

# 4

*Experiential education and learning should be used in framing leadership education. This chapter will explore how leadership education in higher education can be taught from an experiential education framework. International Leadership Association overarching Teaching and Learning Guiding Question: “What are students’ developmental levels and what teaching and learning methods are most appropriate to ensure maximum student learning?”*

## Teaching and Learning: Using Experiential Learning and Reflection for Leadership Education

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Students encounter leadership development opportunities while involved in higher education. Student involvement is the amount of time and energy a student devotes to their college experience, including inside and outside of classroom learning (Astin, 1984). Traditional definitions of out-of-classroom learning have focused on developing leadership skills only through participation in student organizations and interaction with offices and professionals focused on cocurricular involvement. Yet, more recent work acknowledges that mere participation by itself does not take full advantage of what students can learn about leadership from out-of-classroom learning. Kuh (2001) took Astin’s notion of student involvement a step further and linked it to leadership with intentional institutional action to provide an optimal environment that maximizes student learning and development. Leadership experiences, arguably some of the most significant developmental opportunities in college, are ripe for helping students move from mere engagement to making meaning of and learning from their leadership experience. As the ILA teaching and learning area asks, what methods are most appropriate to ensure maximum student learning? We believe experiential learning and reflection are critical to maximize leadership learning.

John Dewey (1933) acknowledged that an experience alone is not always educative, and urged learners to “reflect in order that we may get hold of the full adequate significance of what happens” (p. 119). Dewey’s call for making meaning requires reflection or thoughtful consideration of experience. Providing intentional experiences to build leadership capacity

in all students can be difficult. However, higher education professionals have opportunities to assist students make meaning of their experiences through deliberately reframing current leadership programming offered across institutional areas. In this chapter, we use experiential learning and reflective pedagogy as frameworks from which to offer a set of activities to help students learn about, reflect upon, and exercise leadership skills.

## Experiential Learning

The primary way to learn leadership is through experience (McCall, 2004). Thus, experiential learning theory provides a solid foundation for leadership education, as well as a framework for developing and implementing programs for students to reach their full leadership capacity. First introduced by Kolb and Fry (1975), experiential learning includes a set of techniques used to provide individuals with encounters from which they can learn and develop. 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). Kolb and Fry argued that when learners experience challenges or difficult situations, the experience is not as meaningful unless meaning is made. Glenn and Nelson (1988) furthered the theory by adding that thoughtful consideration of an experience should influence future action.

Kolb (1984) proposed that learning from experience occurs in a cycle. The cycle has four phases: (1) concrete experience, (2) abstract conceptualization, (3) reflective observation, and (4) active experimentation (Figure 4.1). Students can enter the learning cycle at any point, and learn best when they practice all four modes. To illustrate the application of the Kolb model to student leadership development, we provide general examples in Civic Education starting with concrete experience. 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. Students encounter this phase by participating in a one day volunteer activity focused on homelessness. The activity exposes the student to service and evokes all the senses (sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste) while serving a specific population in their community. Students see the issue of homelessness, feel the emotions that surface from interaction with homeless persons, as well as smell, taste, and hear elements of homelessness in their community.

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. In our example, a student begins to think more about the issue of homelessness from many perspectives. The student develops generalizations about the homeless population; speculates about how

individuals became homeless; and examines the community agency that provides services for the homeless.

Abstract conceptualization is “learning by thinking,” which is logically analyzing ideas, planning systematically, or acting on an intellectual understanding of a situation. In our example, the student takes a class on Homelessness in America; critically examines their personal experience with the homeless through their service experience; and develops a relationship with a homeless person to better understand the issue from a personal perspective.

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). Given the personal relationship our student developed with homeless individuals from their service experience, the student organizes other student volunteers at the community agency and attends and advocates for homeless children at a city council meeting in their community.

Figure 4.1. Kolb's Cycle of Learning



Experiential learning can take place either through a direct educational encounter or via everyday life events (Clark, Threeton, and Ewing, 2010). An individual's total life experience includes both personal growth producing occurrences and the experiences of others (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Taking both intentional and accidental experiences into consideration, it is important to think about how we, as educators, include meaning making opportunities into both programs and our daily interactions with students. Creating space for deliberate conversation as part of the educational process provides the opportunity for purposeful reflection on students' experiences (Bunker, 1999; Keeton, Sheckley, and Griggs, 2002). Taking this step improves the effectiveness of leadership education using experiential learning.

### **Reflective Pedagogy**

How do students "mine" their experiences to learn the most and to develop leadership knowledge and skills? Reflection is key to unlocking the developmental opportunities in experience (Dewey, 1933; Hatcher and Bringle, 1997).

