

## **Leading Critically: A Grounded Theory of Applied Critical Thinking in Leadership Studies**

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### **Abstract**

This study describes the development of a grounded theory of applied critical thinking in leadership studies and examines how student-centered experiential learning in leadership education bridged critical thinking with action. Over three semester undergraduate students in an upper level leadership studies course at a large four-year public institution in the southeastern United States completed a written assignment in which they were asked to define the concept of “leading critically.” A grounded theory of critical leadership – utilizing critical thinking skills to make decisions about leadership actions in different situations – emerged after completing a qualitative document analysis of these papers and incorporating the researchers’ existing knowledge of leadership and student development theory. The hope is that this research will create dialogue concerning new approaches to leadership education and encourage practices that apply critical thinking skills to leadership.

### **Introduction**

A current problem in colleges and universities nationwide sits at a critical impasse. While higher education emphasizes critical thinking across disciplines, many undergraduates cannot effectively utilize this skill (Burbach, Matkin, &

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Fritz, 2004). It is clear that critical thinking exists in institutional curriculum, but there is disconnect between what is taught and what is practiced (Loh, 2009). Yet, unlike many traditional academic disciplines, leadership education offers students an environment in which critical thinking skills and practices can be applied every day. The underlying philosophy of leadership education is to enhance students' interpersonal skills for leadership in an environment that fosters increased self-awareness, increased understanding of others, and learning from life experiences (Burbach et al., 2004). And while there may be disconnect between critical thinking and classroom and real life application in other disciplines, leadership studies emphasize building skills such as critical thinking through student-centered experiential learning (Eich, 2008; Allen & Hartman, 2009; Moore, Boyd, & Dooley, 2010). This type of learning is central to helping students develop as leaders and bridges thinking with action.

Leadership education offers a unique platform inherently designed to improve critical thinking by cultivating self-regulatory judgment through the interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference of a leader's own decisions and actions (Facione, 1990). Yet, the incorporation of critical thinking pedagogy in the leadership education curriculum has only recently emerged (i.e., Burbach et al., 2004; Gifford, 2010; Sinclair, 2007; Stedman, 2009). As a result, more research is needed to examine specific pedagogies for applied critical thinking in the collegiate leadership classroom.

## **Literature Review**

### **A Look at Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking has many definitions (i.e., Ennis, 1962; 1987; 1991). Ennis (1993) suggests the following definition is more in accord with contemporary usage: "Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 180). Inasmuch as Ennis proposed this definition, he did it with some trepidation stating this definition is "as vague as Bloom's taxonomy (1956) ... [and] that too needs elaboration" (p. 180). Thus, Ennis offers 10 actions a person characteristically needs to do (at least most of them and each one interdependently) in order to practice critical thinking:

Table 1  
10 Actions a Learner Must Take to Think *Critically*

| Number | Action   |
|--------|--|
| 1      | Judge the credibility of sources.  |
| 2      | Identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions.  |
| 3      | Judge the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions, and evidence. |
| 4      | Develop and defend a position on an issue.   |
| 5      | Ask appropriate clarifying questions.  |
| 6      | Plan experiments and judge experimental designs.   |
| 7      | Define terms in a way appropriate for the context.   |
| 8      | Be open-minded.  |
| 9      | Try to be well informed.   |
| 10     | Draw conclusions when warranted, but with caution.   |

Source: Ennis, R. H. (1993). Critical thinking assessment. *Theory into Practice*, 32(3), 180.

### Critical Thinking Pedagogy in Leadership Studies

The development of critical thinking capacity allows for a more purposeful and effective reflection process in leadership development (Stedman, 2009). According to Guthrie and King (2004), reflection is a key component in the development of leadership capacity. The use of critical thinking skills provides an in-depth and forward thinking reflection process (Rudd, Baker, & Hoover, 2000). Stedman (2009) argued that leadership classrooms should seek to develop the cognitive capabilities of students by enhancing critical thinking skills. In the same way, other scholars have alluded to practicing critical reflection, a behavior that integrates personal experiences with new learning and understanding to engage and mobilize students to act on new ideas and to challenge conventional thinking in both theory and practice (Jones, Simonetti, & Vielhaber-Hermon, 2000; Reynolds, 1999). In leadership education, deep reflective learning requires students to consider the underlying dynamics of power and to question basic assumptions and practices. For example, students could be required to reassess the power they use in leadership situations to achieve their desired results (Jenkins & Cutchens, 2010).

