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Leadership, Women Role Models and Inspirational English Learning

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Abstract

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) taught through leadership models exhibited by women concomitantly develops English communication and critical thinking as students assess and appreciate women in leadership roles. The class, *Lady Leaders*, provided a creative curriculum with content at completion formatted into a *Lady Leader Magazine*, AKA scrapbook, which incorporated inspirations and the qualities of women leaders, choosing a personal Lady Leader, interviews and preferences in contemporary interests including fashion, health, fitness and romance. Individual creativity was expressed by generating an original magazine title with a tag line or slogan. This paper will discuss the transformational process of leadership learning and using woman leaders as applied in EFL pedagogy for a Japanese university class.

Keywords: leadership, women leaders, EFL learning; transformation

リーダーシップと女性ロールモデルによる刺激的英語学習

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Introduction

Life, leadership and learning begin with a story. Compelling stories are fundamental to authentic communication. Stories we tell and are told shape our view of the world. Stories are tools which allow people to share insights and inspire: a transformational process. *Management fads may come and go, but storytelling is a phenomenon that is fundamental to all nations, societies and cultures, and has been so since time immemorial* (Denning, 2007). The stories women leaders offer provided critical thinking challenges as students appreciate women role-models and assess leadership qualities within EFL learning. In participating in this process, transformations were possible as students learned about great women and in doing so discovered their potential.



Books could be written about why use leadership or the need to study about successful women in Japan or any university setting. However one omnipresent concept particular to Japan was a significant factor for this curricula development: the Japanese cultural phenomenon of *kawaii* or *cute*. A quintessential example Hello Kitty® has world-wide popularity and is evidence of this powerful concept. Additionally, this concept expands to an idealized woman. As Marling commented, *little girls are the princesses of the kingdom of Japanese cute, presided over by Sanrio's Hello Kitty sweet-as-sugar merchandise*. Liza Dalby, in her 1989 study of Japanese play, asserts that the cuteness associated with such girls' toys provides a model for what women are expected to become. (Marling, 1992).

In this class the challenge was to create an effective English learning course and point the students' conscience compass away from cute to discover the power of women as well as their own. In learning and inspired from successful women's stories students were transformed into more confident communicators, thinkers and leaders. The power of effective leadership, teaching, is to affect a positive ethos and transformation. Goodbye kitty.

Leadership and Transformation

Most researchers agree that leaders guide, direct, motivate, and/or inspire others. Whether a mother or woman in the Tokyo Assembly, leadership consists of effective communication skills. A plethora of leadership references and texts offer discussions and insights. The standard in this category is Leadership for Organizations by Yukl who characterizes transformational behaviors as: *Idealized Influence; Intellectual Stimulation; Individualized Consideration; and Inspirational Motivation* (Yukl, 2001). Yukl's references are helpful for further study on leadership for the classroom or

organizations.

Examining the stories of women leaders demonstrate what is possible in the world and inductively contributes self-potential. The inductive process is an effective and pervasive mechanism transformation. This process is characterized by an Aristotelian concept where one grasps the universal in the clearly known or particular, *epagoge, clearly then it must be by induction that we acquire the knowledge of the principles* (APo, 100b3). Add self-reflection, understanding, communication and transformations are possible. Transformation originates and is controlled by opening the soul's interior doors. As Palmer stated, *We must invite, not command the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen* (2004). Paradoxically, the solitary journey of transformation has an interactive nature; character is engaged in the process by the stories we hear and tell. This fundamental moment is a litmus test leading to transformational leadership, and again Palmer offered, *Every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned. Even if we fail to follow its guidance fully, we are nudged a bit further in that direction* (2004). Leadership and teaching affects real change as learners are transformed and directed to the essential greater good. This is not a good based on a construct of a given morality or gender but a universal good and found in the particulars of good stories.

