

# Leadership in Song: Developing Leadership Practices Using Music in an Online Course

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## Abstract

“Leadership in Song: Developing Collaboration, Community, and Leadership Practices through Music in an Online Course,” is an introductory exercise in an online synchronous educational leadership class that outlines how music can be used as a pedagogical tool to create a cognitive collaborative community of inquiry that fosters a) reflection, b) collaboration, c) value of different leadership practices and d) affective connections to the assignment. Additionally, this assignment provides a transferable activity that school leaders can modify for use with various stakeholders in their schools. Significantly, this assignment underscores how music, an often-underutilized pedagogical tool in academia, creates a reflective, collaborative, engaging, relevant, interactive virtual experience for educational leadership students in an online environment. I applied a series of steps traditional to qualitative analysis such as open and axial coding, noting patterns, and maintaining a chain of evidence; students reported what they valued and learned from the assignment and emphasized how this assignment can be used to enhance collaboration and self-reflection, revise initial ideas, and understand different leadership perspectives. This lesson can be used in online settings as a team-building exercise in a classroom or with a leadership team at the beginning of the school year to help faculty and staff form a community around the school’s goal and mission.

*Keywords:* Developing leadership practices, collaboration in online learning, use of music in online learning, reflection, educational leadership

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The rise in popularity and growth of online learning has moved it from the “periphery of educational delivery to the center of higher education” (Bozkurt & Zawacki-Richter, 2021, p. 3). Increased student enrollment in online courses and fully online instruction delivery created the need for instructors who, heretofore familiar with face-to-face formats, developed the basic skills necessary to deliver quality online instruction (Bozkurt & Zawacki-Richter, 2021; Donelan, et al., 2025; Neuwirth, et al., 2020; Young & Duncan, 2014). The demand for online instruction has assumed the form of blended, asynchronous, and synchronous delivery (Duncan et al., 2013), shifting many educators from K-16 to post graduate school from hybrid delivery to exclusive virtual delivery. Whether learning is delivered face-to-face, hybrid, synchronously, or asynchronously, educational delivery has challenged traditional pedagogical tools and required a “rethinking of educational strategies for the twenty-first century” (Crawford, 2017, p. 1).

One of the pedagogical challenges with which higher education professors who teach online, particularly educational leadership professors, most struggle is how to create and incorporate academically challenging, culturally relevant, and engaging educational experiences using assignments that not only address leadership standards, but that also address the flexibility needs of professional students in a virtual environment (Donelan et al, 2025; Duncan et al., 2013; Neuwirth, et al., 2020). This is especially true in an online environment where in addition to providing practical assignments, professors must also first create authentic community—a community of students who discuss educational challenges, questions, and ideas in real time . Hence, a need and a challenge also exist to create authentic pedagogical strategies. As this study suggests, music is one way to teach online, but little is known about its use in educational leadership practices. Herein, I offer a response to this challenge using music as a pedagogical tool to facilitate the development of the “social and learning communities and foster a shared consensus...” (Rovai, 2002, p. 364).

## **Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this article is to describe how using music as an introductory educational leadership assignment entitled “Leadership in Song” (LIS) in an online platform successfully creates a cognitive collaborative community of inquiry, specifically around leadership characteristics that fosters a) reflection, b) collaboration, c) recognition of the value of diversity and d) provides a transferrable activity that school leaders can modify for use with various stakeholders in their schools (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015).

Inasmuch as learning and leadership are fundamentally social in nature, this original assignment, LIS, is significant because it underscores how music as a medium is used to create a collaborative, engaging, relevant, and interactive virtual experience for educational leadership students (Pope & Patterson, 2019). This assignment further emphasizes that learning is social and embodies both a rational and cognitive process (Immordino-Yang & Damasio 2007).

## Research Questions

The overarching research question about whether and how music can be leveraged in an online environment is guided by the following questions:

- 1) Whether and how music affects community building in an online environment?
- 2) Whether and how music advances leadership collaboration skills in an online environment?

