

# **Digital Narrative Coaching as a tool for fostering Educational Leaders' qualities**

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## **Abstract**

Leadership is a significant area of scientific research within the context of education, especially over the past few years, as the belief that the quality of leadership influences school and learning outcomes is increasingly being met (Bush, 2007). Saitis & Saitis (2012) see leadership as an art and points out that "Leadership is not something static but clearly dynamic because it is based on principles and mechanistic patterns that are constantly changing". This means that the leader must adapt to the habits, the cultural tradition, the societal expectations and the values' system within he operates (Saitis, 2005). In this way leader presents a kind of empathy. Moreover, he considers that leadership, in order to be effective, should not be specific, but flexible and adaptive to the occasional environmental data (Saitis, 2007). School leaders influence the behavior of teachers and the values they support, but not to the extent desired for effective leadership (Marks, Zaccaro & Mathieu, 2000). According to Fullan (2002), effective school leaders are also the key factor to meaningful and sustainable educational reforms. Communication between school leaders and teachers is also an important factor in effective school leadership and, depending on the communication channel, can be realized following a top-to-bottom or a bottom-to-top approach.

Servant Leader, who starts with the desire to serve (Greenleaf, 1991), is an emerging leadership model, also in the education setting (Bratitsis, Tsolopani & Ioannou, 2018). Barbuto and Wheeler describe servant leaders as being selfless, often putting the needs of their followers above their personal ones (Drake, 2003). Servant leaders desire that those who they lead become more autonomous, ideally, increasing the chance of the followers eventually becoming Servant Leaders (Vogel, 2012). The Servant Leader puts personal time and effort in assisting his/her collaborators to identify their weaknesses and potentials, thus setting goals greater than those they would set individually. Also he/she sees reality for their perspective, with patience and persistence. He/she focuses on teamwork, cultivation of interpersonal relationships, cooperation and interaction. For that he/she attempts to include all the collaborators in the decision making processes and guides them to act, thus applying a democratic leadership style. Overall, the Servant Leader stays loyal to certain social and moral values (Ainscow, 2005; Bringhouse, 2010). According to Bratitsis, Tsolopani & Ioannou (2018) a servant-leader provides directions by emphasizing the goals of the organization, its role in society, and the separate roles of the employees. A secure psychological climate plays a central role in this. Leadership behavior characterized by humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance is essential. Also the stewardship characteristic of servant leaders is focusing on building communities with strong interpersonal relations within an organization.

The exploitation of Narrative Coaching in fields other than the business environment is gaining momentum, as the effectiveness of this approach is already widely recognized. It is a reflective, interactive, dialectical narrative process (Stelter, 2007) that focuses on a story of communication and communication between a Coach and a Coachee, with the latter being at the center of attention (Tsolopani & Bratitsis, 2015). Narrative

coaching is, according to Drake & Stelter (2014), a relatively new entry in the field of counseling and more specifically in the field of psychotherapy, which acts as a narrative framework, in which the main component is the stories of the person or persons who are involved each time in the coaching process.

Additionally, the traditional narrative approaches used in school are evolving, as digital storytelling has emerged. It is the combination of traditional oral narration with multimedia content and digital tools, which is a relatively new form of art that has evolved over the last decade and utilizes music, images, videos and narratives to create stories about people's lives, their work and experiences (Lathem, 2005; Robin & McNeil, 2012; Bratitsis, 2014).

Combined with Digital Storytelling, the approach of Digital Narrative Coaching (DNC) has emerged lately. Within DNC, stories are the basic tool from which coaches draw information and material about the coaches (people receiving coaching), while the latter build with the same tool and within the same context their experiences, thus creating new logical links between experiences and events of the future that will affect their future attitudes (Morgan, 2000; Drake & Stelter, 2014). In narrative coaching, story is defined as the sequence of events that are associated with consistency over time and follow a plot (Drake, 2009). The application of appropriate techniques and methods reveals the social and individual identity, which emerges through patterns of attitudes, beliefs and schemes that he/she has adopted or developed in the course of his/her life, and through which he/she interacts with the environment, in ways that are recognized through his/her stories (Drake, 2007). The first applications that have highlighted the effectiveness of narrative coaching were linked to the business sector and specifically to the training and development of higher and senior executives. At this point, it is important to clarify that coaching is not a method of education but a method of (personal) development with a particular emphasis on the development of metacognitive skills, by which coachees learn to manage more efficiently all skills and competences, as well as to continue their development in the long term (Vogel, 2012). DNC can often act as a way of transmitting and recruiting patterns in the self-identification of the position of individuals in the education sector. Consequently, all people, and thus the leaders of educational institutions, experience in their organizational environment (and in general in all areas of their lives) stories that they perceive and interpret in their own way. The way they develop and convey these stories depends on how they perceive the links among events, and the meaning they attach to them (Morgan, 2000).