Engaging in critical reflection can create student discomfort and dissonance (Brookfield, 1994; Dewey, 1933; Reynolds, 1999). Nonetheless, as Fink (2003) and others assert, discomfort often means students are really thinking and consequently really learning. Moreover, where reflection is absent, there is the constant risk of making poor decisions and bad judgments (Brookfield, 1995). For example, without reflection, leaders may be convinced by past successes of their

invincibility and fail to consider other viewpoints, with possibly disastrous consequences (Densten & Gray, 2001). Similarly, leaders may avoid reflecting on a course of action because such reflection might challenge their favorable perceptions of themselves (Conger, 1992).

## **Research Design**

Within this multi-case research design, grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2008) was used to construct a theory or model of applied critical thinking in leadership studies. This method was chosen because it was a qualitative way of coupling inductive data analysis and interpretive inquiry to identify themes from the data and offer interpretations leading to theory generation. In inductive data analysis researchers build patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing data into increasingly more abstract units of information and working back and forth between themes and the database until researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes. Interpretive inquiry describes a process in which the researchers used what they see, hear, and understand. These interpretations cannot be separated from our backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings (Creswell, 2009). For example, in this research, the researchers' experiences teaching undergraduate leadership studies courses and command of the relevant literature had direct influence on conclusions included in our interpretations.

Holistically, the grounded theory method is constant and comparative – comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory – a four-stage process used to make meaning of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method combines data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling to generate a theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing (Conrad, 1982). Furthermore, each facet of the theory or model generated from the concepts derived from analysis can be cross-related with the data or any new case to the point where the constructed theory or model is grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## **Sample**

Participants were 80 undergraduate students in an upper-level leadership studies course at a large four-year public institution in the southeast United States. Over three semesters in 2010 these students completed a written assignment in which they were asked to define the concepts of “leading critically.” The assignment appeared in the course syllabus as follows:

Read, Think, & Lead Critically: While learning about the many different theories of leadership this semester, our theme will be to challenge you to read critically, think critically, and lead critically. This assignment will be a 3 - 5 page paper where you will explain what you think it means (thus defining) to read, think, and lead critically. Then, elaborate how you feel you currently utilize these skills, how you will demonstrate these skills during the semester, and how you plan on applying these skills to your learning and leadership in your organizations and career in the future. Article #'s 49, 53, and 54 in the Wren text will provide a great resource for this assignment—I strongly suggest you read them before you begin writing.

The readings included *What It Means to Think Critically*, by Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Decision-Making Process*, by E. Frank Harrison, and *Decision Making and the Leadership Process*, by Victor H. Vroom from J. Thomas Wren's (1995) *The Leader's Companion: Insight on Leadership through the Ages*. Students reported utilizing web resources to further expand their thinking and interpretation of critical thinking.

### **Data Collection and Selection**

The researchers purposefully selected individuals for the study. According to Creswell (2009), the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants (and corresponding documents) that will best help the research understand the research question. Eighty students' written responses to the assignment described above (qualitative documents) were collected in the process of research. It is important to note that all ( $N=80$ ) participant students volunteered their written assignments (through informed consent) for inclusion in the research. These documents allowed the researchers to obtain rich and thoughtful data from a graded written assignment. As well, this data collection type offers the following advantages: (a) enables the researcher to obtain the language and words of the participants, (b) can be accessed at a time convenient to the researcher – an unobtrusive source of information, (c) represents data that participants have given attention to compiling them, and (d) as written evidence, it saves a researcher the time and expense of transcribing. Limitations still exist including the possibility that students were not equally articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

The principal researcher followed a prescribed data analysis procedure suggested by Creswell (2009) and Tesch (1990) that began by reading through all the data to get a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning. The researcher then began a detailed analysis with a coding process to systematically

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organize the material into chunks of text before bringing meaning to the information. The researchers maintained the logic of grounded theory coding that applies *preconceived* categories and codes for the data based on our experiences (Charmaz, 2006). In order to improve confirmability and dependability the primary researcher corroborated with the secondary researcher to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected students' perceptions (Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Stainback & Stainback, 1988). The concurrent procedure included jotting down ideas that came to mind, making a list of key topics and passages, coding, turning topics into categories, and assembling the material belonging to each category in one place to perform the preliminary analysis. This grounded theory coding process allowed the researchers to both construct codes and generate a description of the themes for analysis. These themes, coupled with meaning derived from information gleaned from the literature, will be described in detail in the following section.

