

Distance Education Teacher as a Leader: Learning from the Path Goal Leadership Theory

Profesora a Distancia como Líder: Aprendiendo de la Teoría de Liderazgo rumbo a la Meta Final

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Abstract

The theoretical paper investigates the relevancy of House's Path Goal Leadership Theory for distance education instructors. Using available research in the areas of teaching, learning, leadership and distance education, a model for Distance Education Teachers as Leaders is developed. This model becomes more relevant as the composition of online learners changes from nontraditional to a more heterogeneous community of learners, making it more difficult for teachers to use traditional standardized methods of teaching. This model helps in understanding the factors that affect the learning and teaching environment for online learners and how the instructors can adapt to individual learner's needs.

Key Words: Online teaching, online learning, leader, teaching, process, model of teaching.

Resumen

El documento teórico investiga la relevancia de la Teoría de Liderazgo rumbo a la Meta Final de House para instructores de educación a distancia. Utilizando la investigación disponible en las áreas de enseñanza, aprendizaje, liderazgo y educación a distancia, se desarrolla un modelo para los Profesores a Distancia como Líderes. Este modelo pasa a ser muy relevante, ya que la composición de los estudiantes online cambia de una comunidad no tradicional a una comunidad de estudiantes más heterogénea, haciendo más difícil para los profesores usar los métodos estándares de enseñanza tradicional. Este modelo ayuda a comprender los factores que afectan el medio ambiente del aprendizaje y enseñanza para estudiantes online y como los instructores se pueden adaptar a las necesidades individuales de los estudiantes.

Palabras claves: enseñanza online, aprendizaje online, líder, enseñar, proceso, modelo de enseñanza.

Introduction

A leader is someone who influences followers towards positive behavioral outcomes or performance (Drucker, 1997; Maxwell, 1998; Drotter, 2003). By this definition, a teacher a leader.

Many studies have indicated that teachers are a major influence on student behavior, whether positive or negative, whether with integrity or not (Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Levin, & Nolan, 2007). There are numerous examples of teachers inspiring students to excel and be successful in all aspects of their lives or influenced them towards failure. In fact, parents and society depend on the teacher to exemplify behavior and be a role model for children (Cross 1989; Roueche & Baker, 1987). Not only is this true at the K-12 level, but in post secondary institutions also. Whereas in elementary and secondary education teacher's influence is targeted towards teaching children idealism, values and foundational social and technical knowledge, at the post secondary level, teaching is targeted towards adult learners to enable them to assimilate pragmatic social and technical skills that they can apply to their lives and thereby survive in the real world (Houle, 1984; Cross, 1981).

Today, adult learners include not only traditional 18 to 25 year old college students (going directly from high school to college), but nontraditional students returning to earn their degrees and professionals wanting to self-improve through continuing education (NCE, 2002). There is greater diversity in the student body of today than ever before, particularly as educational technology becomes more advanced and brings together learners from around the globe through distance education. The average online

student in United States is 30-35 years old (Castle, Dang, McGuire & Tyler, 2007). However, as educational institutions offer more degrees and courses online through Internet media which is easily accessible from anywhere in the world (Baer, 1998), they may attract more traditional students from Asian countries like China and Pacific Rim nations (Hezel & Mitchell, 2006). In fact, even within United States more and more online classes are being offered to traditional students as institutions try to manage their budgets, physical resources, and capacities and reach out to students that may not be able to physically attend the college (Lindsay & Howell, 2004; Allen & Seaman 2006, 2008).

The question then is: Does the teacher's role as a leader change when the teacher is dealing with the online learner of today?

Teacher as a Leader

If we go by the basic definition of a leader given earlier, then the answer is that the role of the teacher as a leader in classroom, whether face-to-face or online, remains the same. The teacher is still there to facilitate learning and the achievement of students' goals. However, the teaching philosophies and strategies teachers can use to help their diverse group of learners achieve their goals must be adapted to the individual learner needs and circumstances (Spoon and Schell 1998; Conti, 1986; Csapo and Hayen, 2006). This is the premise on which House and Mitchell (1971, 1974) based their Path Goal Leadership Theory. They proposed that a leader can affect the performance, satisfaction, and motivation of a follower or learner in different ways such as giving rewards when learners achieve goals, helping to develop strategies towards goals and providing a supporting environment. A person may perform these by adopting one of the four leadership/teaching styles or behavior, namely directive, participative, supportive, and achievement, based on the situation. The situation is made up of two variables: the subordinate's/learner's characteristics, and the characteristics of the environment. After assessing the situation, the leader/teacher tries to help the follower/learner define goals and then achieve them in the most efficient way. Leaders/teachers may even adapt their styles with an individual during the completion of a task, if one part of the job needs a different motivation from another. Figure 1 is the House and Mitchell Path Goal Leadership model adapted to the Teaching model.

