge, and in their willingness to referee debates and disagreements, especially when they or their material is the target. Controversial debates, Fournier-Sylvester noted, can be a rewarding experience for both teachers and their students. A highly collaborative environment filled with free exchanges of ideas requires the full attention and focus of everyone in the classroom.

The servant teacher, however, must create psychological safety for learners, for nothing will shut down unguarded dialogue quicker than a hostile, judgmental classroom environment. If students do not feel safe to express their opinions and feelings, discussion and freethinking will be stifled.³⁴ If students believe they have a voice and their point of view has value, they will be much more apt to speak up. Teachers must privately confront students who, for example, roll their eyes at a classmate’s comment and let them know that disapproving reactions and nonverbals are not appropriate in a professional environment.

Are there some things you can do to increase the level of discussion in your classroom and make disagreement and debate more admirable? How will you kick down the door of trepidation and ensure your students are free to disagree, with a good defense of course? How do you deliberately create and maintain psychological safety in your classroom?

No Free Lunch

While servant teachers care for the whole person, they are not pushovers. A good servant teacher should set high standards and expect adult learners to walk into class prepared, having completed the required reading and writing so that he or she can contribute to group learning. The figure (on page 60) illustrates the three essential elements of preparation in adult learning: outside reading and preparation, class discussion and opinion, and new information and instructor input. The star signifies the best of all three areas, where the greatest amount of learning can take place if a student is conscientious enough to pay attention to all three.

As the figure makes clear, each element is equally important to the learning process. If a student is squeezed for time, the reading is often ignored, which is evidenced by a lack of input to the group discussion. When a student contributes nothing to the conver-

sation but personal stories and opinions, chances are he or she did not plan sufficiently for class. Chan holds the opinion that “a servant-leader teacher has high demands and expectations of students, who emulate their servant leader, and are becoming autonomous, responsive, and responsible servant leaders themselves.”³⁵ Be academically tough and demanding, yet helpful toward students lacking in verbal persuasion or effective writing. Be compassionate toward learners dealing with substantial personal issues. A combination of high standards and empathetic understanding serve to encourage adult students to learn and grow as thinkers.

How do you hold your students accountable? Besides exams and papers, how do you measure if your students are prepared for class? Do you cold call or just allow the prepared students to talk and the unprepared to be silent?

Feedback is a Two-Way Street

While adult students should be held accountable for their contributions to the learning environment, teachers should provide effective and timely feedback to assignments given to learners for them to adequately assess their progress. As already noted, progressive assessment and timely feedback are ranked in the top five motivating factors for adult learners in a study conducted by Sogunro.³⁶ Sogunro found that prompt feedback influences students’ motivation for success, which leads to enhanced performance. Generally, grades should be posted five to ten days after the assignment has been submitted, depending on the length of the assignment. Students usually understand that research papers, for example, require more time to grade. But when it comes to questions or concerns that a student brings to the attention of the instructor, a reply should be given in less than twenty-four hours.

I consider it equally important to receive feedback regarding my teaching style and techniques from the students. Although sometimes problematic, Eileen De Courcy pointed out that student ratings of teaching are still the most widely used methods to assess teacher performance.³⁷ After the first four or five lessons, give students a 3” x 5” card and ask them to provide you with three positive features of your teaching strategies, as well as three perceived shortcomings in your approach to teaching, along with concrete ways to improve your methods. Just recently, one of the cards that came back to me from one of my students read, “Repeats the same stories.” I had no idea, and to make matters worse, the class informed me that a story I just relayed minutes before was the fourth time I had shared it. The students and I all had a good laugh, and I learned that I need to start tracking the stories I tell. Be brave enough to solicit feedback and address the class after you review their evaluations, relaying appreciation for their comments.

What is the average amount of time you give to providing feedback? Do you allow your students to evaluate your effectiveness in the classroom?

Concluding Thoughts

A servant teacher takes a holistic, self-reflective, and practical approach toward earning the respect of his or her students. Presenting beneficial material is only a small part of effective teaching. The central issue of servant-leadership education is relationships and finding value in each student. Aaron Noland and Keith Richards best summed up the mission of servant leadership in the classroom with what they described as the “key attributes or dimensions of servant teaching: emotional healing, creating value for the community, empowering students, helping students grow and succeed, putting students first, demonstrating conceptual skills, and behaving ethically.”³⁸ Servant teachers care for the whole person, not just how well the student can think, write, and reason.

Resources abound for the practitioner desiring to learn more about student-centered teaching practices. While material taken from Ormrod’s book, *Human Learning*, was limited in this article to her discussion regarding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, she provides invaluable information for educators.³⁹ Also noteworthy, but not addressed in this article, is Chan’s research into the relationship between servant leadership and the cultivation of grit (i.e., effort and stamina) in learners.⁴⁰ Chan’s suggestions for building grit through servant leadership can be found in his paper, “Servant Leadership Cultivates Grit and Growth Mindset in Learners.”

Larry Spears, who currently serves as president and chief executive officer of the Larry C. Spears Center for Servant Leadership, recognized over a decade ago that the philosophy and practice of servant leadership was a growing movement, and noted that “a particular strength of servant leadership is that it encourages everyone to actively seek opportunities to both serve and lead others, thereby setting up the potential for raising the quality of life throughout society.”⁴¹

Most educators do not teach for the money (that would be impossible) but for the love of influencing, challenging, and inspiring young people to succeed. As Ramajanki Doraiswamy Iyer so eloquently stated, “There is no big incentive for people to become teachers other than an innate desire to serve. No teacher has ever got rich or famous or powerful but there is always a simple teacher behind every big and famous individual.”⁴² There is no better return on investment than to invest in the professional and personal lives of students. To find out how strong you rate in the characteristics of servant leadership, take the online survey at http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/servant_leadership_survey.html. ☞

Notes

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