Combining all the aforementioned research trends, an arts-based learning technique in the form of Digital Narrative Coaching (DNC) emerged and tested in a study with 14 2nd Grade pupils. The aim was the self-determination of their social position and bonds in the school environment, leading to interesting observations. Some students expressed intense empathy towards their classmates (e.g. students with special educational needs). One student expressed his feelings of minor suppression in order to hold a role in the classroom's social life. Another student who felt insecure because of her Albanian background was often taunted by her classmates and reported her feelings and perception about this issue. Although the class teacher, as a leader, had a good overview of her students and their relations, she was unaware of some these events. Thus, it seems that the DNC approach could be exploited in order for her to gain a better understanding of the classroom's social dynamics and further develop her empathy towards her students, also in a leader-subordinate type of relationship. The approach could be used once (at the beginning) or a few times over the school year.

By combining the Servant Leader model and Narrative Coaching, it is speculated that as the DNC approach was effective in studying in-school social dynamics, it could further be applied in the field of Educational Leadership. According to Van Dierendonck (2011) some of the main characteristics of a servant leader are: a) Interpersonal Acceptance, which is the ability to understand and experience the feelings of other and includes the perspective-taking element of empathy; b) Providing Direction, which means that leaders make sure that followers know what is expected of them; c) Empowerment and developing people which means giving people in the workplace responsibility for their own actions. Additional features of this model are Authenticity, Humility, and Stewardship.

Thus, Empathy seems to be of high significance for an effective Servant Leader. Empathy is a fundamental component of social cognition (Bratitsis & Ziannas, 2015), which commonly defined “as the ability to comprehend another’s feelings and to re-experience them oneself” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This definition recognizes that there is a cognitive component to empathy, which is the ability to perceive and recognize another’s feelings. It is a complex construct and a specific social cognitive ability related to taking part in the suffering of other people (Hoffman, 2000). It encompasses a cognitive dimension which involves the capacity to see things from the perspective of others and an affective dimension that involves sharing other people’s emotions (Ornaghi, Brockmeier & Grazzani, 2014). The distinction between cognitive and affective empathy is important because it is possible for someone to recognize what others are feeling without sympathizing with them or sharing their emotions. Modern neurological research has verified that the cognitive and affective empathic processes are separate and distinct (Cox et al., 2012; Decety, 2011). Emotions hold a significant role in one’s life by guiding and directing behavior (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence is the combination of cognitive, affective and conative domains, referring to the capacity for recognizing own and others’ feelings, for motivating oneself and for managing emotions well internally and within interpersonal relationships of any kind. In this vein, emotional intelligence is a key factor for academic and professional achievement, as it is a set of socio-emotional skills which enable the intellect to turn into action and accomplishment. Moreover, professional achievement and group well-being rely significantly on intra-group relations. Thus, humans build up the capacity to care for others from an early age (Sierksma, Thijs & Vrkuyten, 2014), by being able to understand another person’s need and provide help when needed and this depicts the humility, interpersonal acceptance, empowerment and stewardship, which are some of the most important characteristic of Servant Leader.

In a corresponding study, 15 Preschool Education Administrative Overseers (a common hierarchical rank in the Greek Educational System) were required to self-determine their leadership profiles and describe the ideal leader in Education. A 3-stage study was conducted, involving video-clips from carefully selected movies which highlighted leadership models. Through several evaluation tools, the participants were able to self-determine their leadership profile and express their perception of the ideal Educational Leader. This study can be considered as another effective application of the DNC approach in the Leadership field (Bratitsis, Mavidou & Tsolopani, 2018), as it facilitated the leaders’ self-understanding of their leadership status, perceptions, thoughts and overall attitudes. In this case, the leaders empathized with the model of an ideal leader, but also themselves in an attempt to understand their deeper feelings. Through the DNC approach they were able to “step out of their shoes” and examine themselves and their beliefs from a different perspective.

In both the aforementioned studies, Empathy played a crucial role. Thus, the indications from these suggest that DNC is a potentially powerful tool for an Educational Leader. For example, a Headmaster can exploit it to effectively apply leadership and develop empathy and a meaningful communication with colleagues and subordinates; a teacher can empathize with and effectively communicate with the students as subordinates. Finally, all the relationships within the Educational system's hierarchy could benefit by such a tool, also exploiting the indirect and implicit approach to studying any underlying problems.

In all cases, Empathy seems to be a key element and by initially establishing its cultivation through DNC, the development of the Servant Leader characteristics/elements could be facilitated. The use of the DNC approach for the self-identification of the social position and bonds in a school environment and the leading profile of Educational Leaders is something innovative and new. The approach has been successfully used in the entrepreneurial sector over the past few years, but not in educational one. Therefore, there are no other similar studies in the literature to correlate the findings of this one. So, these two studies pointed out the value of the empathy and formulate a claim that this trend could be further extended in education for the facilitation of empathy and the development of a new generation of Educational Leaders at extend, considering not only the executives of the Education System, but also the role of a teacher as a leader figure for his/her students and their parents and a facilitator of the social role of a school entity.

**Keywords:** education, servant leadership, digital storytelling, narrative coaching, digital narrative coaching, empathy

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