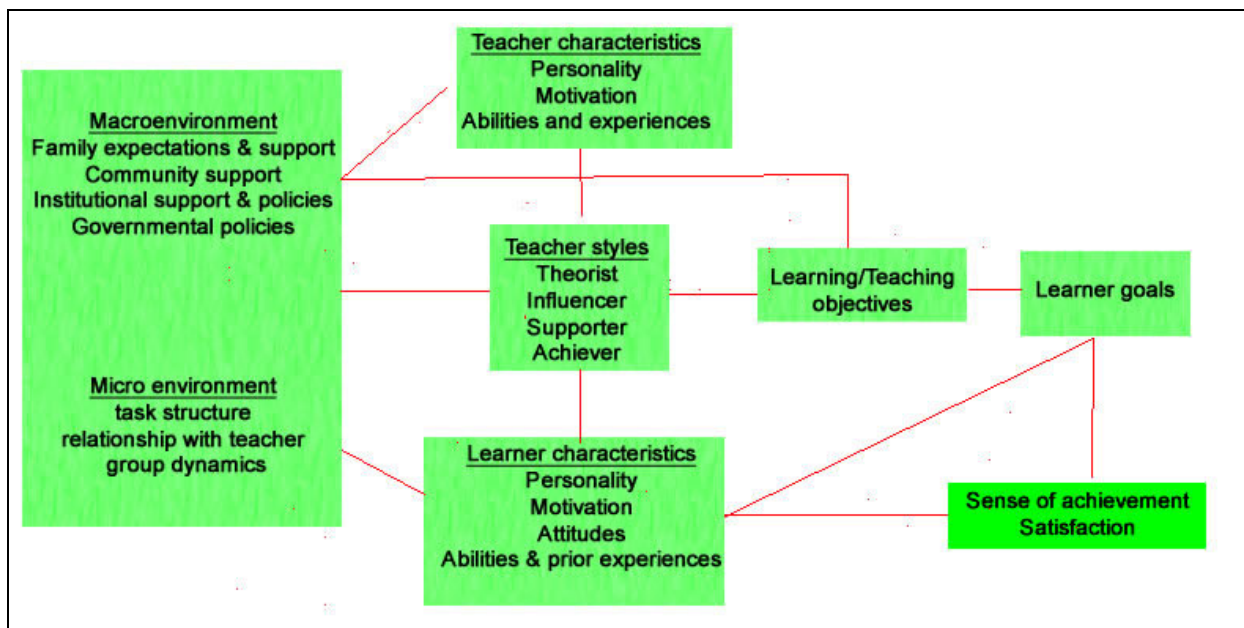


Figure 1: Teacher as a Leader Model

Teaching Styles

Teaching style is defined as a set of teaching strategies or instructional format (Galton, Simon, and Croll, 1980; Siedentop, 1991). Other definitions of teaching style revolve around instructor philosophy (Bennett, 1978) and decision-making style that impacts learner outcomes (Mosston & Ashworth, 1986). Very similar to Leadership Continuum Theory by Tannebaum and Schmitt (1973) and Vroom and Yetton's (1973) Normative Leadership Theory, Mosston and Schmitt defined 10 teacher styles: Command, Practice,

Reciprocal, Selfcheck, Inclusion, Guided Discovery, Divergent, Individual, Learner initiated, and Self teaching. Grasha (1996) based his definition of teaching styles on the power bases that teachers use to influence learners towards positive outcomes, namely, expert (expert power), formal authority (legitimate power), personal model (referent power), facilitator (supportive and participative), and delegator (*laissez faire*).