## Theoretical Lens

Grounded in tenets of Active Collaborative Learning (ACL), this assignment centers student-learner experiences by using music as a pedagogical tool to help students find patterns in their lived leadership experiences, organize their patterns into meaningful ideas, and apply their ideas around a singular group experience (Yoder & Hochevar, 2005). Molinillo et al. (2018) contend that “active learning involves speaking, listening, writing, reading, and thinking” (Yoder & Hochevar, 2005) (np). Moreover, using ACL changes the way students learn by moving from a passive role to one that actively manages and develops their learning (Donelan, et al., 2025; Molinillo et al., (2018). Instead of learning passively through LIS, students demonstrate their own agency by becoming architects of new learning and experiences.

Further, LIS leverages a learning modality, music, that has not been a dominant motif in academia or typically used in higher education classrooms to illustrate how music can instill educational leadership concepts (Duncan & Young, 2009; Watson, Bishop, Ferdinand-James, 2017). Equally important in this assignment, music was used as a tool to reinforce leadership skills.

While the use of music is not common in higher education, teachers in the early grades routinely use music as a teaching tool (Foran, 2009). As instruction moves to higher levels of education, strategies as simple as the use of music are considered too elementary. Nevertheless, as Foran argues, when used appropriately, music can evoke positive experiences that “can strengthen healthy neural connections and promote cognitive and emotional development” (p. 54). Further, Foran, Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) and Sjolie, Espenes, and Buo, (2022) argue that emotional processes are necessary for transfer of skills and knowledge into long-term memory and real-life situations. Because “modern biology reveals that humans are fundamentally emotional and social creatures” (Immordino-Yang, & Damasio, 2007, p. 3), in this case, connecting judicious use of music to a specific leadership assignment has the potential to promote student engagement through cognitive and emotional connections to ideas (Doolittle et al., 2023; Foran, 2009). When used as an integral part of an introductory lesson in educational leadership, music can potentially promote higher level thinking and better decision-making skills, and lead learners to connections that foster a deeper understanding of the concepts regardless of the level of educational engagement (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Jing, 2024).

Lastly, while the assignment’s primary task engages the cognitive dimension, by employing an ACL lens, the activities involve social-emotional interaction evoked using music (Sjolie, Espenes, & Buo, 2022, p. 2). As a result, social interaction through music provides the foundation on which the assignment rests.

## Methodology

### *Leadership in Song: The Assignment*

“Leadership in Song” (LIS), is an introductory assignment in an elective urban leadership concentration offered in an online Master of Education (M.Ed.) and Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) program. As an introductory activity for school leaders and teachers, I used music as an emotional connector to build a shared philosophy of leadership. This assignment is designed to a) offer an initial way to create community among a group of students who have no previous relationship with one another, b) foster consensus building and synthesis, c) shift the balance of power from the teacher as the focal point of learning to the student. The following outlines how the assignment was structured within an urban leadership classroom.

### *Participants*

Twenty-one participants in this study were Master of Education and Educational Doctorate students in an elective urban leadership class taught every fall and spring. Participants in this class served as teachers, school and district level leaders, and one person in the judicial system within public-school settings as depicted in Table 1 below. For anonymity, students were assigned a pseudonym beginning with Student A through Student T.

**Table 1**

*School Assignments of Students in Urban Leadership Class*

School Assignments	Program	Number of Participants
Classroom Teacher	M. Ed.	9
Building Assistant Principal	Ed.D.	4
Building Principal	Ed.D.	4
District Personnel	M.Ed.	1
District Personnel	Ed.D.	2
Other (juvenile system)	Ed.D.	1
Total	M.Ed. Students	10
	Ed. D. Students	11
		21 Students

### *Introducing the Assignment*

To introduce the assignment, model the use of music as a teaching strategy, and establish a commonality of purpose, the professor used a song that resonated with the professor’s philosophy of leadership. In this study, “I Am Light” by India Arie was used. The song was introduced by telling students that “I am playing a song that represents my philosophy of educational leadership.” After playing the song, I explained how my philosophy of educational leadership relates to the song’s lyrics.

Next, students organized themselves into groups that last throughout three semesters, entailing three urban leadership courses. Because this course is the first of three urban educational leadership courses, this exercise is the first step in creating purposeful communities of learners.

