

Balancing the Ledgers of Interdisciplinary Leadership

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Abstract

This narrative essay studies and amends the established identity of the author as an online student majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus on Leadership at Old Dominion University, while working full-time as a utility junior accountant. Attending college virtually full-time, the author shows how combining financials and leadership skills helps individuals successfully grow in their professional careers. Combining developmental structures from Dan McAdam's *The Psychology of Life Stories*, along with modern science on epistemic bubbles, and cognitive, narrative maturity, the narrative demonstrates how leadership within the utility industry needs purposeful integration of diverse perspectives from a human, ethical, and financial standpoint.

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The soft, rhythmic hum of my laptop's cooling fan breaks the silence of my work office after hours, accompanied by the distinct glow of a high-definition monitor and a bright, buzzing overhead fluorescent light. Outside, a quiet evening settles, but inside my digital workspace, has me fully absorbed in the expansive network of Old Dominion University. As a leading public research university, ODU prides itself and its global footprint as a continuous and expanding agent "of change for its students, for the region and the nation it serves (History & Archives, 2025)." From my laptop, nearly 150 miles away from the physical campus, I can see the monarch blue, silver reign, and hudson blue user interface of Canvas. Discussion boards flood with posts from classmates logging in from different time zones, late night responses from working parents, and active-duty military studying from deployment. My fingers steadily clack on the keyboard, my index and tall finger scroll and click my mouse throughout Canvas as I review the current week's modules, upcoming assignments, and map out my assignment log for the week; connecting organizational communication, corporate ethics, and sociology. As an Interdisciplinary Studies major specializing in Leadership, this laptop is my digital classroom, laboratory and current space holder where my narrative identity is currently being written, or should I say, typed.

The Weight of a Single Perspective

My academic journey to this distance learning began within the strict, unyielding lines of general ledger and balance spreadsheets. As a junior accountant in the utility industry, my professional career was led by numbers, strict, narrow accounting rules, and anticipated fiscal periods. Incessantly, I carefully and thoroughly calculated asset depreciation, monitored grid maintenance expenditures, and performed routine audits of operational costs for regional utility infrastructures. The faint smell of printer toner dust, paper files, and old breakroom coffee pots was stagnant in the background of an occupational world that felt completely cut and dry. While I was thankful for the accuracy and precision of numbers, I quickly noticed a massive, systemic detachment within the utility organization. The

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numbers on my desktop never depicted the human components behind them. Financial reports could clearly show a decline in field operational efficiency but could never explain the decreasing morale of the line technicians or the breakdown in cross-departmental communication between engineers and executives. Confined in an environment that only regards technical, monocular proficiency, I felt I wasn't fulfilling my purpose. I knew I wanted to lead organizational change, but my professional background left me without the necessary abstracts to understand the complex human networks operating our organizational processes. According to the narrative identity outline created by Dan McAdams, individuals "reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose (McAdams, D. P. 2001)." McAdams explains a healthy identity involves a "self-narrative (McAdams, D.P. 2001)" which means the individual is an active author capable of determining their destiny rather than a passive bystander of meaningful life events. Early in my career as a junior accountant, my self-narrative was absent-minded; viewing myself merely as a data entry clerk adhering to strict regulatory accounting policies and procedures, rather than an active and participating agent of organizational progress. I yearned to lead, but the mentors of leadership I was witnessing were isolated and transactional. My personal narrative was stuck in limbo of a repeating cycle of monthly fiscal reconciliation reports, general ledger balancing spreadsheets, depreciation calculations, and routine audits of operational costs; I desperately wanted and needed an educational structure that could mirror the complex, multi-faceted realities of modern corporate infrastructure challenges, and transition me from an isolated data entry clerk into a leader with a vision.

