

The Effects of Experiential Learning with an Emphasis on Reflective Writing on Deep-Level Processing of Leadership Students

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Abstract

Experiential learning and reflective writing are important components of college instructors' repertoires. Learning is not complete without proper reflection. The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate students' perceptions of learning in a leadership course that emphasized experiential learning methods. The respondents included the students enrolled in a Professional Leadership Development course. Students were asked to keep a reflective journal and to prepare a reflective paper at course completion. Using content analysis of the students' reflections, it was determined that the students benefited from receiving instruction associated with experiential learning. They recognized each of the teaching strategies associated with the four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle and the importance of each in maximizing learning. Incorporation of teaching strategies associated with experiential learning within the collegiate leadership classroom did enhance student learning, whereby allowing students to approach learning in a deep manner.

Introduction

Institutions and instructors of higher learning have a responsibility to develop activities that will develop the students. Chickering and Reisser (1993) believe:

The quality of teaching is critical to student development in college. Good teaching can powerfully encourage the development of intellectual and interpersonal competence, identity, mature interpersonal relationships, purpose, and integrity. Poor teaching can actually hinder development in one or more of these areas. (pp. 369-370)

College professors are challenged to become more than subject-matter experts. They should become experts in teaching. Even though “the dark secret of higher education is that most college professors are never trained to be teachers” (National Panel Report, 2002, p. 16), college professors must embrace training, where they strive for excellence in teaching. Teachers must know and understand how and why students learn.

The traditional teacher-centered atmosphere of the college classroom has been criticized for not fostering a student’s ability to think (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). The learner’s role is submissive, where he or she is only a participant in the learning process. This scenario is an example of a typical teacher-centered college classroom. Now, imagine a classroom where the teacher involves the student in the entire learning process, from the decision of what will be learned to the evaluation of what was learned—from the beginning to the end (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). This scenario is an example of a typical learner-centered college classroom. A learner-centered approach to teaching fosters a deep approach to learning, where students are required to think critically (Trigwell et al., 1999). The way a college instructor teaches influences how his or her students learn (Trigwell et al., 1999).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) believe:

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much by just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, [and] apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves. (pp. 374-375)

Through the incorporation of learner-centered teaching practices with an emphasis on reflective writing, can students internalize the concepts presented in the classroom?

Research shows that college professors typically do not teach with the thought of promoting critical thinking in their students (Cano & Martinez, 1991; Whittington, 1995). If college professors are not teaching with the thought of promoting critical thinking in their students, the students are not typically thinking

critically (Cano & Martinez, 1991; Whittington, 1995). The manner in which a college professor teaches in the collegiate leadership classroom can influence the way in which students learn, promoting students to critically think about the subject matter (Stedman, 2009; Stedman & Andenoro, 2007).

Reflective writing encourages students to think, whereby the student is an individual thinker, whose thoughts and ideas are important to the class and the material being taught in the class. Journaling is a “means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights” (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 19), and a learning journal is “essentially a vehicle for reflection” (Moon, 1999a, 4). Similar to a learning journal is an academic journal. An academic journal is typically “based on responses to assigned readings or topics presented in the classroom, and are most often evaluated not for their style or control of formal writing abilities but for their reflection of students’ learning and thinking” (Anson & Beach, 1990, p. 2). A learning journal or an academic journal allows students to put their own thoughts into words, crystallizing the concepts important to them and allowing the instructor to realize the importance of such concepts. Duckworth (1977) realized the importance of such:

In my view, there are two aspects to teaching: The first is to put students into contact with phenomena related to the area to be studied—the real thing, not lectures or books about it—and to help them notice what is interesting; to engage them so they will continue to think and wonder about it. The second is to have the students try to explain the sense they are making, and instead of explaining things to students, to try and understand their sense. (p. 3)

Journaling allows students to move beyond the knowledge gained through a traditional classroom environment (Hiemstra, 2001), and hopefully, allows “connections [to] often unfold almost magically in the writing process, as learners experience those wonderful ‘ah-ha’ moments through the free writing a journal invites” (Fenwick & Parsons, 2000, p. 155).