Baker, Roueche, and Gillett-Karam (1990) used the Path Goal Leadership Model to identify effective teaching styles used by instructors in classroom settings. They defined leader/teacher styles as the interaction behavior adopted by leaders/teachers to motivate and influence learners and agreed that a teacher is a leader since

...an exemplary instructor, both recognizes and engages students' desire to learn, is interested in identifying students' educational goals in relation to the particular course, and is concerned about the students' path to educational success....By recognizing what students bring to the classroom and by tying their attitudes and abilities to the particular course, the teacher arouses, engages and satisfies students' needs (pg.72).

Their idea of defining teaching style neatly summarized many of the other definitions of teaching styles. They postulated that teachers can lead their learners towards learning and learner goals by utilizing one of the four teaching styles: influencer, supportor, achiever, and theorist.

Influencers (House's participative style): commit to clear objectives, constantly influence learner beliefs about themselves, actively involved with the learner, seek and utilize every opportunity to help learner achieve goals. There exists mutual learning. They teach the learners how to learn.

Supportors (House's supportive style): open minded, listen objectively, sensitive to learner feelings, aware of learner values, constantly gather information on learner, seek to understand implications of actions and situation, and thereby maximize results. They help inspire students by making them get interested in the subject presented.

Achievers (House's achievement oriented style): seek to maximize results by evaluating goals, solutions, and outcomes, constantly experimenting and trying to find creative solutions to get the best results. They help their students to be independent thinkers.

Theorists (House's directive style): Use quantitative analysis to design better learning designs. They explore present learning theories to understand and implement best learning environment and hence get the best performance. Makes the student aware of themselves and their potential.

According to Kolb (1984), it is more effective to design a curriculum so that there is some way for learners of every learning style to engage with the topic. Many others agree that teachers should adapt their styles and strategies to learner needs and characteristics (Cross 1981, 1989; Dressel and Marcus, 1982; Hunter, 1982; Delahoussaye, 2002). Baker et al. (1990) found that the styles most often used by effective teachers for the adult learners were the influencer and achievement styles, with the theorist style a close second. The teachers frequently changed their styles to suit the learner.

Learner Characteristics

Learner characteristics include learner personality traits, motivations, attitudes, and their abilities and skills. Earlier research on learner characteristics indicated that online learners are usually adult students, mostly employed, place bound, and goal oriented. They have positive attitudes towards instructors, high internal locus of control, and high efficacy, and are intrinsically motivated (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Bernt & Bugbee, 1993; Biner, Bink, Huffman, & Dean, 1995; Garland, 1993; Laube, 1992; Pugliese, 1994; Stone, 1992, 1993; Bakash, 1984; Pintrich, 1996).

More recent studies (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; King, 2002; Katz, 2002; Powell, 2000; Comeaux, Huber, Kasprzak, & Nixon, 1998; Spector, 1999; Cheurprakobkit, Hale, & Olson, 2002) indicate that the composition of online learners is becoming more diverse, dynamic, tentative, younger, and responsive to rapid technological changes. They have a strong academic self-concept, exhibit more fluency in the use of online learning technologies, possess better interpersonal and communication skills, understand and value interaction and collaborative learning, possess an internal locus of control, and exhibit self-directed learning skills and a need for affiliation. Today's online learners also exhibit many different learning

styles. They could be auditory, visual, kinesthetic, or spatial learners (Dille and Mezack, 1991; MacKeracher, 1996) and they are more willing to express their needs.

Researchers, like Baker et al. (1990), have determined that for today's distance learner, teachers must become facilitators and communicators in order to engage and motivate these learners than becoming the expert or formal authority. (Lim, 2004; Lim and Kim, 2003; Kempe, 2001). According to Baker et al. (1990), other styles were successful too as many of the teachers changed their styles to suit learner needs. Hootstein (2002) proposed a model in which the e-learning facilitator or moderator wears 'four pairs of shoes'. They sometimes play the role of instructor, sometimes that of social director, then that of program managers and they sometimes assist learners with technology issues. So even if the most effective teaching style for online learners is the influencer style, teachers have to incorporate other styles to carry out their leadership function from time to time(http://www.astd.org/LC/2002/1002_hootstein.htm).

Environmental Characteristics

There are two types of environment that may influence teaching styles of effective teachers either directly or indirectly. The *micro environment* includes the task learners have to carry out, the relationship they may have with their teacher, and the relationships they may have with their peers. The *macro environment* is composed of family influences and support, institutional policies and support, community support, and government policies.

