

## **Developing Future Leaders: The Role of Reflection in the Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

Leadership development continues to be a topic of conversation, education, and research. Reflection has been named as one of the key competencies needed for effective leaders particularly as the workplace grows more complex and multicultural. But how does one develop reflective skill in college students, the leaders of the future? This paper reviews the concept of the “reflective leader,” the importance of reflection as a key component in the development of future leaders, and suggests strategies for incorporating reflection in leadership education as well as mechanisms for its assessment.

### **Introduction**

As the workplace becomes increasingly complex and multicultural, the cry for effective leadership has been answered by a growing popularity of leadership studies in undergraduate, graduate, and executive education programs (Doh, 2003). Although students may have the option of majoring in leadership at a variety of universities, actual intended outcomes may range from merely the study of theory to actual skill development (Brungardt, et al., 2006). If the mission of the leadership program in question includes development, several researchers maintain that study alone is not sufficient and suggest a more comprehensive program that fosters personal integration of theory and practice over time in a manner that is both reiterative and reflective (Kayes, 2002; Doh, 2003; Connaughton, et al., 2003; Townsend, et. al., 2005). Students must both learn what it means to be an effective leader as one practices how to be an effective leader. Nahavandi (2006) suggests that leadership be taught early and often. Central to this process is the practice of reflection. This paper reviews the importance of reflection as a key component in the development of future leaders, suggests strategies that can be incorporated into the classroom to promote reflection, and mechanisms for its assessment.

## Why Reflection?

Reflection, or the process of critically thinking about our behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and values, has been identified by numerous researchers as an important part of any learning process, be it formal or informal. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model incorporates reflective observation as an integral part of the learning cycle. Experience leads to observation, reflection about that experience, and ultimately the development of new insights or conclusions which shape different action in the future. Schon (1983), in his seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner*, also emphasized the importance of reflection in professional practice and added that reflection may occur not only after an event but simultaneously within the moment as well. Although professionals may have learned a body of knowledge and pattern of practice, it may be difficult to apply them in unique, complex or uncertain situations. Continuous learning in practice occurs through reflection-in-action (thinking on one's feet) as well as reflection-on-action (thinking upon completion of a project or particular activity).

The term reflection, however, can mean many things. It can range from simply thinking about one's experience as a means to increase awareness (of thoughts, feelings, values, or actions) to considering possible alternatives to a problem. Mezirow (1998) used the term "critical reflection of assumptions" to specify the type of reflective practice central to all adult learning processes that evaluate or challenge one's underlying assumptions related to an experience.

Leadership as an area of study in higher education is somewhat unique in that it spans both traditional academic disciplines such as psychology and sociology, and practical contexts such as work and social settings. Merely finishing a particular course of study intended to develop leadership skills, however, does not ensure that a student will be an effective leader. One cannot possibly study ahead of time how to handle every situation that may present itself, but one can develop a process of learning from experience that ensures progressive competency development over time. In fact, the process of leadership is intrinsically connected to learning (Vail, 1996; Huber, 2002). Practice and application of key concepts are crucial to retention of leadership concepts and well as development of leadership skill (Townsend, et al., 2005).

As defined by Mezirow (1998), critical reflection can be used as a way to integrate theory with practice, can facilitate insight, and stimulate self-discovery, not only in classroom contexts, but in professional life as well. By inviting the student to question and perhaps even change one's personal assumptions, critical reflection can broaden perspectives which lead to a more holistic understanding of complex or ambiguous situations (Densten & Gray, 2001; Kayes, 2002). It can also assist in developing moral and ethical responsibility by encouraging one to

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draw upon experiences and values while attending to interpersonal relations, feelings, and politics (Grey, 2004). According to Goleman et al. (2002), self-directed learning which employs reflective questioning throughout its cycle has been shown to be an effective strategy for developing emotional intelligence and ultimately leadership competency.

Senge (1990) placed the process of reflection as integral to organizational learning. He suggested that leaders, rather than being very individualistic, actually engage in highly collaborative activities as designers, teachers, and stewards in organizations with others who are continuously learning, adapting to changing environments, and generating new ways of being. Critical reflection on multiple levels is an intrinsic component of single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and is a key to challenging prevailing mental models, and fostering more systemic patterns of thinking. Raelin (2004, 2006) echoed the notion of collaboration and suggested that leadership development actually happens as a group process. Leaders develop collaboratively through work-based “learning-in-action” with reflection occurring both individually and collectively.

