

Creating a Meaningful Learning Environment: Reflection in Leadership Education

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Abstract

This article examines the use of a book discussion as an instructional tool for developing leadership exploration competency skills in university students, as it pertains to the study of women and leadership. A book discussion centered on Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* was held as a means to conceptualize discourse regarding leadership issues in the arena of women and leadership in a multidisciplinary campus wide symposium. In an effort to assess the effectiveness of such a program to learn about leadership issues, student commentary was collected during the discussion via an audio recording device.

A qualitative exploration of the resulting commentary focused on this initiative as an effort to provide insight into the efficacy of book discussions as a best practice for facilitating the engagement of students in the exploration of leadership issues. As leadership educators seek to develop pedagogical tools that catalyze transformative learning, research regarding tools and methods by which faculty equip students to explore leadership becomes increasingly critical.

Introduction

Students' leadership development is a commonly stated outcome of undergraduate education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012; Astin & Astin, 2000; Roberts, 2007). Public statements declaring leadership as a result of college are rooted in the belief that higher education institutions can and do influence the development of students' leadership efficacy and skills. According to Roberts (2008), "the process of leadership is intrinsically connected to learning" (p. 117). The goal of leadership education should be to invite students to engage in the complexity through a "journey of development and exploration of new information and frameworks" (Guthrie & Thompson, 2010, p. 52). Meaningful leadership learning includes education about formal leadership theories, experiences that allow students to develop and utilize practical skills, and reflection (Guthrie & Thompson, 2010). While leadership education is experiential, it is the reflection, not the experience, which generates learning.

As educators, we are constantly challenged with how to best situate instructional and experiential opportunities to maximize student learning. Debates on how best to teach leadership

in the classroom context have surfaced (Doh, 2003; Parks, 2005; Riggio, 2013; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). As Wren (2001) contends, the pedagogy used to teach leadership makes a difference in student learning. Leadership educators should consider the learning environment created to most effectively teach leadership (Odom, 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore how reflection, as a pedagogical tool, contributed to creating a meaningful learning environment in an established Leadership Certificate program.

Leadership Learning: Experiential and Reflective

Leaders must be constantly learning in order to be effective in rapidly changing environments. Life-long learning includes “self-directed learning, learning on demand, informal learning, and collaborative and organizational learning” (Boyd & Williams, 2010, p. 145). This learning includes both experiential and reflective learning.

Experiential Learning. The primary way to learn leadership is through experience (McCall, 2004). Thus, experiential learning theory provides a solid foundation for leadership education. David Kolb (1984) built his experiential learning theory on the work of Dewey (1933), Lewin (1951), and Piaget (1970). Experiential learning theory defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Each of the theorists from whose work he drew contributed to Kolb’s understanding of experiential learning as a lifelong process that supported personal satisfaction and career success. Additionally, each theorist included a reflective component in their original work: Lewin’s (1951) action research emphasized concrete experience based on feedback processes; Dewey (1933) was more explicit in identifying the role of feedback processes in development; and Piaget (1970) identified the movement of individuals from a concrete phenomenal view in infancy to reflective internalized knowing in adulthood.

Kolb’s (1984) Cycle of Experiential Learning has four phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students can enter the learning cycle at any point, and learn best when they practice all four modes. Concrete experience is “learning by encounter,” which can be learning from specific experiences, relating to different people and their experiences, or being sensitive to feelings and people. Reflective observation is “learning by reflecting.” This learning occurs by carefully observing before making judgments, viewing issues from different perspectives, and understanding the relationship between the meanings of things. Abstract conceptualization is “learning by thinking,” which is logically analyzing ideas, planning systematically, or acting on an intellectual understanding of a situation. Active experimentation “learning by doing,” is demonstrated by showing ability to get things done, taking risks, or influencing people and events through action (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning is foundational for leadership learning, especially the reflective observation phase.

Reflective Learning. Reflection, also called “meaning-making” or “processing,” covers a range of activities that enhance learning resulting from experience. For Dewey (1933), reflection was the goal of education and not a continuum but a cycle through which learners spiraled, gaining depth through each rotation. Reflection includes cognitive processes and

structured learning activities that focus on specific learning objectives (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). For leadership educators, the challenge is best understanding how students “mine” their experiences to learn and develop leadership knowledge and skills (Guthrie & Bertrand Jones, 2012).