Micro environment

According to House and Mitchell (1974), a directive/theorist leader is most effective when followers need reduction of role ambiguity; a supportive leader does best when the followers' task is boring, frustrating, and stressful; a participative/influencer leader is needed when followers require autonomy and feeling of achievement; and achievement-oriented leaders excel when followers have ambiguous and unstructured tasks.

The task environment for online students is different from that for face-to-face students. Online students do not have opportunities to physically meet one another or the teacher. Communication is often limited to written text and may be void of visual cues, and there are challenges keeping tabs on individual students' learning when they are studying remotely. These physical distances can lead to the student having feelings of isolation, anxiety, and confusion (King, 2002). Also, since online students often work full time or part time, they want to have more control (Katz, 2002) and flexibility in the ability to work on the course at various times during the day (Aqui, 2005). Conveying the essence of the task to be carried out and providing support for students through technology, content design, feedback, and group collaboration becomes important. The teaching strategies employed have to involve a more learner-centered constructivist approach, and the teacher needs to take on the role of a facilitator and enabler, both ingredients of influencer and achiever teaching styles (Seller, 2001; O'Neil, 2006).

This facilitator aspect of influencer and achiever teaching styles requires the teacher to be in frequent communication with the learner. Positive teacher-student relationships, defined as "warm, close, communicative," are linked to behavioral competence and better school adjustment (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Other researchers found that conflict and dependency in teacher-student relationships are related to unfavorable outcomes such as negative school attitude and school avoidance (Birch & Ladd, 1997), and hostile aggression (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994). Riffell and Sibley (2003) found that students felt that quick and detailed feedback enabled them to understand the course materials. Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) felt that immediate feedback was a manifestation that the course instructor cared about student learning. Riffell and Sibley (2003) argued that immediate feedback not only motivated students to learn but encouraged them to reexamine their ways of managing time and organizing their learning process. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) noted that there was a positive link between written communication and a higher order of thinking. Assisted by the instructor's explanatory feedback that contains "good insights" (Chang, 2009) and that provides "good ideas" (Chang, 2009), the instructor's feedback could have a favorable effect on learning in making the instructor's presence visible (Chang, 2009; Chang and Petersen, 2006). Instructor's feedback is regarded by students as being supportive of their learning (Lim and Cheah, 2003), and established a social presence (Billings, 2000; Bonnells, 2008).

The enabler aspect of influencer and achiever styles makes the teachers become responsible for setting up course designs and projects, arranging for access to appropriate resources and technology, and creating the organizational structure and support that can help students succeed in their tasks (Means and Olson, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1999; Brown and Campione, 1994). The teacher also has to help the online learner get a sense of community with their peers to reduce student attrition (Tinto, 1993). Learners will have higher levels of satisfaction if they believe themselves to be part of a learning community. Increased feelings of community could also increase motivation to learn and make available a larger set of resources in the form of other learners, who in turn could be called upon to assist with learning (Rovai, 2002). This sense of community can be enhanced by utilizing group collaboration activities in the course design and interactive technology, keeping discussions tracks, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads and course components, and maintaining group harmony (Rohfeld and Hiemstra, 1995; Anderson and Garrison, 1998). This interactive structure that recognizes the social and interactive elements of knowledge construction is more student-centered and has been found to be extremely effective for online learning (Jasinski 2001; Ambrose 2001; Salmon 2000). Learners acquire social learning skills, discursive or dialogical skills, self and group evaluation skills, and reflection skills (Comeaux, Huber, Kasprzak, & Nixon, 1998; Spector, 1999). Teachers utilizing their facilitative and enabler behavior make this possible.

Macro environment

In addition to job responsibilities, many distance learners have major family responsibilities as well. Many are married and/or have children (Sikora, 2002). Kevern and Webb (2004) suggested that this student group often lacks coping strategies and support systems for effectively managing the course workload and that of the domestic role. These responsibilities require flexibility entwined in course designs and more understanding from the teachers.

