

## Nurturing Critical Reflection and Perspective through the Kiva

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### *Introduction and Background*

This paper examines the applications for leadership education of a group reflection and discussion process called a Kiva. The Kiva experience provides a structured group experience that encourages critical reflection and self-analysis through multiple, sequenced facets of a single issue. The Kiva is thought to have origins in Southwestern Native American governance processes, however similar processes are found throughout many indigenous American cultures (Friesen, 1993).

Leadership education requires a pedagogical approach that explicitly addresses more than the cognitive domain. In one of the limited references to Kiva as a pedagogical tool, George Reese asks, “What if we view mathematics as more than the set of information, algorithms, and proofs that make up our textbooks? What if our mathematics classes were places where students could question not just the problems from the text but the purposes of mathematics itself?” (p. 1, 1998). Reese’s query does not seem unusual to leadership educators. As is now commonly accepted, if not practiced, understanding (and doing) leadership requires emotional and social intelligence, ethical and spiritual development, considerable self-awareness and identity development, and a wisdom of self vis-à-vis others in both application and aspiration. This also sums up one of the major challenges in leadership education, namely finding the balance between respecting and encouraging the intrapersonal journey and motivations of emerging leaders, and the academic rigor and content that the leadership field strives to establish. However, as most leadership scholars, educators, and practitioners acknowledge, the successful leaders require both a well-informed set of skills and concepts, as well as a deep sense of self (and the lessons from the journey that formed that self). Although it seems contradictory to advocate tearing down mental constructions while simultaneously building them, it is indeed this process in which the most effective learning occurs – when mental models are critically questioned to allow a more full integration of new information (Brookfield, 1995; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

The Kiva represents one unique tool for facilitating the learning and self-discovery of emerging leaders. The strength of the Kiva experience lies in the juxtaposition of public and private self, and the affective and reflective responses the structure elicits. The process provides a number of advantageous outcomes:

- Kiva participants teach and learn simultaneously.
- Activates feelings, background experiences, and perceptions.
- Provides a structure that promotes reflection and processing ideas.
- Elicits awareness of interaction between background, perception, and emotions.
- Provides a variety of answers and considers an issue from different perspectives.
- Processes issue at a deeper level, illuminating connections and ideas.
- Provides a base for personal change and action through greater consciousness.

(Pavlik, 2003; Weiss, 1996)

During this practice session, participants will engage in learning about educating leaders using Kiva by actually engaging in a Kiva.

Learner objectives:

1. Experience and understand the Kiva process.
2. Discuss the many facets of the experience that encourage critical reflection and learning.
3. Explore the various student populations, contexts, and leadership topics in which this process would be highly effective.
4. Understand some of the theoretical underpinnings of why and how the process is effective.

Following the Kiva activity, participants will examine the many applications of this technique for teaching leadership, particularly those topics requiring deep introspection and examination of personal motivations and emotions.

#### *How it works*

The Kiva experience consists of a group of participants sitting in nested, concentric circles all facing in toward the facilitator in the center. The innermost group engages in answering (out loud) individually directed questions about an issue of which: (a) they have personal experience, (b) they have a degree of knowledge, (c) has affective and motivational facets, and (d) has some degree of deep personal meaning to them. After answering the initial questions (as the other circles listen and reflect), the participants change places, moving one circle closer to the center and the innermost circle moving to the outer circle. The same questions are asked of this new innermost circle group as the others listen, reflect, and synthesize their conceptualization of the issue/topic. The following summarizes the process:

(For awareness of this experience we thank Dr. Howard Fuller and Dr. Robert Pavlik at Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning. Much of the following explanation originated with a handout from Dr. Pavlik.)

**Participants** Active respondents – 21-28; Active listeners – open; Facilitator - 1

**Prerequisites:** Seating arrangement of chairs in 3 concentric circles

Set of 7-10 questions, which will vary based on the topic. However the general focus follows background, feelings, perceptions, the present, and the future.

- Processes:**
1. Invite participants to engage in 1-2 minutes of silence about the issue.
  2. Overview the steps:
    - ❑ Each person in the inner circle will be asked a similar or different question. Rather than answering with definitions and reasoning, participants should share their feelings and emotions to the extent they feel comfortable.
    - ❑ Each person may choose to answer the question or ask for another question.
    - ❑ All participants in the middle and outer circles are to listen, not talk until they are in the inner circle and asked a question.

- After all persons in the inner circle answer a question, they should move to the outer circle, while the middle circle group moves to the inner circle and while the outer group moves to the middle circle – all in reflective silence and with respectful, slow movements – no banging chairs, etc.
  - After all three groups have answered questions, they may remain in their seats, or stand, or move to another chair for a large group discussion.
3. Invite each person in the inner circle to answer one question.
  4. Ask participants to move to their next circle of chairs. (Repeat until complete.)
  5. Invite participants to answer such questions as these:
    - What surprised you in listening to the answers?
    - How did you feel as a listener? As one of the respondents?
    - What did you learn about the issue?
    - What questions do you have about the issue now?

Again, for this session, a brief introduction to the Kiva experience will be provided. Then participants will actually engage in a Kiva experience (for this session we will focus on their role as a leader in the classroom and the critical (theory) participative approach they embrace or fear). Following the experience (as time allows), participants will engage in a brief summarizer discussion to reinforce the lessons and practical applications of the Kiva experience in their teaching context.

#### *Results to date*

The presenter has used the Kiva successfully with both experienced leaders pursuing graduate degrees, as well as with undergraduates with little to no leadership experience. Each group requires careful consideration of Kiva content to match their experience and interest. While the Kiva directly elicits personal perspectives and experiences, the overlapping questions and reflective listening of the outer circles prompts continued thinking and rethinking about one's perspective, allowing for a much deeper consideration. For example, in one experience with doctoral students, a Kiva was used to explore perspectives and experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination (Middlebrooks & Slupski, 2002). In addition to being a powerful examination of ideas and perceptions, the process opened up a variety of new perspectives for learning about Servant-Leadership and Transformational leadership. It is one thing to explain a leadership theory, and quite another to connect it to a personal, emotional story. The Kiva helps bring these concepts to life by emphasizing that which is most uniquely human – the motivation, emotion, and uniquely personal perspective of individual story.

#### *Conclusions*

The Kiva technique represents a very useful tool for leadership education. Facilitating the growth and development of effective leaders requires attention to head, heart, and spirit – essentially a full integration of individual conceptualization and the experiences that brought them there. Pedagogical approaches and techniques that can elicit, explore, and question those closely held personal conceptions provide opportunities for leadership educators to link the personal with the theoretical and applied.

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