McCarthy (1987) suggested that learning involves two dimensions of perception and processing. Human perception refers to the ways people take in new information, typically through experience. Human processing refers to the ways people integrate new information, typically through reflection and action. In the field of experiential learning, human perception has been investigated extensively (Kiili, 2006; Miettinen, 2000; Van Orden & Goldinger, 1994); however, human processing has not been as well researched. Despite this gap in the literature, during the last few decades reflective methods have been a focus in teaching students within the contexts of service learning and lifelong learning. Reflection has been primarily conceptualized as the key process through which learners extract knowledge from their experiences (Fenwick, 2001; Illeris, 2007).

Rodgers (2002) emphasized that learners who go through a cycle of reflection create new meaning that serves both themselves and a greater good. Reflection is not an end point, but a continual process, which elevates reflection as part of the learning process as opposed to relegating reflection to a singular activity.

Reflection Models. Based in research and experience, there are reflection models that provide guidance for leadership educators to enhance reflective, leadership learning for students. Among effective reflection models there are common themes:

- Ongoing (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, & Schmeide, 1996; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997)
- Contextual (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1996; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997)
- Connected to the experience and learning objectives (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1996; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997)
- Provides feedback (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997)
- Challenging and promotes critical thinking (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1996)
- Structured to include assessment (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997)
- Provides opportunities for values clarification (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee, 2000; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

Structuring Reflection. There are various reflection methods, some more appropriate than others depending on the context, group, and nature of experience. While meaningful reflection can take place in a variety of settings, educators need to provide space and structure to facilitate reflection. Eyler (2001) and Ash and Clayton (2009) suggested an overall reflection strategy, which might include several different reflective pedagogies, such as journaling, online discussions, presentations, or written responses to readings. It is important leadership courses are designed to make intentional connections between experience and desired learning, otherwise students may not always see the connections. Specific reflective methods may also cater to different learning styles. Using Kolb’s (1984) learning styles, Eyler et al. (1996) divided reflection activities into the four categories of reading, writing, doing, and telling. Eyler et al.

(1996) suggested different learning styles responded better to certain types of reflection activities, which would provide learners more of an opportunity to utilize the method of reflection through which they reflect most naturally. Various reflective methods have utility for different learning styles, course structures, learning outcomes, and student preferences.

Structured reflection can be both a program outcome and a learning opportunity. In order for leadership educators to maximize students' leadership learning and capacity building, they "must be intentional in matching their intended program or course outcomes with relevant student and leadership development theory, and then apply effective strategies for the delivery of material to a diverse student population" (Rosch & Anthony, 2012, p. 38).

Challenges of Incorporating Reflection. There is ample evidence for the benefits of reflection in experiential learning; however, incorporating reflection into leadership education has its challenges. One challenge may be students' preferences for reflection methods may not match the course pedagogy. Another challenge, as Eyler and Giles (1999) discuss, is students may not be comfortable sharing honest reflections, particularly when being assessed for a grade. Another challenge is that reflection may be coercive. A participant in a study by Astin et al. (2000) stated that she enjoyed reflecting, but "a lot of other people won't unless they're forced to" (p. 79). By planning structured reflection effectively, leadership educators can make time spent reflecting on leadership learning a more effective tool for student learning.

Study Context: Leadership Certificate

Studies of leadership programs have found that engagement in leadership activities during college can have positive impacts on a range of student outcomes (Astin & Astin, 2000; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2001; Dugan & Komives, 2007). The Leadership Certificate in this study strives to provide a meaningful learning environment for all students who enroll in just one class or the entire certificate program.

The Leadership Certificate in this study is an 18-credit interdisciplinary program that prepares students for leadership in multiple contexts. This program uses reflection, theory-to-practice, experiential learning, and service-learning projects to frame leadership learning within the context of social change. The program includes four major learning outcomes that serve as overarching guides for the Certificate: gaining theoretical knowledge of leadership theory, increasing self-awareness through personal reflection, increasing leadership skill development, and the ability to apply theory-to-practice in multiple contexts. By participating in the program, the goal is that students will gain knowledge and skills that impact their leadership as an individual, in partnerships, in groups, and in their communities.