Women as a Leadership Model and EFL Class



Prepared and motivated by my interest in leadership and the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the goal was to create an EFL communication class which would develop writing and conversation skills as well as improve students' critical thinking by learning about women in leadership roles (Felder, 1996; Greenleaf, 1977; Krashen, 1982; Krashen, Terrell, 1983; Spears, 1998; Tarvin, Al-Arishi, 1991). The creative curriculum used the contemporary English women's magazines; handouts on Lady Leaders; inductive leadership lessons; and interviews. EFL activities, materials and discussions were formatted as a magazine (scrapbook) with sections for women leaders as well as themed topics including fashion, beauty, health, romance and fitness.

Lady Leaders- An English Communication Class Design

Lady Leader Magazine: Cover

The first task and challenge for the students was to create an original magazine title and tag-line (slogan) for their *Lady Leader Magazine*. Magazine titles were required to be three words or less. Tag-



lines had to be six words or less and function in a supporting role to titles and add inspiration or meaning. The student-centered interactive lesson employed titles and tag-lines from well-known companies like McDonald's *I'm Lovin' It*® and Burger King, *Have it Your Way*® as well as others. Students were able to understand the concept and participate in discussions about marketing inspirations. These examples allowed for insights and enabled students to create their own brand. Students appreciated marketing and power of words: JUST DO IT®.

In this first step the students created a vision and knocked on the door of leadership. As Tichy stated, *the idealized project that inspire people to move ahead* (p 128, 2005). The challenge created and met, the images and words provided a conceptual road map for the students- whether it leads to their future or just to their *Lady Leader Magazine*, and students were richer for the effort: both critical thinking and English communication served.

Lady Leader Magazine: Special Interest Sections

Students' interests remained an important consideration for their motivation and enjoyment to learn English. Consequently, the *Lady Leader Magazine* had extensive sections about everyday life of interest to young college students. The first section dealt with fashion. Students were asked to consider planning a wardrobe for three occasions. The three categories were: Party; Play; and Power. Students worked together and shared ideas about each category. Group discussions gave the students a chance to share their fashion choices. Students used illustrations and written explanations for paired and class presentations. Other sections followed the same pattern on topics including beauty, health, fitness and romance. Flexible as to content, another section developed was dubbed '*Six Ways to Wa*' in which aspects of mental strength were discussed. This included the following concepts: making time for yourself with quiet reflection time, using your voice to say what is important, and managing your time well. All are key tools in leadership and transformational process. In another section dealt with romance and the possibilities of love and marriage. But when asked to consider what qualities they personally possess to attract a partner, the exercise of self-reflection proved quite challenging. As Spears says, *leadership can only occur with regular periods of self-reflection and self-assessment* (2002). These sections were a first glance fun, but also anchored in leadership training as well as the transformation process.

Lady Leader Magazine: The Interview

Learning, communication, and leadership are personal. A worthwhile way to convey the value

of women leaders were interviews of successful women. The event was planned by the students including questions, format and thank you letters. Preparing for the end of a project before the beginning actually allowed for more options. This seemed strange to the students at first, but in practice, the value imparted another insight into leadership- know where you are going when you start (Yukl, 2001). The interviews were in Japanese/English as the guests ability allowed. Students translated the answers to the questionnaire and included both the Japanese and English versions in the *Lady Leader Magazine*. While some students spoke in Japanese for the interview, they developed their English communication skills in the following ways: they created questions for the interview; translated responses to English; wrote thank you notes; and reported to the class their impressions and benefits from the interview. A sample the students' comments are as follows:

I was interested in your life in America.

I thought- "What am I?" I want to be a Leader- I can do it!

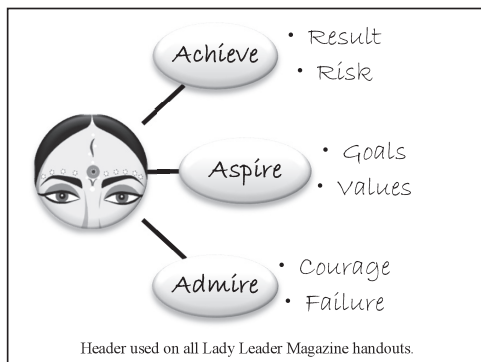
I was very interested in your talk, and I thought- I will study harder.

I'm glad to hear about Christ (Mission) schools.

I heard your talk, I remembered my dream and I will study hard again for my dream.

I heard you talk and I decided on the title of my graduation thesis, 'Dignity.'