### ***Crafting Philosophies of Leadership and Choosing Their Songs***

Over the next week, students wrote their individual philosophies of school leadership, then shared and discussed their philosophies with their groups. Through consensus and synthesis, each group developed a “group” philosophy of school leadership. After synthesizing their individual philosophies and developing their group philosophy of school leadership, students collectively selected a song that embodies their composite philosophy of leadership. Using their class readings to contextualize and support their explanations of “leadership in song,” students crafted a group explanation of how the lyrics in their songs relate to their collective philosophies of educational leadership. As a result, the overall experience allowed students to conceptualize a significant component of leadership: a definition of who the person and the group are as leaders.

As a final step, students answered the following four questions:

- 1) What is the value or relevance of the assignment?
- 2) What did you learn from the assignment?
- 3) How could the assignment be used in other settings?
- 4) How or in what way(s) would you modify the assignment?

Students answered these questions individually.

### ***Data Collection***

After completing the assignment, students submitted the following: 1) individual philosophies of educational leadership 2) collective philosophies of educational leadership, 3) group song with an explanation of the connections between their philosophy and the song’s lyrics, 4) and individual responses to four questions describing the value of the assignment, what they learned, how they might use the assignment in other settings, and any possible modifications. Groups then submitted all explanations and responses in Power Point, Prezzi, or Word Doc format along with either a video or the lyrics of the song in our digital learning management system, Desire2Learn. For this article, findings are reported from individual responses to questions one and two on the relevance of the assignment and what they learned. A forthcoming paper discusses students’ responses to the way in which the assignment relates to their group songs and their philosophies of leadership.

### ***Data Analysis***

Using the tools of analysis as outlined by Saldana (2016) and informed by tenets of Action Research related to collaborative action research (Efron & Ravid, 2016), I analyzed the data by using open and axial coding, noting patterns, and maintaining a chain of evidence (Merriam, 2002; Saldana, 2016). Based on student responses to the action research questions, this analysis included several iterative steps::

- 1) Compilation of group responses from the four questions entitled “Leadership in Song composite responses,

- 2) Compilation of codes from the composite responses entitled Coded – Leadership in Song – composite responses,
- 3) Compilation of themes by the guiding research questions, and finally,
- 4) A compilation of responses by individual students.

In this way, I created a chain of evidence for the responses that could easily be traced by each individual student. Below is a more detailed explanation of the content analysis process.

First, I compiled each group’s responses to the four questions organized by question with individual responses under each question in a document entitled “Leadership in Song Composite Responses.” After compiling the four questions per group into one document, I reviewed the responses several times and open coded the responses to all four questions. While coding, I also made notes of initial themes in track changes. I called this document “Coded-Leadership in Song—Composite Responses” in which I collapsed the codes by question and individuals into themes. After identifying themes of individuals, I combined similar themes with individual names and comments across questions and groups. For example, for question 1 (What is the value of this assignment?) I grouped the various codes into themes such as reflection and collaboration. I recorded the themes along with the individual person on a document entitled “Summary of Themes” for the question. In this way, I identified individual themes as well as individual students who contributed the themes in one document. To explore ways in which music can be leveraged in an online environment, I share students’ responses to the two reflective questions: a) What was the value or relevance of the assignment? and b) What did you learn from the assignment?

## Results

### *Student Feedback and Outcomes*

In total, 21 M.Ed. and Ed.D. students took urban school leadership as an elective in 2022. Table 2 summarizes recurring themes from students’ responses to the value and relevance of the assignment, along with what they learned from the Leadership in Song experience.

**Table 2**

#### *Themes from Student Responses*

<b>Question 1:</b> What did you value or find relevant about the assignment?	<b>Question 2:</b> What did you learn from the assignment?
Reflection about leadership	Reflection about self
Collaboration	Collaboration

Learning effective and ineffective leadership practices	Diversity of leadership practices and perspectives
Affective connections	Opposition

Responses for questions one and two elicited overlapping and nuanced themes in four categories: reflection, collaboration, leadership practices and affective responses. Because of this overlap, I reported what was valued and learned under each theme.

