

Final Reflection Essay

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Paulo Freire writes that “true reflection leads to action,” and this course has pushed me to understand reflection not as passive thinking, but as a leadership practice in itself (Freire, 1970). Over the course of the semester, several key concepts continued to surface and deepen for me: liberatory leadership, systems thinking, and power. While these terms were not entirely new to me, the way they were explored through readings, our guest speakers, and experiential projects shifted how I understand my role within systems and how I choose to act inside them.

When I first encountered the term liberatory leadership, I understood it primarily as an alternative to hierarchical leadership models. I associated it with values like inclusion, collaboration, and shared power, but I still imagined leadership as something enacted by individuals who “hold” responsibility. Through the course readings and discussions, particularly those that emphasized collective leadership and facilitation, my understanding became more nuanced. Liberatory leadership is not simply about flattening hierarchies, it is about actively designing conditions where people can participate meaningfully, where leadership circulates, and where care and accountability are shared. I began to see leadership less as a role and more as a practice that emerges in relationship with others.

This shift was reinforced through our work on facilitation and collective process. Rather than viewing facilitation as a neutral skill set, the course challenged me to see it as deeply political. Who sets the agenda, who speaks first, whose knowledge is centered, and how conflict is held all shape whether a space moves toward liberation or reproduces harm. I found myself reflecting on moments in my own professional life where I have facilitated spaces with good intentions but without fully attending to power dynamics. This course helped me recognize that liberatory leadership requires ongoing self-interrogation, not mastery.

Systems thinking was another concept that evolved significantly for me. Initially, I understood systems thinking as a way to map complexity and understand how structures interact. While that remains true, the course deepened my understanding by insisting that systems are not abstract, but rather they are lived and felt. Systems show up in bodies, in burnout, in access, and in who is allowed to rest. Our readings and class projects pushed me to see how organizational structures can either support or undermine the values they claim to hold. This was especially clear in our discussions about organizational culture and

resilience. I began to notice how often institutions rely on individuals to compensate for systemic failures and how that expectation is normalized.

My thinking about power also shifted over time. At the start of the semester, I primarily understood power as something held or withheld by institutions. While that idea remains important, I now have a more layered understanding. Power also operates through narratives, through norms, and through what is considered “professional” or “appropriate.” Our guest speakers and case examples helped me see how power can be redistributed intentionally, not only through formal roles but through process, language, and decision-making structures. This realization has stayed with me, particularly in relation to creative and educational spaces where power often goes unnamed.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this course was the way theory was consistently tied to practice. Projects like our facilitation design, interviews, and collective experiences required me to apply concepts rather than simply understand them. There were moments of confusion where I wasn’t sure if I was “doing it right,” especially when the course emphasized experimentation and imperfection. Over time, I came to see that uncertainty as part of the work. Social transformation does not move in straight lines, and neither does learning (no matter how much I’d like it to).

As I move forward in my academic and professional life, I am carrying a more grounded sense of responsibility. I am leaving this course with a commitment to design spaces that are not only effective but ethical, not only productive but deeply humane. I am more attentive to how systems shape behavior and how leadership can either reinforce or disrupt those systems. Most importantly, I am clearer that reflection is not the end of the work. It is the preparation for action.

This course has reinforced for me that leadership for social transformation is not about having the right answers. It is about staying in relationship, remaining accountable, and choosing practices that align values with action. That is the work I intend to continue and that is the work I am grateful to have explored this fall.