

## Transformational Leadership: The Nexus Between Faith and Classroom Leadership

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### ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership is well documented in organizational and business literature. Classroom and faith-based applications are more recent phenomena. The authors of this mixed-methods study explored professor behaviors and characteristics perceived as transformational in students' faith and focused on transformational leadership in the classroom at a faith-based institution. Thirty-four undergraduate students completed surveys containing open-ended and forced-choice questions; the findings highlighted the importance of compassion, optimism, encouragement, and openness as behaviors that facilitated faith transformation.

Transformational leadership is an “approach that causes change in individuals and social systems” (Gujral, 2012, p. 1), but the founder of the theory focused on the collaboration of leaders and followers to motivate and establish a stronger sense of morality (Burns, 2010). Rowe and Guerrero's (2013) definition highlighted the importance of the relationship built through this style: “transformational leadership is an involved, complex process that binds leaders and followers together in the transformation or changing of followers” (p. 215).

Although transformational leadership is a relatively new concept, particularly in the instructional context, it has strong roots in the management field (Noland & Richards, 2014). This foundation has provided information on effective characteristics of transformational leading. Transformational leaders and effective teachers share many of the same characteristics that make them successful in their respective professions (Kim, 2012). Leaders and teachers both help motivate change, intellectually challenge others, meet them on an individual level, and serve as a model for followers and students.

Transformational leadership as it applies to teaching appears to impact students' mastery of such key course concepts as their attitudes, beliefs, and skill development (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). With its follower-centered approach, transformational leaders play a key role in the classroom by providing guidance, motivation, and assistance (Noland & Richards, 2014). This leadership approach at a Christian university enables faculty to guide students in critical thinking and in evaluating knowledge and its application through the lens of faith.

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## Review of Literature

This review is comprised of three subjects described within the transformational leadership literature. First, we provide a definition and a brief historical summary of transformational leadership. Second, we review the literature that focuses on the application of transformational leadership within the classroom. Finally, we discuss transformational leadership within a faith context. These three areas of literature established a framework for our research questions.

### *Transformational Leadership*

Transformational Leadership developed as a theory over the past 35 years. In 1978, James MacGregor Burns published the book *Leadership*, which outlined the differences between transactional and transformative (transformational) leadership (Burns, 2010). This differentiation heightened the awareness of transformational leadership and has advanced it to the forefront of leadership research. Transformational leadership is a relational process between leader and follower, with the pair working toward follower growth through individualized consideration, modeling, empowering, and motivating followers to achieve great things (Rowe & Guerrero, 2013). This process ultimately transforms followers as a whole and enables their own leadership capacity. Positive social leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are exemplars of transformational leadership. In contrast, dictators are mistakenly perceived as transformational leaders because they motivate change and move people; however, transformational leaders do not lead by fear or negativity, so dictators are not appropriately classified as transformational. Instead, transformational leaders inspire their followers to live differently. Although Burns primarily focused on political leaders as examples of transformational figures, he described the important moral and formative roles of teachers as transforming leaders. Both political figures and teachers are responsible for facilitating critical thinking and developing individuals (Burns, 2010).

Although Burns (1978) developed the philosophical basis for this new leadership theory, Bass (1985) defined it with empirical evidence and renamed it transformational leadership. The major aspects of transformational leadership include idealized influence (role model), individualized consideration (concern for followers), inspirational motivation (move followers), and intellectual stimulation (creatively challenge followers; Fadare, 2015; Rowe & Guerrero, 2013). Using this background information, Bass and Stogdill (1990) developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to assess follower responses to various leadership characteristics. Their findings and instruments continue to be used in current research.

### *Transformational Leadership in the Classroom*

Transformational leadership has applications within business and medicine, but has not often been associated with either the classroom or spiritual contexts. Its application is relatively recent to the instructional context, despite documented success with learning and motivation in classrooms (Noland & Richards, 2014). In a study with 273 college student participants, transformational leadership had a positive correlation with student indicators of learning ( $r = .50, p < .05$ ); more specifically, “transformational leadership played an important role in the motivation of the students” (Noland & Richards, 2014, p. 15). Positive outcomes of this

leadership style extend beyond motivation and learning in the classroom; transformational leadership theory has been found to have “significant implications for effective teaching” (Kim, 2012, p. 70) within the graduate environment, as well. This leadership style motivates followers to do more than they had previously expected by raising followers’ level of awareness, enabling followers to transcend their own self-interest, and altering levels of self-actualization from needs to wants on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Bass, 2005). Transformational leadership promotes students’ ability to perceive and interpret situations and circumstances accurately (Poutiatine & Conners, 2012). This transformation meets goals of student development in the higher education classroom and encourages transformation on all levels: institutional, classroom, and individual student level.