Structured reflection is provided throughout each course using various methods such as discussions, reflective essays, journaling, and presentations. Through Certificate curriculum, students are able to explore elements of their identity, which contribute to their moral, ethical, and civic foundations and responsibilities.

Methodology

Taking the context of the Leadership Certificate into consideration, we used a qualitative, phenomenological approach for this study. Qualitative research is best suited for an exploratory study or examination of a complex phenomenon. Since there is little information on the role of reflection in leadership learning and leadership education, this study was well suited for qualitative methods.

Participants. The population for this study was students' participating in an interdisciplinary, experiential undergraduate Leadership Certificate at a large, public, research I institution in the southeast. The sample for this study was purposive and employed criterion sampling. All students had completed the first three courses in the Leadership Certificate, sharing a similar theoretical understanding of leadership and basis for reflection structures and expectations. Additionally, every participant was currently enrolled in the Leadership Experience course or had completed the Leadership Experience course within the previous year of the study, which totaled 35 students. These students actively applied their leadership learning through experience and reflection on their experience through this course. The students participating in the certificate are diverse in their major, racial identity, religious identity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and campus involvement.

Data Collection. For this study, we collected one-on-one interviews, students' journal entries from the Leadership Experience course from the same students, and supporting documents from the Leadership Certificate. The semi-structured interview was appropriate for this study because this approach allowed us to look at how students perceive reflection and focus on the role of reflection in students' everyday world. While potential themes were drawn from the conceptual framework for the study, the semi-structured format offered the flexibility to pursue other themes as they arose in the course of the interview.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 14 participants. The two interviews were two to five weeks apart, depending on scheduling. This allowed for both the researchers and participants to reflect on the topics discussed after the first interview. The first interview focused on understanding students' perceptions on the leadership coursework and general reflective practices. These first interviews lasted from 45-60 minutes, depending on the amount of information the student shared. The second interview provided an opportunity to follow up from the first interview and drilled deeper into how reflection connected to their leadership learning.

Journals are one of the most widely used reflection tools in experiential learning. Student journals enhanced our understanding of the leadership learning phenomenon by providing additional insight into how students reflect on, synthesize, and apply information connecting their experience to the theories and concepts taught. During the course, students submit 30 journal entries. Data such as reflective journals provide several advantages (Silverman, 2011). These journals provides rich description from the participants' perspective, are relevant to the topic of reflection, provide insight into how students apply leadership learning learned through reflection, and are naturally occurring and are not dependent upon the researcher. After receiving permission from the students, we worked with the course instructor to get access to those journal

entries for analysis.

For the most part, students' reflective journals were recorded without researcher intervention. Different from interviews where the researcher's presence may alter the interaction, documents and journal entries offer an advantage because they are "usually produced for reasons other than the research at hand and therefore are not subject to the same limitations" (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). The journals provided more naturalistic insight into the students' learning and understanding (Klenke, 2008) because most of the participants participated in the study after the course was completed. Currently enrolled students only completed the first half of their journals before interviews were conducted. Only 60 of 392 journal entries, or about 15%, were potentially influenced by the interviews. The majority of the journals provided naturalistic insight.

Data Analysis. We used inductive analysis for this qualitative study. Inductive data analysis starts with very specific pieces of information and ends with more abstract conceptualizations (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). We first transcribed all of the interviews and used NVivo 10, which is Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) (Merriam, 2009). Next, the transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software. The journal entries, as well as supporting documents from the Leadership Certificate were uploaded. Journal entries and interviews were organized by participant using pseudonyms. After initially reading and coding the data, we read the journals and transcripts a second time, looking to see if codes clustered together to form categories. While a hierarchy of themes appeared after coding the first round of interviews, new themes were added from subsequent data analysis, and the resulting constructs changed. Triangulation of data occurred through interviewing each participant twice, which allowed for verification of interview content. Additionally, by also using journal entries, we were able to corroborate evidence between the two sources of data rather than relying on one source of data. Phenomenological research must demonstrate a clear path between the data and the findings as well as provide rich description of the essence of the phenomena. Findings from our study provide a coherent interpretation of the data, which will help enhance use of reflective pedagogy for greater leadership learning.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how reflection, as a pedagogical tool, contributed to creating a meaningful learning environment in an established Leadership Certificate program. The findings from this study support reflection as an essential pedagogical tool in leadership learning. In their interviews, students discussed the role of reflection in learning about leadership; in their journals, students demonstrated reflection on their leadership learning experiences. Participants consistently attributed their understanding of reflection, and application of leadership theory through reflection, to their experiences in the Leadership Certificate. Learning about reflection, and practicing reflection regularly, introduced students to the importance of a reflective practice for understanding their leadership development. Students highlighted aspects of the Leadership Certificate courses that contributed to their reflective practice and enhanced their learning environment. Several themes emerged including creating and applying reflective pedagogy, establishing a reflective culture, and having diverse peers in leadership certificate courses.