Uncovering the Multi-disciplinary Grid

After extensive research, my discovery of the online Interdisciplinary Studies program through ODU sparked the beginning of my desperate and needed transformation. Entering the Interdisciplinary Studies program was an act of mental autonomy; it was not asking me to abandon my professional

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background, rather it was suggesting that I leverage and merge it with alternative fields to study leadership from a rounded perspective. Rather than studying leadership through a solely financial lens, my program pushed me to look at power dynamics, organizational culture, and systemic problem-solving by gathering information from the humanities, social sciences, and professional leadership disciplines. Coming into a digital learning setting helped me analyze what C. Thi Nguyen categorizes as an “epistemic bubble (Thi Nguyen, C. 2020)” which is a “social epistemic structure in which some relevant voices have been excluded through omission (Thi Nguyen, C. 2020).” Thi Nguyen highlights that operating within strict and remote frameworks, narrows an individual’s “epistemic filter, which leaves out contrary views and illegitimately inflates (Thi Nguyen, C. 2020)” their epistemic self-confidence. As a junior accountant, I was living in an intense epistemic bubble consisting of nestled expense spreadsheets and strict accounting guidelines. However, my epistemic bubble systemically popped through ODU’s online interdisciplinary program. In discussion boards, I found myself discussing organizational management situations with students of different backgrounds; some continuing education, others working full-time and enrolled in school full-time, military officials that were continuing their education and some freshman just beginning their educational journey; analyzing leadership failures and successes by examining psychological stress indicators and communication barriers. I quickly realized an effective leader cannot view an organizational crisis through a singular, metric database. The online environment strengthened my cognitive flexibility; during several after-work hours throughout the week, my senses are engaged by a combination of delivered lectures, case studies, and collaborative, virtual projects. On several occasions, I recall virtual classroom and group discussions on real-time supply chain concerns and infrastructure risks; topics that currently reflect my daily work in utilities. While a business student may focus solely on logistical metrics or financial losses, my interdisciplinary discipline guided me to analyze the ethical implications of shortages in labor, the psychological toll on remote workforces, and the necessary communication strategies to continue the trusting relationship with the public during

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utility updates. I was no longer learning just about leadership theory, but actively combining diverse methods to understand compliant, human focused, business strategies.

Understanding Purpose and Acting

The turn in digital education has reflected the larger psychological concepts of academic growth. Narrative maturity as Dr. Amit Nagpal describes it, is “not about eloquence ((PhD), D.A.N. 2026)”, but “it is about the predictability of judgement under scrutiny ((PhD), D.A.N. 2026).” For example, a mature narrative or point of view is not judged by elaborate words; instead, it proves its worth when people test it and find that its core logic remains steady, honest, and reliable. For years, I negatively misinterpreted my diverse interests outside of finance for a lack of career focus. Applying *The 7 Stages of Narrative Maturity*, to my own narrative, helped me turn my restless energy into strong leadership. I realized that numbers are simply one language among many others in the corporate world. My identity progressed from a narrative of bits and pieces into a strong statement and example of adaptiveness; I have learned that the demanding challenges that the utility industry faces, like energy shifts and digital transformations, cannot be resolved by one individual with a specific background, within an organization. Leadership within the utility industry needs individuals with an interdisciplinary mindset to resolve complex problems through actionable, empathetic strategies across operational limitations. Even though online learning appears lonely from an outsider’s view, I felt a deep, personal passion for what I was studying that made me forget I was even alone. I was governing my own academic schedule and work profile; which empowered me and helped my self-confidence flourish.

Conclusion

It’s approaching 8:00 PM, and the brightness from my laptop’s screen is illuminating a blue glare across my desk, signaling the successful submission of my final project. This virtual classroom, once a quiet corner in my office space, has become the presentation of my amending life story; my public ePortfolio stands as an active and transparent electronic profile of this self-revolution. My ePortfolio is

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not just a record that lists academic scores; it's proof that I actively built myself into a leader who balances financial policies and procedures with interpersonal skills. With guided frameworks from McAdams, Nguyen, and Nagpal, I can reflect on my educational background with immense clarity and pride. I'm no longer just a junior accountant navigating through volumes of disconnected financial ledgers; I'm an interdisciplinary specialist equipped to lead across isolated departments. As I power down my laptop, step away from my office space for the night, I feel confident and in control of my destiny. Old Dominion University has given me the necessary measures to exceed physical and academic boundaries, allowing me to move forward as an adaptable leader with a multi-dimensional perspective.

References

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