Students need appropriate classroom leadership to achieve success. Although transformational leadership seems like an effective approach to facilitate classroom instruction, introducing the concept of transformational leadership to teachers and encouraging its use in the classroom may be difficult. Researchers have shown that teachers do not subscribe to traditional definitions of leadership, but prefer a collaborative effort with other teachers (Devaney, 1987; Troen & Boles, 1992).

In order to incorporate a transformational leadership model into the classroom, two steps must be accomplished. First, educators need to change their perception of leadership and embrace a collaborative partnership between teacher and student rather than focusing on colleague collaboration. Secondly, educators need to recognize themselves as leaders of their classroom with influence and abilities to transform student thinking. Redefining the teacher–student relationship as one between leader and follower is key to transformational leadership and has proven to have positive effects in other leader–follower relationships (Eden, Avolio, & Shamir, 2002). Eden et al. (2002) conducted an experimental study introducing leaders to transformational leadership training; the leaders who were trained in transformational leadership impacted their direct followers in the areas of motivation, morality, and empowerment. The connection between leaders and their followers’ performance was clear and alluded to a potential connection with follower development. Incorporating transformational leadership behaviors in the classroom is inevitable as good teachers inherently develop students through the same avenues used by transformational leaders (e.g., influence, intellectual stimulation, motivation, and personalized instruction). Transformational leadership training has bolstered important characteristics for followers, which would translate to the classroom. Encouraging motivation, morality, and empowering students would be at the top of most educators’ lists for student development.

### ***Transformational Leadership in Faith***

Transformational leadership has also garnered Christian definitions with applications in church congregations (Mercer, 2006; Scarborough, 2010). Within 13 definitions of Christian transformational leadership, influence (i.e., moving, mobilizing, and empowering others) was the only commonality (Scarborough, 2010). Consequently, Scarborough (2010) offered the following definition:

Christian Transformational Leadership is leadership, which declares a Biblical or Christian foundation, or is specifically directed to the Church. It holds that a leader’s vision, character, persuasiveness, and ability to strategize guarantee that he or she will be influential (or transformational) to achieve shared goals. (pp. 77–78)

Some major differences between this definition and the secular definition highlighted under the transformational leadership section revolve around the additions of vision and biblical foundation. Otherwise, both consider influence, modeling appropriate character, and shared goals as critical elements.

In a qualitative case study about Folorunsho Alkija, a Nigerian business woman, faith and values were important aspects of successful transformational leadership (Fadare, 2015). Fadare (2015) argued that generosity and philanthropy are both foundational biblical principles and transformational leadership characteristics, thus justifying the incorporation of faith and values within this particular leadership style.

In addition to these important qualities, it is well established that modeling appropriate behavior for followers is a strong component of transformational leadership. Positive role modeling is often a requisite in a faith community (Sosik, Zhu, & Blair, 2011). Additionally, transformational leadership has predictive power with regard to organizational trust, follower satisfaction, and faith maturity within church organizations (Scuderi, 2011). Thus, combining transformational leadership and Christian education enables faculty to model appropriate faith behaviors through generosity and philanthropy while creating a classroom that facilitates trust, satisfaction, and faith maturity. In those classrooms, students critically evaluate material in the context of faith and biblical teachings.

For example, by incorporating scripture or Christian values in a way that requires students to reconcile information within the context of their own faith and belief systems, students engage in a deeper level of learning when they process the information and draw conclusions. For a student to develop these ideas, Christian education requires a safe learning environment where students are encouraged and allowed to build their spiritual foundation, fostering transformation (Blevins, 2013). In sum, transformational leadership aligns well with Christian education.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to identify professor characteristics and behaviors that students perceived as transformational in their faith. A mixed-methods design was chosen because both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained via a survey; this combination of data provides a better understanding of the research outcomes than an individual method (Creswell, 2015). Some closed questions, based on the principles of transformational leadership, provided a framework for analysis. The open-ended questions allowed participants to share reflections about an instructor's transformational effects. A Christian higher educational institution served as the setting for this study. Approximately three thousand undergraduate students attend the small, private university. This setting was a convenience sample but was appropriate because of the Christian emphasis evident in the mission statement.