## **Findings**

For the purposes of this study, leading critically is defined as applying critical thinking skills to decisions about leadership actions in different situations. It is constructivist in nature because it means taking into account prior experiences and knowledge before making decisions. It is important to note that application of critical thinking appeared throughout the student papers (i.e., "thinking critically is the first step to leading critically") and that the aforementioned *10 Actions a Learner Must Take to Think Critically* (Ennis, 1993) from Table 1 were implicit in the preceding analysis and proceeding construction of the model. Moreover, the researchers' knowledge of leadership and student development theory further guided the analyses.

A grounded theory evolved after the researchers examined patterns in students' written statements. From the patterns, themes were identified, coded, and clustered to strengthen the study. The resulting grounded theory of critical leadership included a defined concept of leading critically. The researchers defined leading critically as applying critical thinking skills to making decisions about leadership actions in different situations. The main tenet being that like critical thinking, leading critically must involve action, not just thought. Students can apply this concept to variety of situations by utilizing the *12 Actions a Leader Must Take to Lead Critically* in Table 2. These actions were developed as an extension of the theory of critical leadership. The actions should be used encourage higher order leadership development, in which critical leadership takes place. The Table 2 lists the 12 actions developed from the study.

Table 2  
12 Actions a Leader can take to Lead Critically

| Number | Action  |
|--------|---|
| 1      | Be aware of the context of your situation and evaluate the implications of your decisions.        |
| 2      | Ask questions and listen appropriately.   |
| 3      | Take the time to understand the diversity of others' decisions, values, and opinions.             |
| 4      | Be flexible and open-minded in your decision-making.  |
| 5      | Accept, internalize, and apply constructive criticism.  |
| 6      | Evaluate assumptions before you try to challenge them.  |
| 7      | Understand processes before you try to change them.   |
| 8      | Know the strengths and weaknesses of your followers and direct or empower accordingly.            |
| 9      | Be purposeful and take into account your organization's mission and values when making decisions. |
| 10     | Engage others where they are, not where you want them to be.                                      |
| 11     | Encourage critical followership.  |
| 12     | Take informed action.   |

The primary purpose in presenting this grounded theory model is to provide a useful model for applied critical thinking and critical thinking pedagogy in collegiate leadership studies. These data hope to provide a platform for enriching dialogue, idea generation, and action planning for leadership educators and student affairs practitioners developing leadership studies curriculum, as well as other academic disciplines. New knowledge and understanding was gained about applying critical thinking to leadership actions by linking existing research on critical thinking, leadership, and student development theory. The researchers investigated the perceptions of undergraduate students in an upper-level leadership theories course and found evidence of critical thought as it applied to leadership. These views were expressed in an assignment intended to probe students' critical thinking skills as they related to leadership. The knowledge and understanding gained through the qualitative document analysis of these student assignments is expressed through their written statements and the inferences of the researchers.

## Grounded Theory of Applied Critical Thinking in Leadership Studies

This study identified 12 actions that leaders must take to lead critically through drawing on the perspectives of upper-level undergraduate leadership studies students and the encompassing literature of critical thinking, leadership, and student development theory. While identifying each key attribute, the grounded theory model explicates the connections to action for implementation. These 12 actions are arranged into four respective clusters: (a) actions and decision making, (b) situational leadership and context, (c) flexibility and open-mindedness, and (d) critical leadership (see Figure 1). Each cluster will be introduced along with the individual attributes within the cluster that entail specific action for applied critical thinking in leadership decision making processes.

Figure 1. 12 Actions a Leader can take to Lead Critically





### **Cluster I: Situational Leadership and Context**

*Be aware of the context of your situation and evaluate the implications of your decisions.*

“Evaluate the consequences of your actions or decisions,” wrote one student. Similar student perspectives and researcher knowledge of cognitive student development theory shaped the description of this action, which lends heavily to situational leadership due to an emphasis on contextual influences. Emphasis is also on thought before action to determine how action will affect the situation, which indicates a quasi-reflective thinking process. King and Kitchener (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-Di-Brito, 1998) suggest that this type of reasoning involves interpretations of evidence in context (Stage 5). Student papers mirrored this line of thinking, asserting that decisions must be “based on thoughtful and critical evaluation of the situation and issues” and that leaders must “identify and challenge assumptions and make decisions contextually appropriate to ourselves or those we serve.” One student summed this theme up succinctly. “You need to critically think about every situation you end up in. You need to evaluate your actions before you act on them, you need to make ethical decisions about what is best for the group, you need to know what you’re doing is the right thing because you are a role model as a leader and your every move is being watched [sic].”