Institutional policies and leadership need to support distance education for teachers to successfully motivate their students. One of the main barriers created by lack of institutional support is inadequacies in the technical area such as lack of systems reliability, lack of connectivity/access, inadequate hardware/software, setup problems, inadequate infrastructure, and inadequate technical support. Another barrier is hostile institutional or organizational culture where there is faculty or student resistance to innovation, resistance to online teaching methods, difficulty recruiting faculty or students, or a lack of understanding of distance education and what works at a distance. Other kinds of support needed are the development of instructional materials, student advising, access to budget resources, training, and people (Gellman-Danley & Fetzner, 1998; Berge, 1997; Freeman, 1998). These barriers may discourage teachers from innovating and moving from traditional teaching styles and strategies.

Accreditation institutions like the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools are setting standards for delivering distance education, hoping to keep quality of education competitive with institutions around the world. This puts additional pressure, sometimes positive and other times negative, on institutions and their teachers who may be designing courses and facilitating learner outcomes (CHEA 1999, 2000).

Another macro environment factor affecting the teacher's role as a leader is government, at both the federal and state level. Responses by the states to a survey showed that several important issues are shaping their distance education agendas: overall coordination and planning; statewide infrastructure; program development; and faculty and curriculum development. This survey also found that only six states have separate policies for approving new degree programs offered through distance education technology. However, in 23 of the responding states, an institution must go through additional processes to offer an existing course or program at a distance (Clark, 2001). This can indirectly affect teaching styles by discouraging and limiting innovativeness and risk taking.

Teacher Characteristics

Teacher characteristics include the instructor's personality, philosophy, motivations, and abilities, including past experience. Personality, philosophy, and motivations have frequently been found to affect instructors' most preferred teaching style (Lawrence, 1984; Sugarman, 1985; Meyers & Myers, 1980; Hoffman & Betkouski, 1981; Carlyn, 1976; Duch, 1982; DeNovellis and Lawrence, 1983). The most common motives for choosing teaching as a career were a positive self-evaluation of their attributes and capabilities to be teachers, to work with children, and the intellectual stimulation teaching would provide

(Sinclair, 2008). It is also contended that teachers often teach the way they learned (Dum and Dum, 1979; Witkin, 1973; Gregorc, 1979; Avery, 1985).

Moreover, students' learning behaviors are affected by their perceptions of the motives of the teacher, the philosophies of the teacher, the beliefs and attitudes of the teacher, and the personality traits of the teacher (Mros, 1990). It is, therefore, important that teachers understand their own motives, personalities, and learning styles so that they can develop into effective leaders. According to McClelland (1984, 1987) effective leaders have a high need for achievement (nAch), a high need for power (nPower), and a low to moderate need for affiliation (nAff). This may be true of traditional directive/theorists kind of leaders. However, for online learners who need their teacher to be more of a facilitator, influencer, and achiever, the teachers will need to have high nAch, high nAff and low to moderate nPower as they pass their power to the learners and empower them instead. Empowering students increases their engagement in the learning process (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Brown and Bussert, 2007).

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives are the expectations of the teacher related to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes a learner should be able to assimilate during the course of learning. Usually, learning objectives are the starting point of a course design. However, these expectations may change if the course design is based on a constructivism approach in which the learner's goals may influence learning objectives (Wilson, 1996; Knowles, 1975). Teacher behavior is also affected by their expectancies of the student, which in turn is affected by student's past behavior (Jussim, Smith, Madon & Palumbo, 1998; Baron, Tom, & Cooper, 1985; Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). While this can and sometimes does occur, most researchers have concluded that teacher expectations are not generally formed on the basis of "false conceptions" at all (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). Rather, they are based on the best information available about the students.

Goals and a teacher's expectations of what students should be able to accomplish have been found to affect student achievements (Tauber, 1998, Spitz, 1999, Rosenthal, 1994). Clear learning objectives for self directed learners are even more important to reduce confusion and make them more focused with little outside support (King, 2002, Aqui, 2005). Performance on both intentional and incidental items was considerably higher when instructional goals were explicitly described than when directions similar to those commonly employed in learning experiments were used (Rothkopf and Kaplan, 1972).

By recognizing the learners through performance-contingent rewards to enhance intrinsic motivation in the learners, facilitating teachers become more involved in the pursuit of competence (Harackiewicz and Sansone, 2000).

Learner Goals

Learner goals are different from learning objectives. While learning objectives are academic goals, learner goals are very personal to individual learners. These may be extrinsic in nature such as getting a degree or intrinsic such as a sense of achievement. These goals are related to the needs of learner as defined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). By fulfilling these needs, learners will be satisfied and motivated (Vroom, 1964; Vroom and Yetton, 1973). The online teacher acting as a facilitator can get information about the individual learner's needs and help him or her achieve these needs through appropriate course design and learning goals (Locke & Latham, 1990).