The most foreseen benefit of adult students keeping reflective, learning journals is the enhanced personal growth and development of the adult students (Hiemstra, 2001). Reflective, learning journals allows adult students to integrate their own personal experiences with the material presented in the classroom, whereby enhancing their own personal growth as human beings (Hiemstra, 2001). Reflection is the means for transforming a student’s current knowledge into new knowledge (Lockyer, Gondoez, & Thivierge, 2004; Moon, 1999b).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this study consisted of three components. The first was experiential learning. Experiential learning, as defined by Luckmann (1996), is “a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from

direct experience” (p. 7). Dewey (1938) philosophized “everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had” (p. 27). True learning is the result of students’ experiences, and the evaluation and reflection of these experiences. New thoughts and ideas are formed as a result of the reflection of these experiences, thus building new concepts based upon past experiences (Arnold, Warner, & Osborne, 2006).

Another significant thinker and contributor to experiential learning was Kolb (1984). Kolb’s 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” (p. 41). In Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (see Figure 1), the learner utilizes two strategies for grasping experiences—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and the learner utilizes two strategies for transforming experiences—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2000).

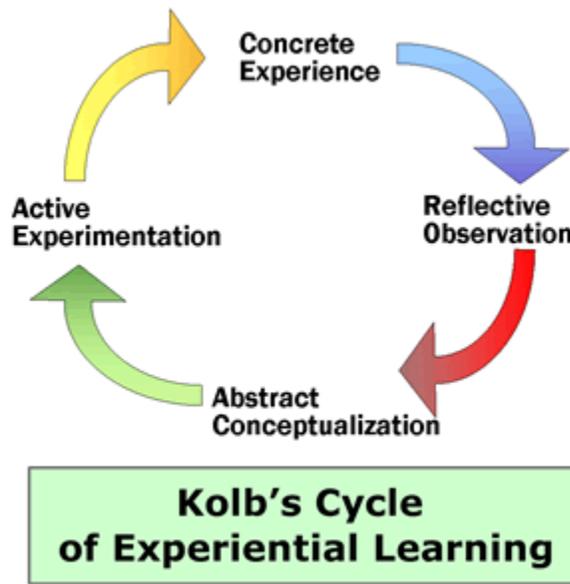


Figure 1. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle

The second component of the theoretical framework that served as a basis for this study was reflection. Reflection, or reflective thought, as defined by Dewey (1910), is the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). A valuable experience is without meaning unless the experience is carefully considered for its true worth. Reflection is key. It allows students to make the connection between theory and practice and allows the principles learned in the classroom to be applied to their

daily lives. Student learning is deepened and strengthened when the abstract becomes the concrete (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Reflection can provide a gateway to the students' outside lives, where the concepts come alive in the most usual of places for them. For a student to actually think, he or she is mentally engaged and ready to learn.

Reflective learning, as defined by Boyd and Fales (1983), is "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (p. 100). Reflection is essential to learning from experience, and it is the "core difference between whether a person repeats the same experience several times, becoming highly proficient at one behavior, or learns from experience in such a way that he or she is cognitively or affectively changed" (p. 100). Reflection helps the individual travel from a destination of uncertainty to a field of clarity (Dewey, 1910). The role of reflection, as defined in the context of learning, serves as a "bridge between experience and theory" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, p. 180). They indicate that through reflective learning, student learning is deepened and strengthened.

The third component of the theoretical framework that served as a basis for this study was student approaches to learning. Upon entering a classroom at one of the many colleges and universities devoted to preparing students for the real world, the students either approach learning in a deep manner or in a surface manner. The students who search for understanding of the knowledge presented in the classroom are utilizing a deep approach to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976). Students who acquire knowledge merely for passing the exams are utilizing a surface approach to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976). In conclusion, two approaches to learning do exist: "first an orientation towards comprehending the meaning of the materials to be learned; and, second, and orientation towards merely being able to reproduce those materials for the purposes of academic assessment" (Richardson, 1994a, p. 463).