### ***Reflection: What Was Valued and Learned***

Reflection was a major theme in response to both the value of the assignment (Question 1) and what students learned (Question 2). Though mentioned more frequently in students' responses to what they learned, reflection was cited as a response to both questions. Students discussed how reflection was valuable to them and described types of reflection. Analysis of student responses revealed aspects of reflection and self-reflection in that students developed an awareness of their personal leadership styles and philosophies, recognized leadership as an evolutionary process, and understood self-reflection as a tool to determine areas for growth and effectiveness.

### Self-Reflection

Students valued and learned from the process of reflection. Students saw value in their ability to "dissect personal leadership philosophy, reflect on who they are and empower them to change and facilitate an awareness of the evolution process in leadership" (Student N). Part of this change involved looking "inward to determine the qualities great leaders possess and why these qualities are important" (Student S). A seasoned educator, Student R, admitted that the exercise "made me reflect on my philosophy of education as a new teacher and revisit my philosophy of leadership as a school leader." Similarly, Student N learned that "reflecting on my leadership style was eye-opening. Essentially, this assignment made me think 'Who am I?'" Student Q commented that "I learned a lot about myself in this assignment....I learned how I want to approach leadership in a way that corresponds with my philosophy of leadership."

### Introspection

Unlike self-reflection, students valued introspection because it involved not just thinking about leadership in general but thinking about one's individual qualities. For example, Student S, an assistant principal, suggested that "this assignment is an exercise in introspection and forces the student to look inward to determine the qualities great leaders possess and why these qualities are important." Student I offered that "it was important that I deeply consider what I value most in leaders and see if those qualities actually align with whom I am authentically." He continued that "it also challenged me to think about the attributes that I want to demonstrate as I transition into high school administration. This type of assignment is valuable because self-awareness leads to growth and progress."

### ***Collaboration: What Was Valued and Learned***

Collaboration was cited in both what students valued and learned. Through collaboration, students learned and valued the opportunities to work as a team to complete an assignment and

appreciated the opportunities for discussion. Among other lessons, students valued opportunities to share core leadership values and learned how and why to build consensus.

### Collaborating as a Team to Complete an Assignment

Working as a team allowed students to rely on team members' strengths, share ideas about leadership styles, and engage in rich dialogue. The value of working as a team was important for several students. For example, Student P offered that "by working together as a group we were able to play to one another's strengths to complete the task." It also allows the "opportunity for different individuals to synthesize their philosophies of leadership into one philosophy... to complete a task" (Student J). For example, Student L suggested that there was value in "the opportunity to share ideals and show the connectedness [similarities] with each of our different leadership styles."

### Allowed for Discussion

Students cited having the space to engage in discussion as another important theme. They commented that discussion allowed students "to view leadership from a different lens," (Student C). It also afforded students "the ability to discuss qualities of leadership or to discuss the similarities." Student L commented that the collaboration provided the "opportunity to expand ideas of leadership."

### ***Other Lessons Learned***

Students felt the assignment helped to determine core leadership values and provided insight into the collaboration process. For example, Student H stated that "we were able to share what is important to us and what we in turn find important to our work." Another student offered that "this assignment provides insight on how we collaborate within our teams and why" (Student O). Specifically, the assignment provided a model for how to build consensus from different perspectives. For example, Student I commented that "through the consensus of each individual philosophy of leadership that it is essential to be inclusive and consider the ideas and opinions of roles. Student I also suggested that this assignment would be a great simulation. Another student offered that "this assignment provides insight on how we collaborate within our teams and why" (Student O).

### ***Leadership Practices***

Another theme mentioned by students in both questions was leadership practices. When students discussed what they valued, they mentioned the value in learning about different leadership practices including effective and ineffective leadership practices through self-reflection. When students discussed what they learned about leadership they discussed the diversity and evolution of leadership practices and perspectives. Student N commented that "As leaders in education, we must continually evolve in this ever-changing field. The only way to do that is to reflect on who we are."

