Students' Perception of the Role of Reflection in Leadership Learning

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Abstract

Reflection covers both the cognitive process and the broad range of activities that enhance learning resulting from experience. While much of what we know about reflection is rooted in experiential learning, leadership education programs which frame leadership as an experience could benefit from a richer understanding of the role of reflection in students' learning. The purpose of this study was to discover how students perceived the role of reflection. This study explored the function of reflection in the formal classroom setting and co-curricular experiences. Findings reveal students make a deep connection between leadership learning and reflection, prefer contemplation to written reflection, and struggle with forced reflections.

Introduction

College students learn from experiences both in and out of the classroom (Light, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Ash and Clayton (2009) suggest students do not learn from experiences alone; learning depends upon the level to which students reflect on their experiences. Kolb (1984) identified reflection as a significant component in the learning cycle. Educators facilitate the process by which students derive meaning from experiences through reflection.

Much of what we know about reflection is rooted in experiential learning literature. Service-learning, a type of experiential education, combines classroom instruction with organized service to the community, emphasizing civic engagement, reflection, and application of learning (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Speck, 2001; Strait & Lima, 2009). Service-learning is an experiential learning pedagogy that deliberately integrates community service activities with educational objectives where "reflection activities provide the

bridge between the community service activities and the educational content of the course" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, paragraph 4). Service-learning is only one experience where students could benefit from reflective activities. Guthrie and Thompson (2010) highlight the importance of leadership education being a "balanced mix of three elements: formal education in theories and principles of leadership, practical experience, and reflection on experiences in light of formal education" (p. 50). This phenomenological study will explore students' perception of the role of reflection in leadership education.

Throughout the 20th leadership was characterized as what Rost (1991) termed industrial leadership which "focused primarily on the individual as leader, promoting command and control models, power and authority, rational and analytical thinking, and strong managerial influences" (p. 217). Alternatively, the emerging post-industrial leadership paradigm is relational, process-oriented, and value-centered (Rost, 1991). Northouse (2001) describes the transition from trait-oriented leadership, which viewed leadership as "special innate or inborn characteristics" (p. 4) to a process-oriented view that concedes leadership can be learned by everyone. Reflection is a feature of several paradigms that make up the postindustrial model of leadership (Kezar, 2006), making it important to understand the role reflection plays in students' lives and as part of the leadership learning process.

Previous research focused on specific classroom approaches to reflection, both in service-learning classes as well as leadership classes, and on how student learning is enhanced by reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Ash & Clayton, 2009; Boyd & Williams, 2010; Moore, Boyd, & Dooley, 2010). Boswell (2010) explored students' perception of reflection following an immersion service trip. She found while students generally disliked many of the structured reflection activities, they had positive feedback about specific activities. Boswell found students preferred unguided conversation to structured activities. Boswell dubbed this "The Structure Trap" (p. 90). As leadership educators rely on structured reflection, research that uncovers student's perceptions of the role of reflection in leadership learning could contribute to the field of leadership studies and higher education on both a practitioner level as well as a theoretical level. The purpose of this study is to discover how students perceive the role of reflection. This study will explore the function of reflection in the formal classroom setting and their co-curricular experiences.

The literature concerning reflection is rooted in experiential education, with some emphasis on curricular programs. To better understand how students reflect, it is important to discover how students perceive reflection. The research questions for this study are: How do students perceive reflection? Which method of reflection

do students prefer (i.e., journaling, discussion, creative)? What role do college students perceive reflection plays in their lives?

Conceptual and Theoretical Frame

John Dewey (1933) provides some of the earliest insight into the significance of reflection. Dewey insisted reflective thought be a goal of education. Reflective thought consists of giving serious consideration to a subject and connecting the subject to both past and future actions. Dewey defined reflective thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the groups that support it and the future conclusions to which is tends" (p. 9). Dewey envisioned experiential learning not as a cycle but as a spiral whereby participants utilized past knowledge to inform future choices, moving them along a continuum of learning.