### **On Becoming a Reflective Leader**

The literature reveals countless advocates of reflective practice, from learning theorists to leadership scholars. Huber (2002) suggests that leadership educators serve as facilitators of the learning process by engaging others in reflective practice and encouraging future leaders to look inward to clarify personal values as well as outward to understand how they connect to a larger whole. The process of reflection, however, may be new to students. Smith (2001), in his experience, found that even current leaders have difficulty reflecting on their actions. I have found that students struggle at first with the process because much of their previous coursework may have involved the traditional “absorb information and regurgitate for the test” experience still prevalent in higher education. The practice of actually working with the material and taking ownership of the learning process may prove to be challenging. Students may not have any idea how to proceed, and without some direction and guided questioning, reflective activities may result in written logs or verbal narratives of events with little critical thinking applied.

The effort put forth to develop reflective capacity, however, can yield many benefits. Studies have shown that students engaging in reflective activities have reported increased self awareness, self-confidence, and feeling of empowerment to recreate their own self-concept (Morrison, 1996). They have demonstrated enhanced professional skills such as more effective listening, a greater ability to manage change, and better ability to clarify arguments. Students are able to assemble all aspects of themselves – personal, interpersonal, private, public,

intellectual, and professional – into a comprehensive understanding of the whole person.

### **The Learning Journal**

The development of reflective ability can be facilitated in a variety of ways from individual activities such as journaling to group dialogue and discussion.

Learning journals are one of the most common strategies utilized due to the ease of implementation and potential depth of response received. They have been used in a variety of disciplines from healthcare to literature and mathematics. The format and structure may vary from free stream-of-consciousness writing to a structured analysis of critical incidents. The purpose can vary as well, from the development of self-awareness to better concept comprehension (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Varner & Peck, 2003; Ramsey, 2002; Cunliffe, 2004).

The quality and depth of learning can vary tremendously from student to student, however, if assignments are left too open-ended. To encourage deeper levels of thinking and facilitate the connection between theory and practice, reflection activities should be developed that include some degree of structure depending upon the ability of the student. I have used learning journals for over six years in a variety of undergraduate courses covering subjects such as organizational behavior, team development, gender and diversity, and leadership philosophy, a service learning course which explores the concepts of servant leadership, and a masters level human resource management course. Plans are underway to offer a masters level Leadership: Theory and Practice course which will require a significant portion of individual and collective reflection. I have found that the degree of structure and direction required is inversely proportional to the level of the course. As students become familiar with the concepts of journaling and have practiced reflective writing in previous courses, their ability improves, they require less guidance, and reflect more deeply.

I have found that guided reflection gives students enough direction, but still allows for individual freedom. Almost all activities, however, involve movement through the experiential learning cycle by prompting students to answer questions, similar to Cunliffe's (2004) approach:

- Identify an experience (*What happened? What struck me?*).
- Analyze the relevance of course content to understanding or question one's assumptions (*What does this mean? Why do I think this happened? How does this relate to the material I am studying? How does this connect to my understanding of this issue?*).

- Apply the learning to personal or professional lives (*So what have I learned from this? Now what will I do differently? What do I need to explore further? How will I think about this topic differently?*).

To achieve optimal learning, reflection activities should occur throughout the course of the engagement rather than merely appearing at the end as a final paper requirement. Activities established before the experience empower students to create their own personal learning goals. Activities structured during the term can facilitate the connection of coursework to experience or focus on resolving personal challenges, developmental issues or team difficulties. Reflection upon course completion challenges the students to think critically about the entire experience and its relevance to course content and their future endeavors. Table 1 offers samples of questions that can be asked at various points throughout the course.

To improve journaling quality, I have also found it helpful to provide grading rubrics prior to the first assignment as well as a sample entry from a previous term to serve as a model. Rubrics shared with the students can assist with enhancing depth of discussion, and finally, outline performance expectations. Based on the type of assignment, grading criteria might include depth and clarity of discussion, application of course content to experiences, personal insight and learning, logic of conclusions, quality of examples, and technical aspects (e.g., format, grammar). Sample criteria for evaluating reflective journal entries based loosely on the work of Varner & Peck (2003) include:

- Understanding – demonstration of knowledge of material.
  - *Were questions covered thoroughly? Did examples clearly illustrate concepts and support answers?*
- Application – connection between subject and personal/work life.
  - *Did experiences clearly and directly connect to subject at hand?*
- Personal insight and learning – enhancement of self-awareness, intent to change behavior/thinking.
  - *Did connections result in learning about self or others? What does the writer intend to do differently next time? How has this experience changed the writer's thinking?*
- Technical composition and professionalism.
  - *Was the paper free of grammatical and spelling errors? Were references cited when applicable?*

### **The Value of Dialogue**

Although one typically thinks of reflection in terms of the assignment of written exercises such as journaling, it may be helpful to include other activities that

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provide alternative routes for sharing experiences and insights. Discussion in class and between teammates can introduce students to alternative viewpoints, to challenge them to think critically, and develop collaborative reflective skills necessary for participation in learning organizations. When the goal is mutual learning everyone exerts influence on and contributes to each other's learning (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). Reflection at the group level, utilized when work is being performed by teams, has an added benefit of enhancing learning about interpersonal and team effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Table 1 also contains suggested questions to stimulate group dialogue and learning.