It is important that distance educators communicate early in the course what is the objective of the course, what are the learning objectives, and what are their expectations of students' behavior. Likewise, it is also important to get to know students well through fun activities. It has been found that students' perception of the course and the instructor determines their behavior and influences their beliefs and goals (Young, 1997; Babad & Taylor, 1992; Stevens, van Werkhoven, and Castelijnns, 1997).

Conclusion

Figure 2 is the modified Teacher as a Leader Model for distance education. Based on research in the area of distance learning and the leadership role played by the teacher in the learning process of the students, it is seen that online teachers have increasingly become facilitators and enablers, clearing the path for learners to achieve not only their learning goals but also their personal goals. Online teachers do

this by using more flexible, innovative, collaborative and empowering strategies than traditional educators. Not only are they leaders in the classroom, they are also increasingly participating in the transformation of traditional face-to-face learning into a technology facilitated learning environment to suit diverse learner needs by being mentors and team leaders for their colleagues. They are also a leading force in getting support from the community, institutions, and government for development of quality distance education.

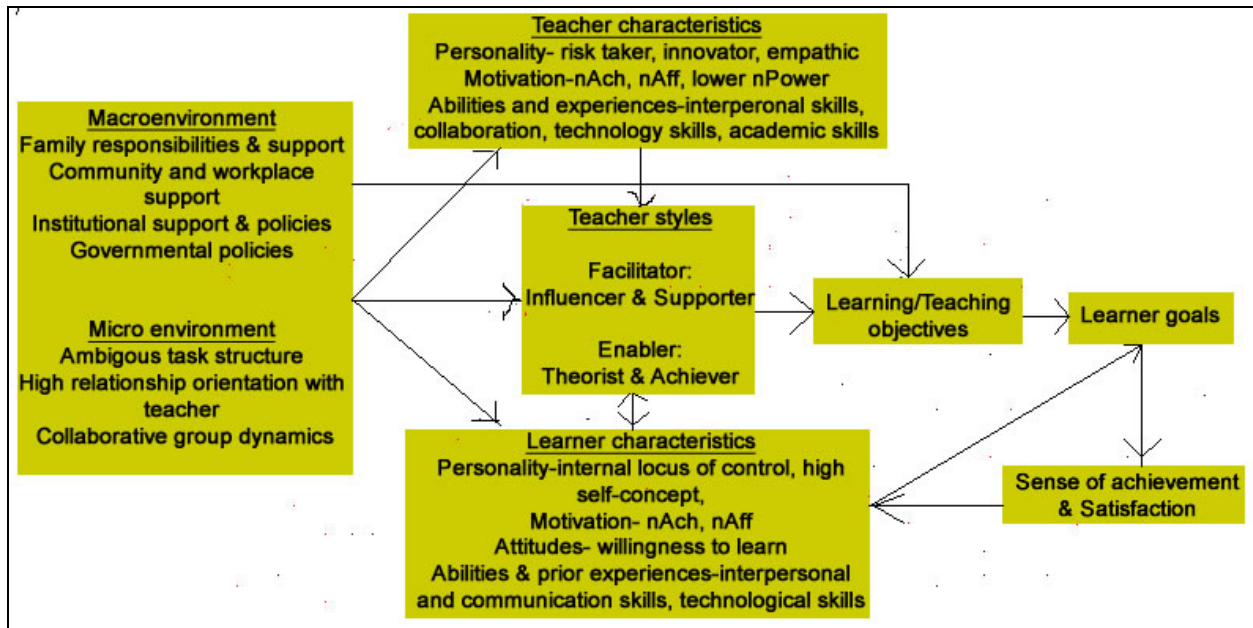


Figure 2: Distance Education Teacher as a Leader Model

Further research is warranted in the area of distance education teacher characteristics. It may be interesting to know how excellent teachers in distance education differ in motivation, personality, and styles from those preferring traditional face-to-face instruction, and what the process of transitioning from face-to-face teaching to online teaching requires from instructors in terms of change.

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Manuscript received 12 Nov 2009; revision received 23 Apr 2010.



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