## **Data Collection**

The researchers created a survey with both open-ended and forced-choice questions (see the appendix). A subject matter expert in educational leadership reviewed each version of the survey for face validity. Students answered the survey questions with these directions: "Please reflect on your time at the university and identify a professor that you feel had a significant

impact on your spiritual development (not content knowledge, but transformational growth as an individual). This instructor can be from a religious or nonreligious class.” There were three forced-choice questions, two of which required a yes or no answer, and the third required a rank order of importance. The yes–no questions were: “Has your faith been impacted by classroom instruction?” and “Was this instructor in a religious class?” In the final forced-choice question, students rank-ordered professor characteristics they perceived as important to their faith transformation. The open-ended questions focused on professor characteristics and instructional strategies for successful faith transformation within the classroom.

The university’s institutional review board reviewed and approved the surveys and study design. The researchers presented the invitation to participate in a psychology class and obtained consent from participants. Students completed the surveys with two researchers present; however, there was no follow-up or clarification of the data.

The study sample consisted of 34 undergraduate students at all levels of undergraduate work; students were 18 years of age or older and voluntarily submitted their survey. The small sample size was a limitation of the study. Researchers recorded quantitative data in a spreadsheet for analysis and reported frequencies of the forced choice questions. The purpose of the qualitative data was to explain or corroborate the findings. Two researchers, working as co-raters, coded qualitative data and identified themes. Qualitative data were grouped into themes based on keywords and synonyms used within the student responses. After the initial report, a second review of the data returned additional synonyms to further refine themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Qualitative Themes

Participants responded to open-ended prompts and indicated that the most common instructor characteristics to impact faith were compassion or caring, optimistic or positive, and showing encouragement. These findings were consistent with other literature. Blevins (2013) also cited encouragement as a way to help students transform faith.

Students perceived transformational instructors as those who were “lively and always had a smile on their face.” They valued instructors who “wanted to connect to the students as best they could.” As shown in Figure 1, participants indicated personable characteristics such as compassionate-caring, encouraging, and optimistic most often along with seven other characteristics.

In addition to an open-ended question about instructor characteristics that were influential in faith transformation, students ranked the following characteristics: demonstrated personal

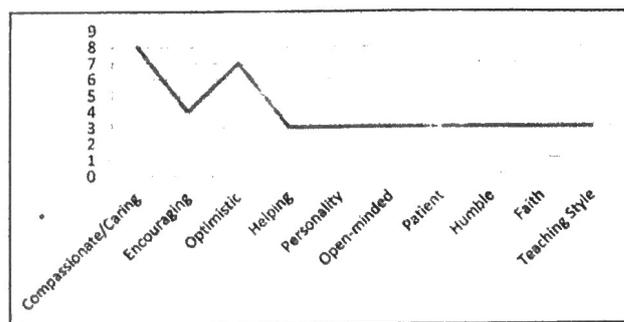


Figure 1. Instructor characteristics impacting student faith.

interest in students, incorporated biblical teaching into instruction, challenged students, seemed trustworthy, and incorporated prayer into the classroom. The selected characteristics were based on a review of the literature and the purpose of this study. Students rated *personal interest* as the most prevalent characteristic of a teacher in transforming the student's faith. Similarly, students identified *compassion* as a main trait of teachers that led to faith transformation in students. However, *prayer* was the least prevalent in their transformation of faith.

Students shared characteristics of faculty who successfully incorporated spiritual principles, and these themes emerged: professor cared, had a positive effect, was open to others' views, and applied biblical teaching to real settings. One student commented, "It happens often where a professor will frame a real-life situation that calls for tough decision making."

Finally, 23 students perceived that a professor's religious values would not impact their view of the professor's leadership style, while three students thought matching of values was important and would impact their perception of the professor's leadership style. One student noted that "the professor was very open to other religions, so I got to realize for myself that Christianity was right for me." Presenting content so that students must process, evaluate, and apply knowledge is characteristic of transformational instructors. Another student said, "The professors are not pushy or demeaning when they do choose to talk religiously, making it easier for a nonreligious person like myself to understand religion."