*Know the strengths and weaknesses of your followers and direct or empower accordingly.*

This action suggests that a critical leader must understand the limits to power and styles of leadership. More specifically, he or she should be aware that different situations require different leadership styles. For example, one student expounded that “a person who leads critically has to be able to notice and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses his/her followers’ have and be able to distribute tasks accordingly.” Likewise, DuBrin (2010) suggests there are limits to empowerment, in such that a group may lack a clear understanding of the boundaries of empowerment. Therefore, some group members may need stronger guidance or direct leadership. Student papers echoed that leaders must know “when to lead and when to follow” and be able to understand the “different behavioral styles of [their] subordinates.”

### **Cluster II: Actions and Decision Making**

As one student stalwartly noted, “Leading critically requires action, not just thought.”

*Understand processes before you try to change them.*

This action deals with deeds or decision making involving change. In other words, this action-step can be applied when a leader intends to change a standing process or policy. Lewin (1951) wrote that if a person wants to understand something, then the individual should try to change it. Likewise, critical leaders must understand processes, policies, and organizational structures before they take action or make decisions to change them. In the same way, wrote one student, “Leading critically involves understanding the change you wish to motivate, exploring the many possible ways to achieve this change, and suggesting a plan of action.” They added, “However, critical thinking should not only exist in the planning stage.”

*Be purposeful and take into account your organization’s mission and values when making decisions.*

This action emphasizes intentional recognition, communication, evaluation, and action related to an organization’s mission and values. Emphasis is on purposeful or intentional action. Being purposeful means having a commitment to a goal or activity. It is also the ability to collaborate and to find common ground with others to facilitate positive change (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007). One student commented that “the goal and benefit of this process is that it is ethical, moral, and beneficial for all involved.” Another student supported this idea stating: “Leading critically is about making sound and beneficial decisions not only for yourself, but for your organization, and your peers as well. A good critical leader will consider the needs of the organization and its members, the different plan of actions to take at different times, the effects of different strategies involved with approaching issues, and why these effects actually effect the organization.”

### **Cluster III: Flexibility and Open-mindedness**

*Take the time to understand the diversity of others’ decisions, values, and opinions.*

This action lends more to understanding others and encouraging action, rather than empowering others. Here, while members’ views are accepted and recognized, actual action is not necessarily supported. It is important to note here that in order to be inclusive, one must have increased knowledge of oneself and others and engage in learning new views, approaches, styles, and aspects of individuality (Komives et al., 2007). Students echoed critical leaders stating that:

- “Work twice as hard for the common goal but allow for input and voices from other members,”
- “Recognize the reasons people believe what they believe and have the way they do.”
- “Take into account people’s diversity and listen.”
- “Realize the hidden agendas followers can have, but also to recognize and appreciate the efforts of those helping to achieve the shared vision.”

*Be flexible and open-minded in your decision-making.*

“Leading critically involves being open-minded,” penned one student. “An effective leader is someone who is open-minded to understand there are many different paths to the ultimate goal and therefore, he listens to other opinions on how to do so,” commented another. In the same way, this action of being flexible and open-minded in decision-making differs from the previous one in that it denotes a characteristic of adaptability within a leader or a willingness to accept change. “In order to be an effective leader, you must think about the actions and conflicts that occur in your organization, have an open mind, and be able to learn how to think outside of the box in order to solve these conflicts,” stated yet another student. Implementing this action-step requires planning followed by successful execution of the plan while planning for setbacks or other opinions when something goes differently than was expected. Leadership is inherently about people working together toward change (Komives, et al., 2007). Therefore, a leader must be adaptable to the group dynamics.

*Engage others where they are, not where you want them to be.*

Whereas the second action in Cluster I, “Know the strengths and weaknesses of your followers and direct or empower accordingly,” refers specifically to understanding limits of power and style of leadership in context, this action-step implies a stronger understanding of the development of others, flexibility to individual needs, and open-mindedness in making decisions about leading and working with others. Sanford (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) suggests that student development is a function of person-environment interaction, in which three conditions must be present: readiness, challenge, and support. Similarly, leading critically, as a higher order of leadership development, must include the ability to recognize and accept the developmental stages of others. This skill is described in great detail in Stages 4 through 6 of the Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model – Leadership Differentiated, Generativity, and Integration/Synthesis. These stages emphasize the developmental levels of interdependence (Komives, Owen, Longbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Komives et al., 2006).