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning built upon the work of Dewey. Kolb's experiential learning cycle included four phases through which learners move: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Kolb, 1984). As learners spiral through the cycle, the complexity of their thinking increases. At each of the four phases, students can move toward increasing complexity and abstraction. See Figure 1 is a graphic depiction of the Cycle of Experiential Learning adapted from Kolb (1984).
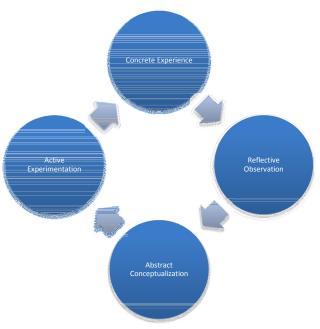

Figure 1 – Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

Eyler and Giles (1999) developed the Five Cs of effective reflection: connection, continuity, context, challenge, and coaching. Connection refers to many aspects of the experience including the individual student connection to diverse groups of people as well as the institutional connection to the community. Experiential learning does not occur in a vacuum and reflection capitalizes on these connections. Continuity refers to the need for reflection to take place throughout the process, including before, during, and after a project or event. In the larger scheme, reflection should be continuous throughout life as learning is never complete. Context considers both time and place for reflection as well as the subject of reflection. Structural details can greatly enhance or detract from reflective practice. Challenge relies on the perspective that new experiences increase complex thinking but should be structured so as not to be overwhelming. Finally, coaching refers to the support required for effective reflection.

Reflection and Leadership

Reflection, also called meaning-making, covers a broad range of activities that enhance learning resulting from experience. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) view reflection as both a cognitive process and a structured learning activity. Rogers points out "the situation is further confused by use of the term reflection as a noun, a verb, an adjective, a process, and/or an outcome" (p. 40). He asserts terminology should be clarified so teachers and students can understand each other.

Hatcher and Bringle (1997) define reflection as "intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives" (p. 153). Bringle and Hatcher (1999) agree with Eyler and Giles (1999) that reflection should occur regularly and be connected to the course, providing context for the reflection, and include feedback from the instructor, particularly to aid students in improving their reflective practice. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) add reflection should be structured to include assessment and also include opportunities for values clarification.

In a broad sense, reflection that maximizes learning is "a process of metacognition that functions to improve the quality of thought and of action and the relationship between them" (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27). Rogers (2002), after outlining Dewey's (1933) main ideas for reflective process, states that:

> Reflection is not an end in itself but a tool or vehicle used in the transformation of raw experience into meaning-filled theory that is grounded in experience, informed by existing theory, and serves the larger purpose of the moral growth of the individual and society. (p. 863)

Arguing for a greater incorporation of emotion into reflection, Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) define reflection as "a process involving the interplay of emotion and cognition in which people (students, teachers, and community partners) intentionally connect service experiences with academic learning objectives" (p. 42). They suggest emotion receive more intentional consideration as part of the process of reflection. For the purposes of this paper, reflection is defined as the processes and activities that facilitate students' cognitive and affective development. Reflection is a skill that can be taught and reflective students learn from previous experiences, spiraling their learning forward by applying learning to future situations.

Types of Reflection Activities

There are numerous options for structuring reflection which include personal journals, double-entry journals, discussions (email, online, in-class, with peers, or with a professor), analysis papers, poster presentations, class presentations, worksheets, directed readings, experiential case studies, portfolios, personal narrative papers, photo essays, or agency projects (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 1996). Journaling is a popular method for reflection. In addition to academic or discipline-specific outcomes, Hatcher and Bringle (1997) suggest that reflection activities encourage values clarification which can support a student's personal development. In addition, they indicate that if values clarification is the goal, creative reflection options may include creative writing, poetry, painting a mural, or telling a story.

To reap the greatest benefits, including a reflection component may not be enough; to make reflection more effective, facilitators must create a trusting environment where students can have reflective practice (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Correia and Bleicher (2008) acknowledged an "important element in teaching reflection is to provide a space for students to think about and describe their learning" (p. 45). Before engaging students in reflection, practitioners designing intentional reflection activities for students engaged in applied learning must themselves be reflective practitioners (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Reflection plays a role in leadership education. In a grounded theory study of leadership identity development, reflective learning which included both structured journaling as well as conversations with family member and peers was one of four areas that facilitated the development of a leadership identity for students (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). Boyd and Williams (2010) looked at the role of personal growth projects in how students made meaning of their experiences in a Leadership Development course. The students completed a project with instructor feedback and wrote a paper in which

the researchers found anecdotal evidence that "engaging students in a personal growth project has a positive impact . . . Students' final reflection papers indicate that some level of personal growth did occur and they are able to articulate how that growth impacted them personally and as a leader" (p. 148). In another study, researchers focused specifically on students' written reflections in a Professional Leadership Development course (Moore et al., 2010). Using Kolb's (1984) cycle, the researchers mapped information from student journals to course activities and emerged with three themes resulting from the reflections – (a) greater retention of leadership concepts, (b) internalization of leadership concepts, and (c) a transformation of their perception of leadership. The researchers found the use of reflective writing as part of a teaching method using Kolb's model to be effective in their classroom.