### Learning Different Leadership Practices

Several participants shared their thoughts about leadership practices. Student J stated, "I learned that individuals have a wide array of ways in which they view leadership." He continued, "recognizing how people perceive leadership will shed light as to why they respond to issues that arise within an organization..." Student C also suggested that part of the diversity of opinions in

leadership is derived “based on an individual’s experiences, surroundings, and personal circumstances.” Student A confirmed that “leadership can come in the form of many ways.” Several students commented that they learned “different leadership styles” and that the assignment brought “people of different ideas together” (Student F). Other students commented that they learned that leadership is a thought process that evolves. For example, Student C offered the process of evolution when she added, “leaders must adjust and evolve based on the needs of their staff, students and various other stakeholder.” Another student commented that “I have learned that there is so much more that goes into the leadership role than what I previously thought” (Student L).

### Learning Effective and Ineffective Leadership Practices

Students saw the value in identifying effective and ineffective leadership practices. For example, Student M shared that through this assignment, she could determine “whether my style of leadership is/has been proven effective in my current and previous roles” (Student I). When asked about the value of the assignment, students commented that it afforded them an opportunity to reflect on their individual leadership styles, practices, and beliefs as leaders and classroom teachers. Second, the assignment provided students with a lens to consider the necessity of change by exposing students to other leadership styles, and to consider areas to improve their different schools.

Student I surmised that “leaders should be supportive and build positive relationships.” Student B added that despite their backgrounds and experiences, “good leaders are able to LISTen to others’ perspectives and opinions in order to evolve their approach and thought process.” One of the most insightful comments about what they learned centered around the acknowledgement of differences in intersectionality of ideals. Student H stated that

while we have differences, there are so many areas where we intersect in our ideals... From each of our experiences we were able to share what is important to us and what we in turn find important to our work.

### *Affective Connections*

Students reported four important affective connections to the assignment: affective responses, leveraging music to connect to students, opposition to the assignment, and tension with use of music. Affective responses and leveraging music to connect were distinct responses to question 1, and opposition to the assignment and tension using music were revealed in responses to Question 2. Students suggested that music fosters an affective connection. Student K reported that “selecting a song that we believe embodies our role as educational leaders portrays how heartfelt this profession is. Music comes from the heart and so does working in education, especially in leadership.” Another student commented that it connected her to her youth:

In considering the value or relevance of this type of assignment, I venture to take a mental trip back to my younger years—even before I knew my career path. Briefly reflecting on my young self, I retreated to the quiet stance and opted to simply observe my surroundings and conjure ways to make changes that I considered was need. I still have those similar envisaged moments whenever I see a situation as

problematic or something I would like to be able to improve. Only now, have I made a connection to my feelings about change in my younger years that I have today. (Student K)

### Leveraging Music to Connect to Students

Considering the power of music, another student found value in connecting the music to how young people learn and navigate their world: “The relevance of this assignment is that our students seem to learn more about how to navigate life through music, and this assignment made me reflect on how the song resonated with me as a child” (Student T). Through this experience, he was reminded that

our kids are definitely influenced by the culture and you can see that via the novelty tee shirts they wear, and the fact that many of them walk the hall with Air Pods in their ears all day long. They learn through the music, and we educators must leverage that to our advantage. (Student T)

### Opposition to the Assignment

Even though most students accepted the assignment, reactions to the assignment ranged from “not passionate about music” (Student P) to challenging with one student who opposed the assignment. She explained that her “default has always been to...work “independently rather than with a group, mainly because I always end up doing all of the work anyway.” Importantly, while this student did not want to do the assignment, she developed some powerful insights about the assignment’s usefulness by its conclusion. In her responses she acknowledged that

my experience with this assignment—really THIS COHORT—is unlike any other that I have experienced. This group pulls their own weight, and everyone is willing to jump in and come to the rescue when one of us is struggling (Student P).

This realization led her to the understanding that “often the power of group work lies in remembering that there is a power in the collective. This is a valuable takeaway—as leaders we must remember that the smartest person in the room is the room.”

