

Beyond Words: Classroom Strategies that Reflect on Nonverbal Cues and Leader Identity Development

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Introduction

Interpersonal skills are foundational to how we understand leadership and are “vital to the development of human relationships” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011, p. 484). Interpersonal skills are collectively defined as learned behaviors used in social interactions and characterized by complex verbal and nonverbal exchanges (McConnell, 2004; Northouse, 2022). Interpersonal skills are linked to effective leadership behaviors and the capacity to influence others through relationships (Riggio, 2024). Fostering leadership learning experiences to emphasize interpersonal skill development allows students to practice leadership as a social process and deepen their understanding of leader development (Komives, 2013). Leadership education scholarship emphasizes the intentional design of instructional approaches that teach interpersonal skills as core learning outcomes (Matkin et al., 2023). However, limited research has examined how instructional strategies or classroom activities can be designed to develop students' nonverbal communication skills as a component of leadership learning. To address this gap in leadership education, the purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate students' perspectives on nonverbal communication and its role in effective interpersonal communication.

Conceptual Framework

The Leadership Identity Model (LID) explains how individuals develop as leaders through experience, reflection, and social interaction, progressing from viewing leadership as positional a relational process (Komives et al., 2005). It provides a framework where learners move toward an integrated leader identity over time. In leadership education, the model supports the use of structured learning experiences that encourage active engagement and reflection to promote continuous developmental growth. This approach is reinforced by calls to better connect the LID model with intentional, reflective course assignments that enhance meaning-making in leadership learning (Sunderman & Orsini, 2024). Because LID positions reflection and meaning making as central mechanisms of developmental growth, it offers a useful lens for understanding how students come to recognize, interpret, and internalize nonverbal communication, as part of their broader leadership identity development.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological approach to explore undergraduate students' perspectives on nonverbal communication and its connection to leader identity development. Reflection statements were collected from journal submissions of 42 students enrolled in an introduction to leadership course, de-identified, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis including open, axial, and selective coding. Researchers then engaged in horizontalization to identify significant statements and emergent themes related to leadership cognition through reflection on interpersonal skills and nonverbal communication

(Moustakas, 1994; Neuman, 2014; Williams & Moser, 2019). Researchers served as the course instructor and teaching assistant, engaged in bracketing to minimize bias and ensure student narratives remained central to the analysis. An audit trail helped guide debrief conversations to enhance confirmability and dependability (MacQueen et al., 1998).

Results

Analysis of student reflection produced three overarching categories: *Nonverbal Communication*, *Interpersonal Skills*, and *Connections to Leader Identity*. Within nonverbal communications, students emphasized nonverbal behaviors, like eye contact and facial expressions, carry more weight than words in conveying confidence, emotion, and leadership presence. The students also recognize nonverbal cues as tools for situational awareness and stronger interpersonal relationships.

Emerging themes around interpersonal skills, including self-awareness, the importance of listening, and self-improvement revealed that students connected their understanding of nonverbal communication to emotional intelligence, giving and receiving feedback, and aligning their values with their leader behaviors.

Across all categories, students articulated that engaging with nonverbal communication content through reflection scaffolded their understanding of leadership as a developmental process, with many directly connecting interpersonal skills to their leader identity through effective teamwork, relationship building, and focused communication. Students also articulated ownership of their leader identity by identifying personal strength and acknowledging that understanding how they present themselves is central to the message they convey as a leader.

Conclusions/ Implications

Consistent with the LID Model, the findings point to personal leadership development reflected in self-awareness and reflection. Students articulated their movement through the process with the connections they described in their reflections. This is indicative of previous studies that have shown the relevance of meaning-making experiences with how an individual leader better understands their leader identity (Sunderman & Orsini, 2024) and how students made deeper commitments to their own leadership development (McCarron et al., 2023). Additional lines of inquiry into the role of reflection assignments in leadership courses and experiences could help develop instructional strategies that support advanced leadership development and understanding in students.

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