Methods

Phenomenological studies attempt to describe the essence of a lived human experience (Creswell, 2007). This study employed purposive sampling. This is a purposeful sample because the participants were drawn from the capstone course in the leadership certificate. In order to enroll in this course, students must have completed the other five courses in the certificate. This class was chosen so the students would have similar experiences and a common language for discussing leadership and reflection.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), focus groups work well for exploratory studies because of the lively interaction which results in spontaneous expressive and emotional views. Creswell (2007) notes "focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other" (p. 133). The students from the capstone course who participated in this study interacted well and were able to make connections between their experiences with reflection as part of the leadership certificate.

Participants

The leadership certificate is an interdisciplinary, multidimensional, and experiential program at a large, public, research one university. The program is a partnership between student affairs and academic affairs. The program has three courses open to all undergraduate students that focus on a broad overview of leadership theories, understanding leadership as a change process, and practicing leadership in community through service-learning. Following completion of these three courses, students can enroll in an experiential course, which can include internship, service-learning, research, or other applied experience. Students take one supporting course that is designed to connect leadership to their academic

field of study. Finally, students take a capstone course focused on complexity and systems thinking. The outcome of the certificate is that students are prepared to be agents for positive change in whichever community they choose to reside following graduation.

All students currently enrolled in the capstone course were sent an email recruiting them to participate in the study. Of 18 possible students, one man and five women responded. Of those that responded, one man and three women participated in the study. The primary researcher conducted an in-depth, semi-structured focus group with three participants and one in-depth, semi-structured interview that lasted approximately one hour each. The typical size for a focus group is between four and six subjects (Creswell, 2008). In one instance, two students failed to attend a focus group and the one attendee was interviewed (Beth). The information from her interview supports the conversation between the focus group participants.

The participants, identified in this paper by pseudonyms, are all seniors in the last semester of the leadership certificate course work. The participants included one Black female, two Asian females, and a White male. All of the participants are active in either a community service program or registered student organization. Many of these organizations include formal reflection as part of their programming. All students have led reflection activities for their peers. This experience may contribute to the students demonstrating a higher level of learning because they have not only participated in reflection activities, but have also led such activities.

Data Analysis

The focus group interview was audio recorded and transcribed. The primary investigator analyzed the focus group and interview transcripts, reading through the text to make notes and form initial codes (Creswell, 2007). After the initial codes were developed, the transcripts were reviewed to extract significant statements that were clustered into themes relating to how the students experience reflection. These themes include perception of reflection influenced by leadership theory, preference for a variety of methods of reflection, and an acknowledgement of challenges with reflection.

Findings

This study sought to understand how students perceive reflection, various methods of reflection (i.e., journaling, discussion, creative) students prefer, and role college students perceive reflection plays in their lives. Findings reveal

students perceive a deep connection between leadership learning and reflection, prefer contemplation to written reflection, and struggle with forced reflections.

Perception of Reflection

One theme that emerged was the prevalence of leadership theory in the students' perception of reflection. The participants make a connection between reflection and leadership as an experience rather than a position. When asked her definition of leadership, Maggie wondered:

> What if there is no definition? What if it's purely an experience? And that experience can look different all the time. I think that a true leader does it because they are passionate about it and it's something that they find some sort of meaning in their life.

The students determined effective leadership requires values clarification, connection to followers through relationships, patience, passion, and reflection. Beth noted:

> You cannot be an effective leader...without knowing who you are initially in life. Really good leaders take a step back and they're very self aware. And they're very reflective on what they're doing.

The influence of one of the capstone course's primary texts, *Leadership on the Line* (2002), was evident in the students' responses. Maggie and Liza immediately thought about the *balcony* when asked about reflection. Maggie explained her perception of reflection through Heifetz's example of the balcony:

> Leadership is kind of like a dance floor and there's lots of things happening around you on the dance...but sometimes you have to go up to the balcony and look at the whole dance floor so that you can get a picture of what's actually going on…that's the main question that you ask on the balcony is 'What's going on here?'…An effective leader will constantly oscillate between the balcony and the dance floor, back and forth so that it's just a practice of reflection…just like reflection in the moment.