Creating and Applying Reflective Pedagogy. Students more specifically discussed how understanding reflection and developing greater self-awareness led to creating and applying reflective pedagogy to their leadership learning.

Understanding reflection. Some students said they learned to reflect prior to college. Shelley, a junior Social Work major, reflected following service projects with her high school church group; Charlotte, a senior Political Science major, began journaling as a child; and Rosie, a senior Interdisciplinary Social Sciences major, engaged in conversations with her family around the dinner table. However, about half of the participants learned about reflection in college and attributed assignments or experiences in the Leadership Certificate with their understanding of reflection. Both Liam, a recent graduate with a degree in Exercise Science, and Jacob, a senior double majoring in International Affairs and Chinese, said the leadership certificate made them more aware of reflection and gave them a name for the process. For several students, after taking leadership courses, reflection felt more “natural.” Emma, a junior Statistics major, who did not like reflection prior to completing the Leadership Certificate, attributed her desire to reflect to having to practice reflection throughout the certificate courses. She said, “it ends up being 1) you want to reflect; 2) it just naturally comes to you. And I think that the gap lies within finding what kind of reflection is appropriate for your life and your personal leadership learning.” Both Taylor, a senior double majoring in Sociology and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, and Jennifer, a senior Psychology major, discussed their growth as it related to the reflective process. Prior to experiences in the Leadership Certificate, both women equated reflection with a summary, however, as a result of practicing reflection and learning about reflection, they saw reflection as a two-step process of summarizing and analyzing their experiences. As a result of the certificate, students were able to identify the reflection process as part of their experiential leadership learning process. Despite acknowledging the importance of reflection, some students gave the qualifier that they did not prioritize or make time for reflection. Other students said they did not think reflection was important for them or they were not very reflective. The Leadership Certificate courses provided students with an awareness of reflection, as well as opportunities to reflect on experiences and develop skills for deeper reflection.

Developing greater self-awareness. Through reflection on leadership, and the application of leadership theory to their lives, students developed a greater sense of self. All of the participants either directly mentioned greater self-awareness, or demonstrated self-awareness in their interview or journal entries. Coasta said his greatest takeaway from the Leadership Certificate was learning about self. As a result of reflection on leadership, Taylor learned “how I maneuver myself,” referring to interacting with people, presenting herself, and thinking about situations. For Grace, the impetus to reflect was “wanting that heightened awareness that I received through [reflection] in different avenues of my life.” Charlotte summed up the group sentiment most succinctly, saying, “I feel like the leadership certificate has made me very much so aware of me.” Students directly linked reflection to self-awareness; as a result of increased self-awareness, students developed confidence, practiced self-care, and focused on developing stronger relationships with groups and individuals.

For some students, the process of reflecting and developing self-awareness was important for their next steps. Constance observed, “The certificate gives you a chance to know where

you're at so you know where you can go." Through reflection, Jennifer realized she did not have all the answers in every situation, but that was okay because she was able to acknowledge where she did not have the answer and then move forward with figuring out how to alleviate the problem or conflict. In thinking about her interactions, Courtney, a senior majoring in Family and Child Sciences said,

I learned a lot about who I am and what I do or do not like, or do or do not need, and how I work and how other people work. That's been a big thing – being able to learn about myself around other people, myself in the workplace, and myself in organizations and how I can contribute.