For many students using song as the medium was a source of irritation. Some thought the entire assignment off-putting (Student P). Others saw no immediate value (Student K). Still others offered the use of other mediums. The important point is that while they found the assignment difficult because of the different preferences for music, in retrospect, they found value in the assignment after completing it. For example, Student K stated that

INITIAL THOUGHTS [student’s emphasis] I’m just not certain if there was an immediate and beneficial impact based on us joining our philosophies and connecting that verbiage to an agreed upon song. In retrospect, I can see how a musical selection ties into leadership; music and leaders connect to people emotionally, music and leaders have a purpose or message. Music entails instruments and voices which play together or independently – as do the leaders and other contributing staff in the building to move toward a desired outcome.

Student P was equally adamant about the nature of the assignment: “I am not passionate about music: therefore, the nature of this assignment was off-putting to me.” However, after completing the assignment, she added, “I think this the beauty of an assignment takes some of the comfort zone. It forces people to come together to complete a mission ... It taught me the strength of the collective.”

Another student would have preferred to work with students who hold similar positions. This point is particularly important as leaders face more diverse student bodies and parents in their communities. Leadership could be the most challenging aspect of the assignment since teachers must grapple with diversity and address student needs from a culturally responsive perspective. As pointed out in the value of the assignment and how it can be used, participants admitted that this exercise helps leaders learn how to recognize and negotiate not only similarities but also differences and more importantly reach consensus about how to complete a task.

### ***Summary***

The personal interaction and tasks imposed by this assignment forced students to collaborate and reflect. The assignment afforded students opportunities to reflect on their own leadership philosophies as well as the leadership philosophies of others. Additionally, students cited to successfully complete the assignment they needed to reflect on who they were as individuals and as leaders. Through this inter- and introspection students learned the diversity of leadership practices, both effective and ineffective.

## **Discussion**

Using ACL as a theoretical lens, the Leadership in Song assignment was designed to use music as a pedagogical tool in an online synchronous educational leadership class to (a) inform practice, (b) build community, and (c) synthesize and construct new ideas around a collective leadership philosophy. More importantly, through orchestrated engagement, these student-learner experiences focused on ACL tenets of speaking, listening, writing, reading, and thinking.

Leadership in Song is an assignment that fosters learning communities connected to a cognitive skill and links an emotional task to a key component of educational leadership, a philosophy of leadership. As such, the findings from this assignment supports a foundation for lasting learning that connects to the emotional as leveraged through music: the song/music connects students to the emotional aspect of the assignment. Students then use that emotional or affective connection to create their individual learning communities. Some students commented that use of the music connected them to their youth and reminded them of the connections contemporary youth make with music.

Pedagogically, music grounds the Leadership in Song assignment and is the focal point from which students engage their “cognitive presence,” defined as the process by which learners construct, confirm, and devise new meaning through “sustained discourse” in a critical community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2021, p. 1). By using music to address learning styles and

connect the emotional to the cognitive, this exercise contributes to “instructional practice” and the “science of instruction” (Mayer, 2009, p. 1). Using ideas from the class readings, their individual school/leadership experiences, the school/leadership experiences of their peers, this activity allows students to construct their own meanings of leadership through music (Schwon, 1983).

In response to the overarching research question (Whether and how can music be leveraged in an online environment?) the guiding questions included: 1) Whether and how did music affect community building in an online environment? and 2) Whether and how did music advance leadership collaboration skills in an online environment? The central outcomes of this assignment are 1) reflection, 2) the power of collaboration, 3) better understanding of leadership skills, and 4) affective connections.

### ***Reflection***

Because active learning and reflection involves speaking, listening, writing, reading, and thinking (Yoder & Hochevar, 2005), reflection was an integral part of the ways in which music advanced leadership collaboration skills. Using music as the focal point of the assignment provided students opportunities for self-reflection about their leadership practices as well as the leadership practices of those in the group. For example, because of group collaborative conversations, the assignment caused students to engage in self-reflection, a necessary skill in leadership. Through the process of looking in the mirror and then listening to peers, students analyzed and accessed their own ideas about leadership in comparison to other ideas. The ensuing introspection coupled with shared ideas fostered a heightened self-awareness that fosters growth and progress.