For Wesley and Beth, reflection called to mind a more literal understanding. Beth explained:

> It's just like making meaning out of experiences…I think it's different for every person. But so reflection is just making meaning out of things like trying to label things that have happened.

Wesley described his perception:

> I think of if I was staring into water or a pool or something or even the mirror, like what is looking back at me? I'm projecting an image, something is happening in front of me and then just staring right at it. Just unpacking "what is that?" Like not only physically what's in front of me but also what does that mean?

Methods of Reflection

In discussing reflection methods, the group oscillated between reflection as a process and an activity. When asked what methods of reflection they preferred, the participants focused predominantly on time spent in contemplation. Maggie utilized a practice she learned in another class:

> "Every day before I finish the day I have to look at what was my exquisite moment for the day."

Liza said she reflected by staring at the wall. She explained:

> The reason why I stare at a wall is because I always see it as a blank canvas.

Wesley, who talked primarily about thinking as his form of reflection, worried sometimes he might think too much.

Journaling and written reflections were met with mixed reactions. Through laughter, Maggie admitted

> I have a lot of journals that I've used 4 pages and then I got a new journal because I wanted a journal. As if the new journal was going to prompt more writing.

The group discussed journaling as a fallback method of reflection. Wesley confirmed:

> I have a journal that I will maybe pull out once a month. Once every two months. Whenever I feel like I really need it.

Beth declared she was a "journaler" and the habit was hard to keep. While she talked about not wanting to write down everything that happened every day, she liked:

The idea of pulling out positive things and things you're thankful for and grateful for and making that a habit…having that kind of reflection changes who you are and the way you view the world.

The participants also focused on group versus individual reflection. Beth viewed them as different because:

In group reflection you don't always write it down or record it necessarily. It's more about that shared moment and experience with people but individual reflection it's like an artifact from that time in some ways that really unique.

However, all participants expressed enjoyment in the format of the capstone course, which focuses on group conversation. Beth elaborated on her perception of the role of her peers in the reflection process:

What I've gotten out of [the certificate] is the exchange between other student leaders. Like there's just this really magical thing that can happen on certain days in class where you…just you are learning from others experience.

Challenges to Engaging in Reflection

One of the main themes that emerged is the challenge associated with reflection. Regardless of the stated importance of reflection in leadership, students noted there was a lack of time for reflection. Another theme that emerged was dislike for forced reflection.

In discussing challenges related to reflection, one of the primary disconnects was between the stated importance of reflection and making time for reflection. All students acknowledged reflection is essential both in leadership and as part of their daily lives, but all also acknowledged they struggled to make time for reflection. Maggie captured the feelings of the group:

My struggle, okay so my leadership experience at the [non-profit agency] *is hard*! Some days are *so hard* that I just want to go home and *sleep* when I'm done. Like because when you are working for a non-profit, I guess this could be any job, you are *exhausted* at the end of the day and reflection takes time. You have to sit there and think about what happened that day and some days you just don't want to think.

Concerning reflection Wesley confirmed:

> [Reflection] might be one of the most important aspects of leadership but also one of the most ignored parts of leadership.

Maggie reiterated:

> I think reflection is 100% necessary to leadership but then again, like I was saying, it's one of the most easily overlooked things. And in life, too. Because like I said before, people are busy, especially people who are passionate.

Although the participants generally agreed that reflection takes place in everyday actions, they struggled to set aside time for intentional reflection that was not required for a class.

The other challenge the participants identified is forced reflection. Feeling forced relates to the perception that reflection needs to be emotional as well as frustration with a required length for reflections, specifically summary sheets and journal entries.

Liza was most blunt in her assessment:

> I always find the process [of reflection] to be really hard cause I'm not an emotional person.

Referring to one-page summary assignments that are due each class during the first three courses of the certificate, she noted:

> With reflection it *has* to be you. Like it really has to be you. Cause honestly I would get to half page and would have nothing else to say because there was no type of emotion into it. So I would delete it and then start over which took a long time.

However, Wesley found:

> Sometimes I would find myself having the opposite problem...I felt pressure to make it more, I don't know if it would be more emotional, but make more meaning out of something that may really just be what it was.

Wesley sometimes felt pressured to make his responses more emotional than he really felt, which prompted an inauthentic response.

The students summarized this frustration in an exchange where they discuss having to submit regular written reflections as part of the leadership courses:

Liza: I think a lot has to do with word count and page length.

Maggie: Oh that's so true. You try and stretch it.

Liza: Cause a lot of us tried to get that one page when sometimes it's really not one page.