As juniors, seniors, and recent graduates, all of the students were thinking about their upcoming transitions into the workplace or graduate school. For a few students, such as Shelly, who was interested in clinical social work, reflection would be built-in through documenting notes about meetings with clients. Several students acknowledged they may not reflect formally, but they hoped to spend time everyday thinking about what went well and how they could improve in their careers. Courtney hoped to get a notebook to keep track of her thoughts as she began her job after graduation. Taylor and Charlotte hoped to work in environments where staff members prioritized group reflection; if that was not already a priority, they hoped to implement time for reflection in the workplace.

Establishing a Reflective Culture. Students specifically discussed how the leadership certificate created a reflective culture and the importance this had on their learning. Leadership certificate instructors, actual class size and seating arrangements, and having discussion-based courses were all significant in establishing a reflective culture in the leadership certificate.

Leadership certificate instructors. Students also highlighted the certificate instructors, who created spaces where authentic reflection was valued and encouraged. Hannah described her introductory leadership class as "tight knit" and a "safe zone." Liam liked that in one of his leadership classes, they established a group agreement where what was said in the room stayed in the room. Rosie felt "the atmosphere the [Leadership Certificate] professors created has been a really safe place." She also shared, "the leadership studies program has been my favorite thing. My favorite classes, my favorite professors, my favorite experiences have stemmed from the Certificate program." Grace highlighted the importance of "pointed dialogue with the professor where they weren't feeding us materials but they wanted to hear our reflections on the materials. They wanted us to really think critically about the material and apply it to our lives." Hannah, Coasta, Rosie, and Sophia all said the instructors who taught their first leadership class had a significant impact and led them to stay engaged in the Certificate. Almost all of the students mentioned a specific instructor who had an impact on them; there was consensus that the Certificate instructors played a significant role in shaping learning environments that invited reflection and challenged students to think critically about leadership.

Grace praised two of her instructors who enabled her to be vulnerable in her final papers, something she said would not have been possible in other courses. She attributed her vulnerability to the trust she placed in those instructors. She said she was able to choose the topics for her papers because,

I knew that they were not going to take advantage of that vulnerability. It was something that they didn't press us to, but encouraged us in...I think if I had a different professor for either of those classes, someone that hadn't been so authentic with our course, hadn't been vulnerable with our class, I think it would have been a lot harder to choose the topics that I did and I probably would have stuck with what felt safe and kept my identity hidden.

Because her instructors modeled authentic, vulnerable reflection, Grace felt empowered to share her own authentic reflections, rather than a topic that felt "safe." By modeling reflection and authenticity, and creating safe spaces for discussion and learning, instructors invited engaged and reflective learning that touched on students' identities and foundational beliefs.

Class size and arrangement. When thinking about the structure of their classes, students focused on not only the discussion-based format, but also the physical size and arrangement of the classes. Almost half the students highlighted the smaller number of students in Leadership Certificate classes. Grace, a recent graduate with a degree in Accounting, said, "It was really awesome to take the Leadership Certificate and be in a class of at most 25 people, sometimes as few as 14 people." Hannah pointed out how the small size of her first leadership class was distinguished from her other courses:

Taking Leadership Theory was the first experience I had where I actually talked to the teacher and the teacher actually knew my name because I was only a sophomore when I took it so I was still in those big general ed classes.

Students valued the smaller class size because they felt it provided the ability to engage in discussion. They also highlighted the tight knit community that formed among the group in some of the classes. By having a smaller number of people in classes, they were able to engage in more reflective discussions with one another and the instructors.

Because of the smaller number of students in many leadership classes, instructors had the flexibility to alter the class dynamic through the physical arrangement of the space. In most of the Leadership Certificate classes, the instructors and students sat in a circle, rather than rows, even if this required rearranging the furniture in the classroom. Liam described his most significant leadership class as "a literal round table discussion of leadership" which facilitated conversations about "how we each viewed different articles and what we got from it." Charlotte emphasized that the "round table" atmosphere fostered class discussion by creating an "opportunity to share our opinions and really get a different perspective on our thinking versus the book versus the 20 other people in the class." She found value in "that round table atmosphere instead of the square" because she was "able to see everybody and internalize what everybody is saying and really be an engaged student." Students attributed the small class size and circle format to the ability to engage more with peers and be more vulnerable and authentic in discussions and reflections.