Purposes and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine upper-level undergraduate students' perceptions of learning in a leadership course that emphasized experiential learning methods. Specifically, this study examined student attitudes regarding experiential learning. More specifically, the researcher investigated the following research question: How was learning maximized as a result of experiential learning?

Methods

This study employed procedures associated with the qualitative paradigm. Personal documents consisting of the students' reflective journals and their

comprehensive reflective papers were utilized as the data collection tool (Merriam, 1998).

The sample of the study consisted of all students enrolled in a *Professional Leadership Development* course during a five-week summer session, giving the researcher prolonged engagement with the respondents. The sample consisted of 66 students, disbursed in 2 sections taught by the same instructor. The sample was purposive and selected because the students were upper-level undergraduate students and were interested in the material (chosen as an elective or a part of their major).

The context surrounding the study constituted careful observation of the 66 students enrolled in the collegiate leadership course. The demographics of interest to the researcher were gender, age or life experience, and major of the students enrolled in the class at the university. For this study, 26 of the 66 students were male and 40 students were female. In regards to age or life experience, 50 of the 66 students were less than or equal to 22 years of age, and 16 students were 23 years of age or older. Regarding the students' majors, 29 of the 66 students were ALED majors, and 37 were majors outside of the department. (see Table 1)

Table 1
Demographic Variables of the Students Enrolled in the Collegiate Leadership Course, N=66

	Number of Students	Percentage
Gender		
Male	26	39.40%
Female	40	60.60%
Age		
≤ 22	50	75.76%
> 23	16	24.24%
Major		
ALED	29	43.94%
Non-Major	37	56.06%

Each student was assigned a code to provide an audit trail of all the raw data. The code consisted of a number from 1 to 66, followed by three letters. The first letter represented gender, and a student was either given "M" for male or "F" for female. The second letter represented age, and a student was either given "Y" for being 22 years of age and younger or "O" for being 23 years of age and older. The last letter represented major and a student was given either "A" for being an Agricultural Leadership and Development (ALED) major or "E" for other majors.

As an example, student 53FYE was number 53, a female, 22 years of age or younger, and a major other than Agricultural Leadership and Development (ALED).

Each class meeting of the collegiate leadership course utilized teaching strategies associated with experiential learning. For the most part, each class began with lecture and discussion regarding a leadership theory, approach, or model, followed by an activity that illustrated the theory or model. Through the hands-on application of the activity, the students were able to connect the theories to their own personal lives. With each activity, the students participated in the activity and then reflected upon it critically. The instructor also used movies, case studies, and writing assignments to illustrate the theories with applications. The instructor also placed the students into four leadership learning communities for the duration of the five-week course. The students participated in the classroom activities with their leadership learning communities and were responsible for a group project.

Following each day of classroom instruction, the students wrote in their reflective journal. Webster and Hoover (2006) determined, the “reflection process transforms the experience for the learner” (p. 94), and journaling allows students to determine what is important to them and encourages teachers to expand upon these important concepts (Francis, 1995).

The reflective journals were semi-structured in design (Merriam, 1998). The students had guidelines they were asked to follow, but were also allowed the opportunity to express their ideas freely. Following each day of classroom instruction, the students were asked to include three key elements in their journal entries. To begin with, the students were required to demonstrate a clear understanding of the leadership concepts presented in the course and through the textbook. The students presented a brief summary of the key points, as the material is covered in class, by answering the question, What did I learn today? Secondly, the students were instructed to answer the question, What major new insights came out of the class for you? Specifically, what did the material mean to you? Lastly, as the final requirement for each journal entry, the students were asked to answer the question, How can the information learned in the classroom be applied to your daily life? How can you make sense of the random leadership concepts and make the theories real to you? Essentially, each day, the students determined what is important to them through their responses to the three above-mentioned questions.