Maggie: It could fit in a Tweet.

Liza: Like you know "We studied. I helped him with his math. We talked about stuff." That was it.

Wesley: And then that's when you go into [mockingly] "And I began for the first time to understand the difference I was making [Maggie and Liza laugh] and how much I had an impact. And I thought to myself 'Wow this was what it feels like to be a mentor." And that's when that happens where it really might not need to go there. [Dissolves into laughter.]

Discussion

Hatcher and Bringle (1997) acknowledge reflection is both a cognitive process as well as structured activities. During the focus groups, the participants fluctuated between both functions of reflection. The leadership certificate's focus on post-industrial leadership, where leadership is a process rather than a position, aligned with many of the student's assertions about reflection. The participants value reflection as an activity to enhance their leadership practice but face challenges with both structured and unstructured reflection.

Given the breadth of potential reflection activities, including creative options, it was initially surprising that in their personal reflective practices, the students focused primarily on contemplation. However, because written reflection activities may be associated with the forced reflection in the classroom, it may explain why students avoid those options. Additionally, written and creative reflection activities may take more time, which the students also acknowledged was an impediment to reflection. Only one student, Beth, mentioned art and reflection, but this was in the context of the personal reflection required to display and discuss the art one creates and was not focused on the creation of art as an outlet for reflection.

The participant reflections as part of this study present a paradox for reflection. They do not like structured reflection because it is forced, but they will not complete unstructured reflection without prompting because they do not have

time. Both Wesley and Maggie referred to concepts from the capstone course to offer solutions to the paradox. In their view, reflection should be incorporated as a daily practice of leadership. For them, leadership is about living with intentionality which comes from reflection, so while they do not set aside time necessarily for reflection, they reflect constantly.

Although the students acknowledged a reluctance to complete forced reflections, they also acknowledge a utility in practicing reflection. Their experiences follow the pattern suggested by Dewey (1933) and Kolb (1984) where as students progress through the cycle of experiential learning, they achieve greater depth in their reflection. This also suggests reflection is a skill that must be practiced in order to achieve greater depth. Leadership educators should consider a strategy that employs increasingly challenging reflections and provides opportunities for students to practice reflection.

Conclusions

Implications

This study provides a glimpse into students' perceptions of reflection and offers a deeper understanding that can help leadership educators structure the progression of courses and the co-curricular programming to help students process and make meaning of not only leadership learning experiences, but those experiences in the context of their daily lives. The participants' discussion reinforced many of the best practices for reflection. They discussed reflection being continuous, challenging, connected, and contextualized. While they did not directly address coaching, one student did mention the role of the instructor in facilitating reflection. However, the conversation where the participants discussed how they handle forced reflection when they run out of sincere reflections was very illuminating. It reveals the need to balance structured reflection with less structured, more conversational reflection. The participants' feedback also underscores the need for educators to make the practice of reflection a priority for students.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the sample size. Another limitation related to the population is the students who are most likely to be enrolled in the leadership capstone course and be drawn to participate in this study are those who are highly reflective and engaged in personal reflection. While this gives the students a similar language for conversation, it is unlikely that students would choose to participate in this study if they did not enjoy reflection. This group may not be representative of the student population, or even the leadership certificate

population, and future studies might expand the scope of participants. Finally, because the topic of reflection can be understood as both a cognitive process and a series of structured activities, the participants may not have always been discussing the same aspect of reflection.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is recommended expanding the study to include additional participants from the capstone course and other courses in the leadership certificate. The students enjoyed the group reflection in the capstone class more than the assignments in previous classes indicating it would be useful to understand how students' perception of reflection changes as they progress through the certificate. The students made clear connections between the leadership courses and reflection. Additional questions would focus more on the role of reflection in students' lives, separate from coursework. One question raised during the study is whether reflection is a transferrable skill that could be learned. Future research might seek to better understand how reflection is learned and how leadership educators can incorporate reflection in the classroom so that it becomes a daily practice and a transferrable skill. Finally, students referred to the role of their peers and instructors in shaping an atmosphere conducive to reflection but there was not agreement as to one area in which instructors could enhance the classroom reflection experience. The students agreed they enjoyed the experience of reflecting in a group in the capstone class but they were not sure that method would be as effective in earlier classes. Future research might explore sequencing reflection effectively in curricular and co-curricular leadership programs to maximize student learning. Understanding how students reflect and how students' perceive reflection could be beneficial to leadership programs and other programs that utilize experiential learning.

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