Discussion based courses. Overwhelmingly, students valued the opportunity to connect with peers, professors, or other mentors as part of their reflective process. Thirteen students mentioned verbal processing, discussion, or conversation as a valuable form of reflection.

Through discussion, students were able to engage with other perspectives and reflect on their experiences. Several students mentioned that all of their leadership classes stood out because they incorporated discussion. Hannah, a senior double majoring in Management Information Systems and Finance, liked how the discussion based classes contributed to “a really active classroom setting.” Sofia, a senior Psychology major, loved “being able to discuss things with students instead of just lectures.” She elaborated: “discussions in class are my favorite thing about [leadership] classes because you get to hear other people’s ideas and you get to express your own and see how they all tie together and how they work together.” Coasta, a senior Family and Child Sciences major, said that even though sometimes it was challenging to begin the conversation, other times,

We will have a debate about something and sometimes it’s a little bit about leadership and then we’ll get off topic but even then the professors will let us go because we’re throwing out our opinions and ideas and we’re bringing it back to the leadership theory and principles.

Through discussion, students were able to encounter diverse perspectives, and they were challenged to think about their own beliefs. Rosie described the certificate as a “shared learning environment.” When asked to elaborate on what she meant by that, she explained, “It’s been great to be able to hear from people that have such different experiences...It’s about recognizing that everyone brings something to the table [and] giving people that arena to be able to communicate that to one another is special.” The discussion-based format challenged students to have a greater role in the learning process. Because the Leadership Certificate courses are smaller, students are challenged to be more active participants in classroom discussions.

Diverse Peers in Leadership Classes. Another theme that emerged was the significance of the diverse perspectives represented by peers in the Leadership Certificate. While the order of courses was not prescribed, there was a recommended sequence, and students appreciated seeing some of the same people in successive classes. Emma liked that, “I got to know my peers in all my classes. Not just one or two. I really got to know every one of them.” Nine students talked about the value of diverse perspectives in leadership classes, including engaging students from different academic backgrounds and hearing multiple perspectives on an article or experience. Students found value in engaging with people who might approach a situation differently or have a different reaction to an assigned reading.

Students also highlighted the importance of being challenged by the people in their classes. By engaging with others, students better understood themselves and their framework for leadership. Coasta described an experience where he and another student held different views about education, stemming from their experiences with family members who were educators. He explained,

We got into a huge debate and it was nice because we reflected on the principles but also applied it to what we believe in and what we really hold dear to our hearts. It was cool to be able to reflect on that, but also debate and hear other ideas instead of just being that naïve person who says “Oh no, I’m right.”

Several students shared a similar sentiment that engaging in discussion with people who may have different backgrounds gave them the opportunity to examine their own beliefs. Liam valued “how we each viewed different articles and what we got from [the articles]. Seeing that viewpoint from other people. Seeing how ‘Okay I did not see that viewpoint. Let’s continue that dialogue and make it more clear for everybody.’” Finally, Constance, a junior double majoring in International Affairs and Geography, appreciated people in the Leadership Certificate who were able to provide feedback: “Nobody is brave enough to really tell you when you’re doing something wrong or when you have a weakness so being able to hear critical feedback from other students is really important.” Through interactions with a diverse peer group, students were able to broaden their understanding of the course concepts and examine their underlying beliefs.

Discussion and Implications

Reflection is an essential pedagogical tool for leadership educators (Guthrie & Bertrand Jones, 2012). While some students may have an understanding of reflection prior to taking a leadership course, for some students this was their first exposure to intentionally examining experiences in their lives and making meaning. Instructors can support reflection through creating an environment that invites and values reflection. By having a better understanding of reflection and the role of reflection in leadership, students may have increased self-awareness, helping to clarify what matters to them and how they might interact more effectively with others. Finally, reflection is essential to applying leadership learning to students’ lives.

Build Reflection into Courses. Regardless of whether a course contains a specific experiential component, leadership is inherently an experiential pedagogy. As such, leadership educators should build reflection into courses, creating opportunities to reflect with students and providing feedback on reflections (Guthrie & Thompson, 2010). Although this study focused on one experiential learning course, students reflected on the application of leadership theory and concepts from all of their Leadership Certificate courses. In the sequence of Certificate courses, students found increasing value in their reflective activities and conversations as the Certificate progressed. Few students mentioned reflective activities in their introductory course; all of the students discussed the value of reflection in their final capstone course. Whether because they had practice reflecting in all of their courses along the way, or they had the opportunity for rich, small-group discussion in the final course, building upon reflection over the series of courses provided many opportunities for reflection. Students applied what they learned from reflection to personal, professional, and academic contexts. Having reflection as a regular feature of leadership classes creates the opportunity for students to think about their development as a leader as well as the application of leadership theories and concepts in a variety of contexts.