### ***Collaboration***

Assignments such as this provide space for collaboration and introduce prospective leaders to the importance of considering different perspectives, which are essential for effective leadership. Students found value in collaboration citing “the style of assignment allows teamwork and collaboration. It provides each one of us an opportunity to meet and learn about others....” (Student L). Thus, the creation and articulation of a collective philosophy of educational leadership using song allows students to collaboratively reach an educational goal (Garrison, 2007) by: 1) fostering individual and group accountability and group processing around a singular idea, 2) establishing the group’s social presence, 3) building an environment of inquiry and reflective discussion to allow. Further, the collaborative discussions involved in this assignment moved students from a teacher-centered focus on leadership to an active student-centered and student-generated focus on leadership (Sjolie, Espenes, & Buo, 2022).

### ***Collaborative Community***

One of the essential elements in online or virtual higher education classrooms has been the necessity of building collaborative communities (Duncan, 2005; Garrison, 2007; Sjolie et al., 2022), especially for working professionals. In contrast to collaboration, building a collaborative community requires sustained collaborative discourse within the same group of people while collaboration may occur occasionally with one goal (Randrup, Druckenmiller & Briggs, 2016). Garrison 2007 argues that “higher education has consistently viewed community as essential to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning” (p. 61).

Students' collaborative community building skills form the basis of their work for working with their leadership philosophies around the music they select. Naidu (2014) argues that to form the connectivism necessary to build a collaborative community as well as work towards a common goal, "communication, discussion, and debate" (p. 67) are necessary components. Importantly, because the philosophy of leadership in song uniquely belongs to each group, their communities are defined by both their collective philosophies and by their individual songs. In addition to establishing a collaborative online community, this assignment allows for community collaboration outside the online environment through phone conversations, or other communication platforms such as Group Meet, Slack, or Google Doc. The collaboration embedded in this assignment models the type of collaboration that leaders should model and expect from their teachers.

### ***Better Understanding of Leadership Skills***

In the process of collaborating and reaching consensus, students found value in learning effective and ineffective leadership practices. As noted, because the class was composed of M.Ed. and Ed.D. students, they found themselves at multiple places on the leadership spectrum. Hence, part of the collaboration consisted in hearing, sharing, and learning from colleagues' diverse leadership experiences including effective and ineffective leadership practices. In part, this exercise functioned as its own professional learning opportunity with the less experienced leaders learning from the more experienced leaders and the seasoned leaders gleaning fresh ideas from the less experienced participants.

### ***Affective Connections***

Because of the sustained cognitive collaboration embedded in the Leadership in Song process, students recognize that the groups are also formed for social purposes—to help students get to know each other—and to form a community of learners based on a mutual purpose and inquiry that in turn reinforces their social skills (Garrison, 2007). Undergirded by a positive interdependence, students form not just a social presence but a presence that requires "intellectual focus...and purposeful communication" (p. 63). This collective construction of leadership in song encourages discussions around students' cultural norms, language, values, beliefs, knowledge, and practice represented in their schools (Abrahams, 2005). Experiencing an assignment that promotes social presence and participating in a collaborative community equips students with tools that they can use as school leaders. They learn the power of building and engaging in social activities that move toward purposeful collaborative engagement around a specific purpose. Most important, this assignment models how to engage in and engage others in a collaborative community.

### ***Benefits of Discomfort***

Notwithstanding the social purposes of this assignment, affectively, several students commented that they were not passionate about music, and the nature of the assignment was "off-putting." Acknowledging that this type of assignment caused some students discomfort is important. Even though the assignment took students out of their comfort zones, it encouraged them to rely on their team mates to help them make sense of and execute the assignment. Awareness of the possibility that some students may be uncomfortable with the assignment is important because it demonstrated for school leaders who are accustomed to being the person

with the answers, that even leaders need a team to “complete a mission.” This acknowledgement is important because it reinforces the need for teamwork on all levels.

## **Lessons from the Field**

LIS lessons from the field include how I would modify the assignment to meet the needs of others both inside and outside an online learning environment as well as implications for practice.