Furthermore, leaders are change agents. Yet, successful leaders cannot be agents of change if they do not engage followers in a manner that is relational and ethical. Instead of trying to force followers to take action when they are not ready to act, critical leaders must find balance in challenging follower thinking and supporting follower actions. In other words, as one student wrote: “Leading critically means encouraging the skills associated with critical thinking in others. A good critical leader recognizes which stage of the critical thinking cycle each follower is engaged in and should be able to help provide encouragement of questioning the accepted norms.”

#### **Cluster IV: Critical Leadership**

##### *Ask questions and listen appropriately*

This action is a more inherently understood concept. It relies more on the idea of good communication skills as a character trait of a critical leader. Similar to King and Kitchener’s (as cited in Evans, et al., 1998) highest stage of the Reflective Judgment Model, a leader’s knowledge should result from reflective thinking, where a process of reasonable inquiry involves constructing solutions to problems and finding or accepting fault in logic. Similarly, as it relates to the Relational Leadership Model (RLM), inclusiveness requires the actual practice of listening skills, coalition building interpersonal skills, and effective civil disclosure (Komives et al., 2007).

##### *Accept, internalize, and apply constructive criticism.*

This action involves the application of criticism and some indication of the self-awareness process. Statements from student papers included descriptors such as evaluate, understand, consider, or handle. For example, students wrote that critical leaders must, “be more group-goal oriented,” “evaluate whether or not a decision made is beneficial to the common group goal, or the leader’s personal goal,” “understand/consider constructive criticism-be on the same level,” and “be able to handle constructive criticism.”

Likewise, as another student stated, “Part of leading critically involves considering other critical thinkers’ objections to your plan, and possibly amending it accordingly.” The RLM stresses the importance of self-awareness as a foundational component of developing a personal leadership philosophy. According to Komives et al. (2007), this is an ethical process that reflects the interests of the common good, which inherently involves the leader’s acceptance

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of others' ideas and opinions about him or her. Critical leaders embody applied constructive criticism.

*Evaluate assumptions before you try to challenge them.*

King and Kitchener (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) advocate that reflective thinking involves comparing evidence and others' opinion before constructing solutions, which are based on the weight of the evidence gathered or the need for action. In a similar sense, this action is a reflective process, wherein the leader must compare evidence and opinions based on context or situation and determine if action should and could be taken. It is similar to the last action-step in this cluster, "Take informed action," but differs in that no action is actually taken. As one student wrote, critical leaders must "analyze multiple arguments and determine which argument is the most useful for that scenario." Likewise, one student explained that "to successfully lead critically the leader looks at every angle of the plan of implementation to ensure every aspect has been thought of ... this also ensures the leader will understand every aspect of the situation and obstacles that may arise."

*Encourage critical followership.*

This action specifically refers to empowering followers. Empowerment is a two-dimensional concept that includes the creation of an environment that encourages and fosters ownership in an idea or process and removes barriers, which prevent meaningful involvement for others (Komives et al., 2007). In this action-step, a critical leader must understand and accept leadership qualities and actions from others, and promote the sustainability of the group or organization. It embraces explicitly the idea of generativity, which is an integral step in the LID Model (Komives et al., 2005; 2006).

In addition, the leader must understand that different types of followers exist. As DuBrin (2010) suggests, there are different levels of engagement by which a follower can be classified. Some may be completely detached and passively support the status quo, whereas others may be engaged to the point where they are willing overthrow the leader if they feel he or she is obstructing the path to successfully promoting the cause. The researchers found that student statements implied an understanding of the types of followers, as well as essential qualities of effective followers. One student wrote "When one leads critically they share the problem with their constituents and together both parties help to generate and evaluate alternatives to eventually reach a solution." Also, student papers suggested critical leaders and followers demonstrated qualities that Kelley (as cited in DuBrin, 2010) noted an effective follower exhibited. In the following

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statements, themes of self-management, commitment, competence, and courage emerged:

- “For true breakthroughs to occur, we must put critical thinking in action by applying it to situations. The next step is leading critically, where we both apply these skills toward our leadership actions as well as developing and encouraging critical thinking skills in our followers.”
- “A good critical leader must know when the group has reached a time for action rather than discussion.”
- “Being able to see the situation and know whether or not you need to take charge of the situation or if you should sit back and let others have the reigns.”
- “Convert followers to critical followers.”
- “A critical leader must create an environment where critical thinking is celebrated rather than discouraged (this may be the hardest step).”
- “Leading critically means not only carefully analyzing your own decision, but encouraging your followers to also question the leader’s decisions.”
- All affected, engaged, and informed of the [vision] must have access to similar methods of critical thinking and objectiveness.”
- “Leading critically means to give your followers the ability and tools to read, think, and sometimes also lead critically.”