Upon completion of the course, the students were asked to prepare a reflective paper, which served as a comprehensive reflection of the course (Fenwick & Parsons, 2000). The students were required to incorporate all the same elements as in their reflective journals. Additionally, the students answered the question, “How has the act of reflecting made the learning process more meaningful to

you?” The students’ comprehensive reflective papers were analyzed to “determine whether [the] students [did] reflect upon their practice and the depth of that reflective thinking” (Kember et al., 1999, p. 19).

Both the students’ reflective journals and reflective papers were submitted to the primary researcher, where the papers were analyzed for common themes. The data analysis technique used was content analysis (Merriam, 1998). Content analysis is a “process [that] involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories [or themes] that capture relevant characteristics of the document’s content” (Merriam, 1998, p. 160). From the students’ reflective journals and paper, the researcher searched each manuscript for recurring words or themes. The reflective writings were coded based upon these recurring words or themes.

The internal validity or “how [the] research findings match reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 201) was enhanced through the use of long-term observation of the respondents. The internal validity or trustworthiness was also established through weekly spot checks of the students’ journal entries to establish open communication between the primary researcher and her students. The primary researcher clarified any misunderstandings and worked to ensure the students were completing the assignment as designed. Peer examination of the data collected was performed to ensure trustworthiness. Reliability or “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205) was enhanced through an audit trail of the raw data. The audit trail of raw data allows other researchers to understand how the researcher, in question, arrived at his or her results (Merriam, 1998). The researcher kept a reflexive journal, where she wrote in detail how the data was collected and how and why decisions were made (Merriam, 1998). External validity, or how the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (i.e., transferability, was established through the researcher using thick, rich description). Thick, rich description will allow other researchers to “determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211).

Findings

As shown in Figure 2, the instructor for ALED 340: Professional Leadership Development utilized teaching strategies that supported all four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle. The instructor did not stay with a single teaching strategy, but used a multitude of teaching strategies, in hopes of reaching every type of learner. One student eloquently wrote, “I feel like I understand leadership on a deeper level since I was taking notes, writing a daily journal, [and] then performing the many different activities that we did daily in class” (13FYA). Another student commented, “I enjoyed the course because it was not strictly a

lecture based class. I felt the assignments, activities, and the discussions has benefited towards my learning style” (23MYA). Utilizing multiple teaching strategies that supported the stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle was a “...style of teaching [that was] very rewarding for the student and the teacher” (65MOE). As one student remarked, “I have gotten [something] out of this class that cannot be learned from the book...it comes from reflection, interaction, and an open atmosphere... (43FYE).