### ***Modifications for Practice***

Given the pedagogical focus of the assignment, I considered modifications for subsequent classes. As a first step for the assignment, I would afford students an opportunity to draft their personal philosophies of leadership. Drafting their own philosophies of leadership would provide them with a basis for combining and drafting a collective philosophy of leadership. As a final step, I would afford students an opportunity to revise their individual philosophies of leadership based on what they learned during the process. Revision as the last step in the assignment is important because it invites students to further explore and broaden their perspectives, re-evaluate, and revise their collective philosophies of leadership. Students then have an opportunity to submit their revised versions of leadership philosophies with an additional explanation of what they changed and a rationale for their changes. Lastly, I would ask students to represent their songs/philosophies in a collage, wordle, or some other visual format, again reinforcing engagement and creativity.

Using music for this assignment worked because each group was charged with finding a song despite diverse music preferences, thus prompted students out of their comfort zones to engage in a task. While some students suggested using other mediums such as a visual art or a movie in lieu of music, I think using music worked best because even though students may not like the same type of music, use of music required students to interact with diverse musical preferences and then reach consensus about the best song to represent their collective ideas. Further, it allowed students to touch the emotional reservoirs of “teaching, research, service and leadership” (Dillard, 2006, p. xii). In this sense, students were expected to respond not only to emotionality that a song inspired, but they had to relate the lyrics directly to their collective philosophies. The cognitive and emotional connection between musicality, the words of a song, and the philosophy of leadership would be lost with the use of other forms of media.

### ***Implications for Practice***

While designed for an online class, LIS is appropriate for hybrid or face-to-face classes and can be adapted as a back-to-school opening activity, a community-building exercise, and a motivational exercise. For example, school leaders can use this assignment as an initial back-to-school activity to help faculty coalesce around an idea or identity or to express their feelings about returning to school. The latter might be informative given the anxiety that teachers face around returning to school and teaching post-pandemic or other social or work-related stressors. Additionally, Leadership in Song can easily be modified to include a school-wide philosophy or mission statement, or it can be used to build collaboration among faculty.

Because Leadership in Song is a malleable assignment, it can be used as an excellent professional development tool, team building, and motivational activity to help teachers develop their own philosophies of teaching and learning. It can also be used by teacher leaders and teachers of the same subject to find a song that expresses how they feel about their specific subjects or teaching their classes. Furthermore, students suggested that LIS could be used in K-12 classrooms to build community.

## **Conclusion**

The Leadership in Song assignment is a tool that can be used by school leadership instructors in both online and face-to-face environments to fulfil students' need for social presence, cognitive discourse, and community building by “balancing socio-emotional interaction, building group cohesion and facilitating and modeling respectful critical discourse which is essential “for productive inquiry” (Garrison, 2007, p. 69). It is an example of how an atypical medium, music, can be used to enhance instruction in a graduate level educational leadership class. Even though Garrison (2007) suggests that additional work is needed to ensure that course content and social interactions occur in online teaching, this assignment provides alignment of the course content by affording students the opportunity to define leadership through collaboration. The assignment also offers an opportunity for instructors to engage students in and out of the online classroom environment. Because both successful virtual and face-to-face teaching should provide engagement, relevance, and collaboration, this exercise offers an exemplar of how music might be used to enhance instruction in both settings.

It is very important to note that even though Reflection and Collaboration were common to what students valued and learned, for at least two students, the initial assignment was “off putting.” However, one student, a building level principal, whose default was “to do it” herself offered the most insightful epiphany for this assignment:

Often the power of group work lies in remembering that there is power in the collective. Yes! This is a valuable takeaway—as leaders we must remember that the smartest person in the room is the room. WOW! What a valuable takeaway and reminder that I think leaders often forget. (Student P)

This realization is often missing in educational leadership. Instead of principals, teachers, staff, and district personnel working together to achieve a task, they more often work in siloes.

The crux of the assignment is that no matter how different the ideas, values, and beliefs about leadership, people can come together for a common goal. By extension, one would hope that school leaders, teachers, and district personnel could use the lessons from LIS to inspire collaboration and reflection to build more cohesive and purposeful educational teams.

## **Declarations**

There are no conflicts regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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