The final qualitative questions about successful and unsuccessful faith integration methods were too individualistic and dependent upon personal preferences to yield identifiable themes. However, themes identified within this study paralleled Eden et al.'s (2002) summations about the importance of the relationship between leader-teacher and follower-student. In this study, students reflected about transformational influences and noted value for relational teachers, which was also consistent with Eden's summation. Bass (2005) indicated that students further the process of self-actualization under relational teachers, which was evidenced by the student's conclusion, "Christianity was right for me."

### **Quantitative Findings**

One of the quantifiable questions for students was, "Has a classroom instructor impacted your faith?" An overwhelming majority of students (27) said a classroom instructor had affected their faith. In a follow-up question about the impact on faith, 25 students responded affirmatively, and two recognized both positive and negative effects. For example, one student reflected: "My faith has been impacted positively. In the world of business, it can be hard to maintain Christian values. I have had professors that have shown me how to be in the business world and maintain Christian values."

The impact on faith occurred in both religious and nonreligious courses. One student said "caring and encouragement" were important traits of instructors regardless of the course content. In fact, it was "interesting to see that it was none of my professors in the Christian studies area" that represented these transformational traits. In this study, 17 students indicated the transformational teacher they encountered did not teach a religion course.

### **Implications**

Although the survey is limited by the sample size and was not validated, it does indicate potential implications for educators in faith-based settings. One of the most significant

findings was that any professor can have a transformational effect on students' spiritual growth, as long as he or she demonstrates compassion, positivity, and openness, and applies biblical teaching to real-life examples. In other words, at a Christian institution, a professor in a secular class is just as likely to encourage a faith transformation as a professor in a religion class because the transformation appears to be a result of the instructor's behavior rather than the content of the course. Similar to Scarborough's (2010) definition of Christian transformational leadership, the leader only needs a biblical or Christian foundation with "vision, character, persuasiveness, and ability to strategize [to] guarantee that he or she will be influential (or transformational) to achieve shared goals" (pp. 77–78).

A second implication of this research is recognition of the value in training faculty in transformational leadership in order to better serve students. Knowing the effective characteristics of this style will allow faculty members to utilize each with intentionality in their classrooms, thereby facilitating student motivation, learning, and transformation.

### Future Research

Research in the area of transformational leadership is slowly moving from applications in business and medicine into the worlds of education and faith (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Scarborough, 2010). Qualitative research with interviews or focus groups with students could provide rich data to extend the findings of this study. Adding feedback of the faculty member could provide a new perspective on transformational leadership in Christian higher education. Ultimately, this information will inform further inquiry around appropriate transformational leadership characteristics to be developed by Christian university faculty.

### Conclusion

Although the effects of transformational leadership on student participation, learning outcomes, and perceptions are documented, there is little information about the behaviors instructors demonstrate that indicate transformational leadership in the classroom (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009). Likewise, Christian transformational leadership has multiple definitions, but specific behaviors leading to successful transformation have not been clearly articulated (Scarborough, 2010). Each of these concepts addresses transformational leadership, but from separate spheres of the classroom and faith; neither addresses transformational leadership in a faith-based educational setting.

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## Appendix

### Transformational Leadership: Faith and Classroom Instruction

#### Survey Questions:

Please reflect on your time at UMHB and identify a professor that you feel had a significant impact on your spiritual development (not content knowledge, but transformational growth as an individual). This instructor can be from a religious or nonreligious class.

With this instructor/experience in mind, please answer the following questions:

1. Has your faith been impacted by classroom instruction? Yes No  
 a. If yes, positively or negatively?

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- b. List 3 characteristics of the instructor that impacted your faith (behaviors, style, language, etc.).

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- c. Was this instructor in a religious class? Yes No  
 2. Please rate the following professor behaviors in order of how prevalent they were in transforming your faith/education at UMHB:  
 (1 — most prevalent and 5 — least prevalent)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Demonstrated personal interest in students  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Incorporated biblical teaching into instruction  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Challenged students  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Seemed trustworthy  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Incorporated prayer into the classroom  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions with your own personal opinion, not necessarily pertaining to the professor evaluated above.

3. Think of a time that spiritual principles were successfully incorporated into your classrooms. What instructor characteristics contributed to that success?

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4. Think of a time that spiritual principles were UNsuccessfully incorporated into your secular classrooms. What instructor characteristics contributed to that failure?

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5. How do you perceive a professors' leadership style when your religious values do not match theirs?

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6. How does a professor's spiritual background impact your learning?

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