Reflection Beyond Writing. For many experiential learning opportunities, written reflection is required. Journals are a popular form of reflection, but other methods may also be engaging for students. Although verbal or creative reflection may be more challenging to assess, different types of reflection provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning or make connections between concepts. Despite being less common than written reflection, students may benefit from reflection activities that engage them in discussion or creative activities (Odom, 2015; Roberts, 2008).

Discussion based classes had a profound impact on students in the Leadership Certificate. Through engaging with diverse peers, students were able to explore a variety of viewpoints. Students utilized discussion to give and receive immediate feedback, as well as challenge one another. By creating spaces that invited challenging discussion, instructors added to the reflective learning environment. This study specifically focused on a Leadership Certificate whose successive classes invited opportunities for continued engagement with the same peer group. Through building on interactions in previous courses, or co-curricular experiences, students were able to engage in richer discussion and reflection about the application of leadership to their lives and work. By having an opportunity to discuss other viewpoints, and get immediate reactions and feedback, students were able to learn about themselves and their leadership practice.

Reduce Barriers to Reflection. Many students acknowledged reflection was important for leadership learning and personal well-being; however, students also shared barriers that prevented them from reflecting. The primary barrier was a lack of time. After describing his schedule, which included coursework, two internships, and community service activities, Coasta said, “My days are just so jam packed that I feel like I don’t really give myself that time to reflect unless I’m forced to sit down and do it for homework.” For Jacob, reflection was often subsumed to other priorities because “there are other things that are more fun or easier or things that feel more pertinent because they have a deadline or there’s a grade involved.” The word “busy” often came up in reference to a lack of time for reflection. Additionally, some students struggled to make time for reflection because it felt like an indulgence or they did not make reflection a priority. Finally, students acknowledged fear or anxiety about what might come from their reflection could be potential barriers.

While some students begrudged “required” reflection, other students found value in having to set aside time to reflect. Hannah said knowing she would have to reflect challenged her to be more mindful during her leadership experience. Coasta captured both sentiments in one thought:

I can’t say I enjoy the journals because it is homework. It is sitting there writing but I mean it’s a good way to know what my thought process is. I don’t sit there and think ‘Oh no that paragraph wasn’t good. I’m going to rewrite that.’ I just sit there and I write my thoughts. So I guess I do enjoy that in a way. It does take time out of my day, which I don’t enjoy, but it’s nice to kind of sit and reflect.

Knowing time is a significant barrier to reflection, educators could provide time in class for individual or group reflection. By carving out time during classes for reflection, instructors indicate reflection is important and worthy of students’ time. Instructors might also consider incorporating one-on-one meetings with students, small group discussion, or time for written reflection as components to engage students in reflection. Finally, to the extent to which they are comfortable, educators should model reflection and authenticity for students (Johnson, 2009). By engaging in reflection with students, instructors contribute to the learning environment and invite authentic student reflection.

Conclusion

Reflection is a critical component of leadership learning. As an experiential, interdisciplinary field of study, leadership courses can benefit significantly from including regular reflection. The themes that emerged from this study indicate reflection, and the environment in which students engage in reflection, has a significant impact on leadership learning. By providing students with an understanding of, and language for, reflection, students are better equipped to make reflection a part of their personal, professional, and academic lives. Through intentionally structuring a learning environment conducive to reflection, leadership educators can increase opportunities for authentic and vulnerable reflection. In this study, we found that discussion-based classes, small classes, the physical arrangement of classes, a diverse peer group, and engaged instructors all contributed to a dynamic leaning environment that enhanced opportunities for reflection. Students attributed reflection to increased self-awareness, which facilitated better interactions with others and increased confidence in their future personal and professional lives. By prioritizing reflection in leadership education, we can increase opportunities for meaningful student learning and engagement.

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