#### *Take informed action.*

This final action involves the application of critical thinking skills to leadership actions. Statements from students included specific references to critical thinking or implied components of critical thinking, such as “thinking outside the box.” For example:

- “Leading critically must also involve action, not just thought.”
  - “As a leader your main influence is rooted in making decisions and when one leads critically it is reflected most in those decisions.”
  - “Informed choice vs. right choice.”
  - “Leading critically involves understanding the change you wish to motivate, exploring the many possible ways to achieve this change, and suggesting a plan of action; however, critical thinking should not only exist in the planning stage.”
  - “The more time you get to think critically about a problem or improvement, the better of decision you can make as a leader.”
  - “Leading critically is the ability to evaluate situations just like reading and thinking critically to apply it to one’s actions and decision-making.”
  - “A critical leader is a leader who would understand all sides of situations and be able to make the best possible decision for the group.”
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- “Leading is taking what you have already learned and applying it to real life situations.
- “Using the knowledge gathered from reading, interpreting, judging, and thinking to situations of leadership... it is the smart and innovative way to lead.”

In student development theory, King and Kitchener (as cited in Evans, et al., 1998) wrote that in Stage 7 reflecting thinking, solutions are evaluated for adequacy based on what is reasonable, considering current evidence. Likewise, critical leaders take action based on a thorough critical thought process.

### **Discussion**

The researchers sought to understand how practices in leadership education bridge the gap between what students learn about critical thinking in the classroom environment and how they apply those skills in the real world. Students demonstrated various levels of critical thought through their comments in the written essay assignment. For the researchers, this prompted a new question: What experiential learning techniques in leadership education are most useful in garnering critical thought? Leadership educators may want to consider pedagogies that explore the use of critical reflection through assignments like journaling and role play. Many scholars have suggested that these activities engage and mobilize students to act on new ideas and challenge their conventional thinking in both theory and practice (Jones, Simonetti, & Vielhaber-Hermon, 2000; Reynolds, 1999). In addition, further analysis of experiential learning techniques, and how they are applied in leadership education, as well as other academic disciplines, may be important to determining how the “Actions a Leader Must Take to Lead Critically” can be used as an interdisciplinary tool for improving students’ critical thinking skills in theory and practice.

Finally, the researchers hope that further studies will be conducted to strengthen the proposed theory of critical leadership. Therefore, some limitations in this study should be addressed. To begin, the researchers recognize the sample for this study included students who were purposefully selected. Further studies intended to more closely examine this theory should include a larger, random sample of students. In addition, this study was conducted with students enrolled in a leadership studies course. Yet, the purpose of the research is to stress leadership education as an inter-disciplinary subject. Future research should apply the concept of leading critically to other academic fields.

### **Implications**

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Results from this study are intended to enrich existing literature on leadership education and demonstrate how instructors can facilitate “leading critically” in their classrooms. The 12 Actions a Leader Must Take to Lead Critically were created with the idea that leadership education is an inter-disciplinary subject. Instructors across all academic disciplines may be able to promote critical leadership by incorporating specific learning techniques, critical reflection, and teaching methods that facilitate student participation.

For example, instructors should emphasize experiential learning techniques that influence critical thinking. Leadership can only be learned through practice, and these techniques stress learning by doing. In addition, focusing on activities, such as the Value Line Experience (Crawford, Saul, Matthews, & Makinster, 2005) and in-class debates, allow students to exercise critical thinking and analyze arguments. In the same way, reflective learning should be used to probe student thinking about applying leadership theories learned in class to real situations. Critical reflection permits students to examine their own ideas and beliefs. Using journals can give the added value of providing a safe medium for students to express their thoughts.

In the classroom and through varying forms of feedback, instructors could point out how students’ life experiences can be either beneficial or detrimental to influencing their critical thinking. Utilizing some unstructured classroom discussion may allow students to create their own discourse on critical leadership and provide feedback on leadership actions. Constructive feedback can enhance leadership development, as explained in the action five of the 12 Actions a Leader Must Take to Lead Critically. As well, instructors can promote critical leadership by inviting speakers to class, encouraging mentorship, or requiring students to interview others leaders can precipitate dialogue and, in some cases, create dissonance that can challenge students’ current perceptions. This also can give students an opportunity to ask question and listen appropriately, understand others, and evaluate assumptions. The key is to bridge students’ critical thinking with leadership actions based on informed decision-making.



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