To facilitate group learning and reflection, Kolb and Kolb (2005) suggested that appropriate "space" be made throughout the term that encourages ongoing conversation related to issues at hand. Merely providing the time, however, is not enough. Facilitators must first create an environment that is psychologically safe by fostering trust and mutual respect. To support dialogue, it may be helpful to agree upon ground rules early on in the course, be sensitive to power issues in the group, and remain aware of the level of participation among members. Ramsey and Fitzgibbons (2005) suggested that everyday classroom experiences can provide rich learning opportunities if they are allowed to emerge. Every student brings personal experiences as workers or members of other organizations that can serve as springboards for discussion. It is easier for them to take responsibility for their learning if they start from what they know. Therefore, every person, experience, reflection, and question should be considered a potential source of learning. This more organic style of learning may be prove to be challenging for some instructors if they are more comfortable with higher degrees of structure, used to providing answers, or compelled to move the group in the "right direction."

As technology becomes more accessible, dialogue can be facilitated electronically using email, websites, discussion boards, or chat rooms. Arbaugh (2006), in his study of online learning, suggested that group discussion play an integral role in learning in online communities. Instructors can trigger the discussion by posting a specific question related to the experience and requiring students to share responses with the group, in turn stimulating further exploration. In my experience after facilitating two online courses, I have found no difference in the depth of discussion or quality of reflection submitted. In fact, the online format may provide the opportunity for students who appear more reserved in the classroom to find their voice. Regardless of the media chosen, students should make contributions at regular intervals to the electronic dialogue and its relationship to their observations, interactions, and experiences, ultimately developing new ways of thinking about an issue or strategies for self-improvement.

Table 1

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Question to stimulate reflection and dialogue

	<b>Beginning</b>	<b>During</b>	<b>Ending</b>
<b>Individual journaling</b> <i>(sample from a service learning course)</i>	What do I intend to learn? What skills related to servant leadership do I want to develop? What do I already know? What will make this a good experience for me? How will I make sure it is?	What happened? How did it affect me? What was exciting, puzzling, inspiring, frustrating, impressive, upsetting, challenging? How can I use <i>this material</i> in my work? How has this experience changed my thoughts, values, or opinions so far? What will I do differently next time based on what I've learned?	Did I learn what I had intended to learn? Why or why not? How will I think, act, or behave differently in the future because of this? In what ways have my sense of self, values and self-confidence been changed because of this experience? Do I practice any behaviors that reflect a servant leadership style? Please elaborate.

<p><b>Sample journal assignments from an MBA level Human Resource Management Course</b></p>	<p>Considering that people problems are among our most difficult challenges, what specific problems are YOU currently dealing with related to Human Resource Management? And how could this course help you overcome them?</p> <p>Please write a short paper describing your learning goals for this class:</p> <p>What am I currently struggling with? What would I like to specifically improve or learn more about?</p>	<p>Complete the attached questionnaire about your work values, attitudes, and preferences and answer the following questions. What did I learn about myself that I did not know before? How does my current job fit my profile? How can I use these results to enhance my career?</p>	<p>Over the quarter, we have covered several topics related to human resources that can have a significant impact on your role as leader. It is now time to reflect upon your learning this session and how it can enhance your effectiveness.</p> <p>Part 1. Review your first individual assignment. What were your learning goals coming into this course? Did you achieve your goals? Why or why not? Part 2. Discuss the issues covered in this course that have affected you most. In your discussion, tell me what you have learned, why it was important to you and how it has changed the way you lead or plan to lead someday.</p>
<p><b>Group level dialogue</b>  (samples from an undergrad level teams course)</p>	<p>How much time and effort are each of us willing and/or able to commit to this project? What would you like to see out of this project? What would we like to learn? What will make this a good experience for everyone? How do we make sure everyone is heard? How will we resolve differences?</p>	<p>How well is everyone contributing to our discussion/work? My level of satisfaction with our work together today (1-10)... What is going well/not so well? What should we try to do differently next time we meet? How does our work together today relate to “what we are discussing” in class?</p> <p><i>Questions categorized as individual may also be used stimulus for group discussion</i></p>	<p>How well did we work together?  What contributed to our success?  What more needs to be done?  What could have been improved during this semester?  A picture of our team would look like....</p>

### Student Feedback

In an effort to determine the impact of reflection as an overall learning strategy, I solicited feedback from my students in an upper-level undergraduate course by



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asking them to reflect back upon their learning experiences throughout the course of their studies at our university and to rank a variety of activities according to how much they learned and ultimately remembered about the subject. This group of students was selected because they were nearing the completion of their degrees and, therefore had accumulated a wide range of learning experiences. A total of 19 students were surveyed individually and asked to rate the following activities using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “5” designated as having the greatest impact on learning to “1” designated as having no impact at all on learning. The survey was followed by open group discussion and “reflection.” The mean results and ranking appear in Table 2.