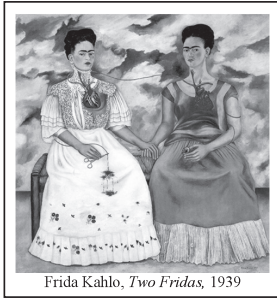
Lady Leader Magazine: Featured Women Leaders



Women leaders were was discussed and written about from three categories: (1) leaders were assessed achievement in terms of results and risks; (2) aspirations through goals and values; (3) admiration in terms of courage and failure. This inductive approach served to scaffold the concepts into the student lexicon of leadership ideas as well the discussion language. The assessment redundancy did several things. It allowed the students to become comfortable with the language.

It also allowed the students to practice critical thinking and self-reflection as they added each Lady Leader with these concepts to their *Lady Leader Magazine*.

Women included in this class featured a variety of women in leadership roles. The choice of women leaders was flexible and provided a fresh look for students and educators. What was consistent was how leaders were assessed. Some of the women included were: the Virgin Mary representing religion; Murasaki Shikibu representing Japan and the first novelist; Eleanor Roosevelt for women and children rights; Hillary Rodham Clinton as a modern politician as well as six to eight others as time allowed.



One example was the introduction of Frida Kahlo, a Mexican surrealist painter. Kahlo's graphic and somewhat gruesome work stunned the students at first. Once they learned about her life and times of this political person who withstood horrific personal traumas, some interesting ideas came into view. In class this process was approached from groups with a different painting for each group. When asked to share what they thought, what the painting meant, students were able to tap into the pain and political messages depicted the paintings. Kahlo paintings challenge any viewer. The meanings are not clear, but a kinetic state. Whether considering the life and art of Freda Kahlo, there are many opportunities to open the mind to new ideas from the many and varied stories available about women in leadership roles

Through the lens of achievement, aspirations and admiration, students learned about women leaders; discussed values and character; and why we admire them. Taking stock of assets also meant critically learning about faults, obstacles, risks and rewards. Again, by making failure not an obstacle, the leap from leading a cause or speaking English was just a step and a process: a change for the better.

Lady Leader Magazine: Personal Choice

Communication and leadership are personal endeavors. An important part of the appreciating women in leadership required personal choices and students choose their own Lady Leader. Taking in to account the previous discussions, students prepared information on a woman leader. Again both written and oral communications were shared. Face will familiar patterns, students were able to prepare and present their choice using the same critical assessments previously applied. Some



of the Lady Leaders chosen were Japanese pop singers, actress, historic figures, sport personalities and mothers. Regardless of the leadership criteria, the power of personal choice was in itself an important exercise. Asked why they like their particular leader many said, *because she is cute*. Far from failure, learning English or leadership is a process, sometimes the step may be small, but steps none-the-less. As the Japanese say, *hitotsu hitotsu, ippo, ippo*, bit by bit, step by step.

Conclusion

There is no lack of wonderful stories about women in leadership roles, but what are lacking are courses and text books which celebrate women as leaders. This class answered this call. The class

also served to help the students develop their communication skills. Students prepared their own Lady Leader magazine (scrapbook) guided through a variety of topics including fashion, health, romance, interviews and women leaders. Students were required to write simple sentences to explain their choices. They developed their speaking abilities using their magazine as reference for in-class and pair-work discussions in each unit. Accomplishments, achievements, character and inspirations about women from the past, present, foreign, domestic offered an opportunity to learn and inspire. Students were challenged creatively to make a magazine title, tag line, and make a personal choice for a Lady Leader. Higher critical thinking was demonstrated by students' personal assessments as they articulated leadership qualities and their reactions from the interviews. Everyday topics of fashion, make-up, health, fitness and romance as well as extraordinary topics under the guise of women leaders proved to be an enjoyable marriage of ladies, leadership and an EFL class.

Women leaders have stories to tell. Storytelling can achieve goals by enabling listeners to visualize universals for the transformations needed to act on that realization. These stories and class served as the springboard for transformations in English communication and critical thinking. The clarity of the familiar allowed for universal revelations, and in this abstraction learners become leaders.

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