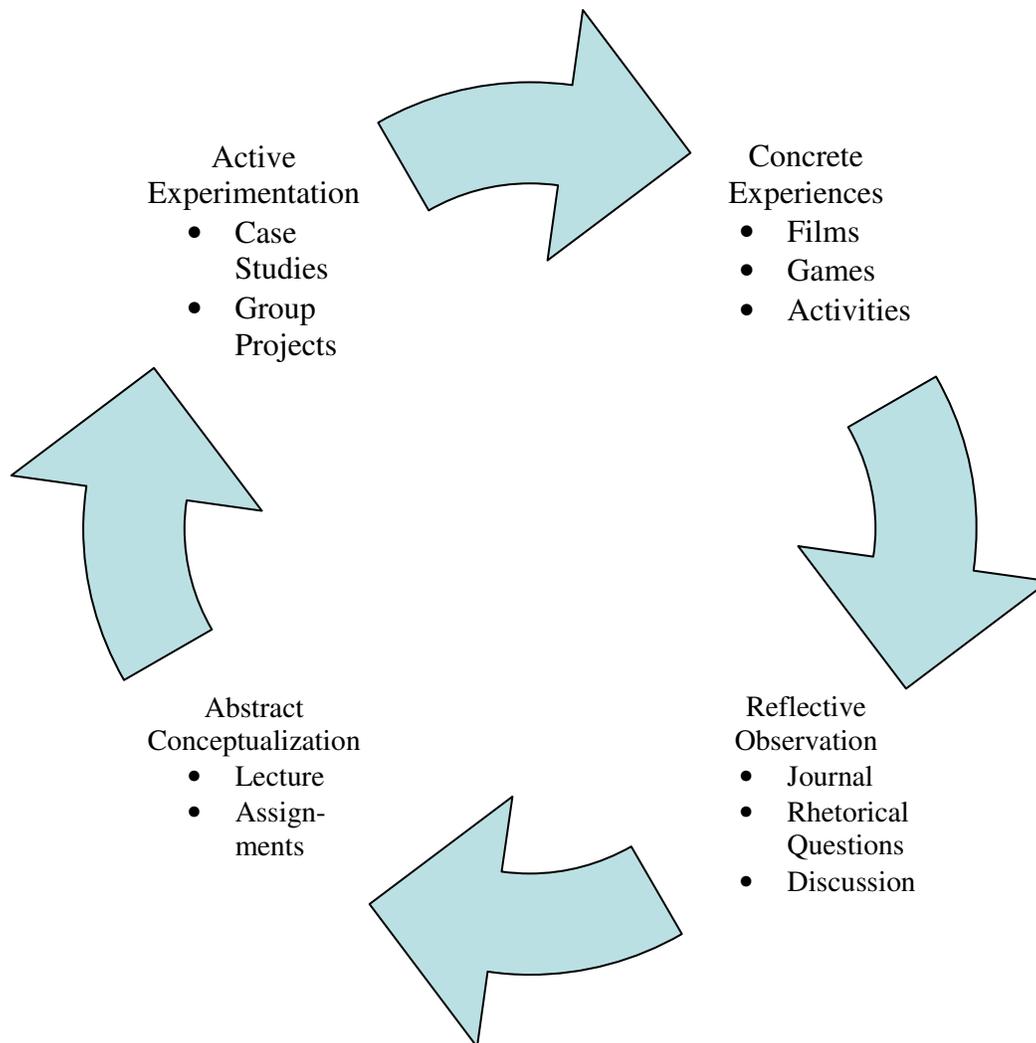


Figure 1. Teaching Strategies that Supported the Experiential Learning Cycle

Note. Adapted from Svinicki and Dixon (1987)

Utilizing Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle as the construct, content analysis of the students' reflective journals and papers was performed, producing the following theme: how learning was maximized. Three categories emerged from this theme: retention, internalization, and transformation.

Retention

The first category that arose from the students' reflective writing included how experiential learning was conducive to the students' ability to *retain* the leadership concepts. As one student said, "I did not forget the concepts as soon as I walked out the door..." (49FYA). In the words of another student, "[I was] able to remember not just for tests, but for life" (59MYE). Remember was a common word included in the students' reflective writing. One student eloquently wrote, "I believe the key difference between memory and reflection is getting something out of it. I could 're'-member what I wrote about leadership during the summer session, or I could try and get something out of those memories—reflection" (50MYE). Another student wrote about how the teaching strategies associated with experiential learning helped her remember the leadership concepts. She said, "[Experiential learning] helped me [to] remember the material longer" (25FYA). In another student's reflective journal, he said, "I am happy to say I will remember all of this throughout the coming years" (9MYA).

Experiential learning helped the students relate the leadership concepts to their everyday lives, increasing retention. In the words of one student, "What used to be in the back of my mind and I had to think about...are now like second nature to me" (35MYE). Another student wrote:

This way of learning forced you to think about what you were saying and put it on paper how it could be used. This has made the learning process easier for me I feel because when you visualize yourself doing something I think it makes it easier to actually get there and fulfill your dream.
(52MYA)

Reflective writing, as a component of experiential learning, was instrumental in the retention of the leadership concepts. One student said, "I feel that writing helped me to remember things I had enjoyed and learned from prior days and this helped me to study for the test because I made connections with each subject already and just needed to refresh" (22FOE). Another student in the class felt that the reflection required "students [to] make more of an effort to learn something daily" (19FOE).