Table 2  
Impact of various activities on learning

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Learning Activity	Mean Score
1. Connecting the material to something in my life.	4.28
2. Discussing the material with my group members.	4.12
3. Watching a video that demonstrated course concepts.	4.00
4. Discussing the material with the professor and entire class.	4.00
5. Facilitating a discussion about the material.	4.00
6. Applying the information by working through a case study.	3.82
7. Presenting the material.	3.67
8. Reading the material.	3.47
9. Thinking about concepts that caused me some discomfort.	3.35
10. Researching and writing a paper.	3.33
11. Reflecting and writing about how the material affects me.	3.33
12. Listening to a lecture.	3.22

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In summary, the students reported that they gained the most learning from the following activities:

- Connecting the material to something in my life outside of class.
- Discussing the topic with my classmates in a group.
- Discussing the topic with my classmates and professor.
- Watching a video.
- Leading a discussion with the class.

It is interesting to note that connection and discussion forms of reflection appeared to have a greater impact on learning than reflection through writing. To

further explore why the students ranked writing (or journaling) lower than most other forms of reflection, I asked the group about their rationale behind the ranking. Several students commented that although they did not like to participate in journaling because it was more difficult and required more of their effort, they did admit that they had learned more than they would have by just reading the material, studying for an exam, or listening to a lecture. Although the sample size in this study was very small, limiting applicability to broader populations, preliminary results appear to support the students' preference for more interactive forms of learning activities. Increased interactivity and experiential learning is certainly nothing groundbreaking as a pedagogical strategy, however, almost any activity can be structured in a way that improves learning even more by routinely incorporating questions that promote critical reflection.

### **Challenges Associated with Reflection**

Although reflection clearly has its benefits, reflective activities are not without problems. Reflection without connection to course material will not result in learning. Context must be provided to establish a general direction for the thought process. Even then, reflection at the individual or group level can sometimes veer off into subjects that are too emotional or uncomfortable even for the instructor. Journal entries can reveal too much information, thus creating ethical issues if sensitive personal data was misused or disclosed in some way. To help alleviate some of these concerns, Boud & Walker (1998) recommended that facilitators establish boundaries early on for the type of information that is appropriate for sharing and frame the context for learning in a manner that corresponds with the topic at hand.

And finally, as mentioned earlier, promoting critical reflection typically involves a more fluid or organic process which may provide a bit of discomfort to those instructors used to more directive or structured approaches to course management. Rather than working from a set lecture agenda, one can facilitate discussion by introducing a key question and allowing the class or group to contribute. It may take awhile to develop comfort in "going with the flow." I have found that even with a more organic process, as issues emerge from our discussions, I am able to tie them back as illustrations and applications of key concepts.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As leaders are faced with an environment that grows increasingly complex, multicultural, and ambiguous, we are seeing an increasing focus on the value of reflective capacity as a means for meeting the challenge. Leadership is learning – at both the individual and group levels. The ability to reflect, however, is not necessarily an inherent attribute, but it must be cultivated over time, and unless

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one is actively engaged in the practice of reflection, it is doubtful that this capability will develop on its own. As leadership educators we have the unique opportunity to help students, our leaders of the future, develop their ability to reflect on their experiences, both individually and collectively, question assumptions, and readjust behaviors and attitudes accordingly. It will indeed be crucial to their success.

Regardless of the mechanism chosen to stimulate reflection, its incorporation into the learning process provides the opportunity to develop “reflective leaders.” One must both learn what it means to be an effective leader as one practices how to be an effective leader. The action-reflection cycle should be started early on in a student’s educational experience, and repeated often. This article has set forth some recommendations for how educators can facilitate the development of reflective practice. Even asking simple questions such as “how has this experience changed my thinking or what will we do differently next time” can enhance learning and establish reflective habits if done consistently over time. Although students initially struggle with exercises designed to promote reflection, their skills do improve over time if reflection is facilitated in a well-defined systematic way as well as incorporated throughout the curriculum. Not only does the practice of reflection become easier, it ultimately contributes to a deeper level of learning as well. Although journaling readily comes to mind, other more collaborative methods may be used to promote individual as well as group learning with the recognition that reflective thinking and practice continues far beyond the end of the semester.

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## **Biography**

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