Internalization

The second category that arose from the students' reflective journals included the *internalization of leadership concepts*, allowing the students to become more

aware of themselves as individuals and as leaders. Experiential methods with an emphasis on reflective writing allowed the students to “internalize [the leadership concepts] and see [their] strengths and weaknesses as leaders. It allowed [them] to grow (29FOA).” Grow was a common word among other students’ reflective journals and papers. Another student said, “This class has been a valuable experience for my...personal growth (14MOA).” Another student said, “Having this class has taught me to evaluate every situation around me and grow from them (19FOE).”

Within the internalization theme, students wrote in their journals how the course Professional Leadership Development helped them to find themselves. One student wrote:

When the end of the day is near, I begin to look back at what I have done, achieved, or what I need to improve. I look at my reflective journal and notes from class and absorb as much as I can. This class has been a guiding light for me to follow while I was in the dark looking for answers. (46MYA)

Another student wrote, “This class has taught me a lot about myself. Who I am and why, who I want to be, and who I am capable of being (37FOE).”

Other students internalized the leadership concepts, allowing them to grow as leaders. One student wrote, “The plans I have for my future are very important to me and this class has helped me to see how, as a leader, I should try to start developing myself so as to best be effective” (26MYE). Another student said, “I am not a leader by accomplishing my goal of graduating from college, but I am a leader for taking what I have learned in school and putting it to use in the real world (48MYA).”

Transformation

The third theme that emerged was *transformation*. One student voiced her opinion by saying “...my knowledge and perception of leadership has changed (66FOA).” Another student said, “I must admit I have always been very set in my ways and not very open to change. After taking this class, I have a few things in mind I want to try (13FYA).” A student in the class commented, “Change is the only constant the students will face in their careers, and the more adept they are to adapting to change, the more rewarding and fulfilling their jobs will be (14MOA).”

In the students’ reflective journals and papers, they discussed how they understood the true meaning of their past experiences and why they acted the way they did. The students also determined if they needed to transform or change their previous interpretations. For example, one student said:

I am a very loud and outgoing person who tends to dictate tasks and can unintentionally overlook possible solutions proposed by others. Although my style of leadership can be very helpful and effective in some situations, in others it has the opposite effect. Identifying what type of group I would be best suited to lead will enable me to capitalize on my strengths.

Regardless of the cost of being a great leader, I plan to dedicate my life on learning to accept that responsibility. (18FYE)

This student questioned situations in her past, and ultimately, realized the leadership situations in which she would excel, avoiding the situations in which she would not excel. She critically reflected upon the experiences, and transformed her way of viewing the experiences. Another student experienced the same epiphany:

In class, we did a game about what color you are, and I chose the color green, meaning organized. It was right on key that I am not good at letting other people help when I am a leader because I think I can do it better, and that my way is right. In order to be a better leader, I need to allow myself to develop the leadership skills so I can overcome my selfishness and grow into a leader others want to work under. I want to strive to be the colors red, yellow, and blue, as well as green. They all have their positives and negatives, but I want to be more open to different people and their different leadership abilities. (8FYE)

Each of these students critically reflected upon situations in the past and made changes for the future.

Discussion

The students' comments in their reflective journals and papers supported the four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle and resulted in the maximization of learning by the students. Svinicki and Dixon (1987) said, "By constructing learning sequences that lead students through the full cycle, an instructor should be able to foster a more complete learning than can be gained from a single perspective" (p. 142). The instructor for *Professional Leadership Development* did construct learning sequences that supported the four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle, whereby upholding the premise of experiential learning.

Teaching to all four learning styles and incorporating all four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle is important for college instructors because it involves students with various learning preferences in the college classroom experience (Brock & Cameron, 1999). Moreover, utilizing all the stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle increased students' retention of the knowledge presented in the classroom. This was evidenced in the students' writings and the quality of their assignments. Bonwell and Eison (1991) believe "students must do more than just listen. They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems" (p. iii). More importantly, students involved in all four stages of the

Experiential Learning Cycle will have more highly developed thinking and problem-solving skills (Brock & Cameron, 1999). All in all, the utilization of the Experiential Learning Cycle increased benefits to the students involved with its incorporation into the classroom. The classroom activities upheld the premise of experiential learning and worked to “change the student who is inactively...sitting in class taking notes and receiving information without thinking or learning very much, into an actively involved student who is mentally engaged and a participant in the learning process” (p. 254).

When students enter a classroom, they bring with them prior life experiences. These life experiences vary from student to student, and the teaching strategies associated with experiential learning helps the students relate their own individual life experiences with the same leadership concepts taught in the classroom. Reflection completes the learning process. A valuable experience is without meaning unless the experience is carefully considered for its true worth. Reflection allowed students to make the connection between theory and practice and allowed the principles learned in the classroom to be applied to their daily lives. Student learning is deepened and strengthened when the abstract becomes the concrete. Reflection provided a gateway to the students’ outside lives, where the concepts came alive in the most usual of places for them. For a student to actually think, he or she is mentally engaged and ready to learn. This connection increased retention as indicated in the students’ reflective writing, where the students remembered the concepts for more than the test.

Also emerging from the students’ reflective writing was how they internalized the leadership concepts. The students became aware of themselves as leaders and as individuals. Because of experiential learning methods utilized in the classroom, students internalized the leadership concepts, making them their own. The internalization of the leadership concepts allowed the students to grow and recognize themselves for the people they are and they will be. It can be concluded that experiential learning methods and reflective writing assignments were effective and increased the students’ internalization of the leadership concepts.

It can also be concluded that experiential learning methods resulted in transformation. Transformative learning is the “process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Learners’ experiences may be transformed through the critical reflection of those experiences. In the students’ reflective journal and papers, they thought about previous experiences, examining them in a new light. They revised their interpretations of the events, and ultimately, made a decision to change or transform their way of thinking. In conclusion, learning was maximized in a leadership course as a result of the incorporation of various teaching strategies associated with the Experiential Learning Cycle.

The students were searching for understanding or the true meaning when writing in their reflective journals. The students did approach learning in a deep manner. The act of critically reflecting, along with the assignments and the teaching strategies associated with experiential learning, produced an environment conducive to the students taking a deep approach to learning.

Recommendations

Should instructors adhere to traditional modes of teaching, where the acquisition of knowledge is the most important goal of education? Or, should instructors, instead, go beyond these traditional modes and work to incorporate more active learning strategies within their classrooms? Based upon the findings and the conclusions of this study, the researcher recommends that leadership educators incorporate teaching strategies associated with experiential learning within their classrooms. The educators should incorporate teaching strategies associated with each of the four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle, in an attempt to reach the learning styles of each and every student. The inclusion of many different teaching strategies within the collegiate leadership classroom allows students to learn in their comfort zone, but it also allows them to step out of their comfort zones and learn in different ways than normal.

Reflective writing, where the students reflect upon the leadership concepts critically, is an integral and necessary component of the Experiential Learning Cycle. Reflective writing was instrumental in allowing the students to approach learning in a deep fashion. The reflective journals should be semi-structured, where the educator provides prompts for the students. These prompts should help the students in understanding how leadership affects their lives. Essentially, these questions should answer the question, *Why does this matter to me?* The students should also have the freedom to express their ideas freely, if they so choose. The students should reflect daily, and the educator must check the students' reflective journals for progress to ensure the students are completing the assignment as designed and to ensure they are making the leadership connection. In applying the above-mentioned recommended practices, leadership educators can foster their students taking a deep approach to learning.

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