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 and Goldinger, 1994); however, human processing has not been as well researched.

Despite the gap in the literature, methods by which reflection is taught to students within the contexts of lifelong learning and service learning have been of specific focus over the last several decades. Reflection has been predominantly conceptualized as the key process through which human beings extract knowledge from their experiences (Fenwick, 2001; Illeris, 2007). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) and Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) suggested that specifically structured reflection is the critical element for students to learn from experiences. Daudlin (1996) observed:

Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences; learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behavior (p. 39).

What we know about reflection identifies several ways educators can design intentional developmental opportunities. Wilson (2002) stated that critical reflection is a powerful way of examining our own subjective

thoughts about our identity, who we really are, beliefs, and so on. In addition, Quinton and Smallbone (2010) found that feedback offers individuals an additional experiential base for reflection. If learning from feedback is to be effective, programs should be designed to include dedicated time allocated for reflection after feedback is given.

Eyler and colleagues (1996) found that reflection needs to be continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. Reflective practices can facilitate a self-dialogue between thoughts on our implicit embodied experiences and the conceptual aspects of our consciousness (Jordi, 2011). Both continuous self-dialogue and collaborative inquiry involves reflection before, during, and after the experience. Connected reflection emphasizes the importance of integrating the experience with class work and academic learning. Challenging reflection pushes students to think in new ways and produce understanding and new ways of problem solving. Contextualized reflection should be context and setting specific.

Le Cornu (2009) proposed a new reflective model based on internalization and externalization of experiences, which includes three different ways of reflection including receptive, critical, and appreciative. These ways of reflection influence each stage of the internalization and externalization process. In framing our thinking about how we use experiential learning and reflection in leadership education, we need to consider and integrate students' individual courses of study (Quinton and Smallbone, 2010). Learning about reflective theories and pedagogy is a logical step toward students being able to recognize and negotiate the complexity of leadership and ethical issues for themselves (Smith, 2011).

In each phase of the learning cycle, students move along the continuum of involvement, from being engaged with a topic to ultimately being responsible for creating their own experience or influencing the experiences of others. Moving from engagement to making meaning requires intentional opportunities for reflection. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) argued that "when students contemplate their service activities, there is potential to reformulate assumptions, create new frameworks, and build perceptions that influence future action" (p. 153). In the Civic Education example, our student was given opportunities for reflection, through her interaction with higher education professionals, engagement with academic coursework, and application in her personal life through her relationships with homeless individuals.

## **Effective Reflection Activities**

Reflection activities can include reading, writing, and/or discussion, and can take place in a group or individually. Educators should be aware that different types of reflection activities may be more appropriate at different stages of the learning cycle. Educators have not had guidance in creating structured learning activities that encourage reflection (Hatcher and

Bringle, 1997). It is important to identify what learning objectives the experience will meet and connect that learning with reflection questions and activities that will produce the most meaning making for students. With this in mind, we describe some reflective activities that facilitate students' connection of their experience to learning.

**Written Reflection.** Journals can be used for students to record their thoughts, observations, or questions. Written reflection has many benefits including improved communication skills and enhanced critical thinking and observational skills. For example, Scott and Sarkees-Wircenski (2008) emphasized that most career and technical education programs are work-life in nature and should be experiential with students writing about what they learned, how they applied it, and how they can become a better employee. When framed in a leadership context, learning about how to not only be a better employee, but a better leader, is essential.

Stevens and Cooper (2009) identify journaling as an effective way to further student learning outside the classroom. Personal journals offer an unstructured way for students to reflect on their experiences, while directed writings provide more targeted reflection. The authors offer several journal-writing techniques for reflection that we have tailored for leadership education.

- *Concept maps.* Students list key elements needed for a leadership project. Using the list, they create a concept map of the items, cluster like things, and identify relationships between the items.
- *Vocabulary.* Students receive a list of key leadership vocabulary; they describe occurrences where they have encountered these ideas in their leadership experiences. This activity helps students to label their experience and connect the events to leadership.
- *Three-part journal.* Students divide their journal entry into three parts, including (1) description of the activities, (2) analysis of how the activities relate to leadership, and (3) application to their personal or professional life.
- *Self-assessment.* In the context of a leadership activity, students ask themselves: What kind of leader am I? What have I learned about leadership? How did I learn it?

**Reflective Discussion.** Learning is relational; therefore, dialogue and listening are essential elements for the process (Fenwick, 2006). As such, intentional engagement with peers, staff, or faculty encourages students to reflect on their own experiences, thoughts, or opinions. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) offer suggestions for structured discussions that we have tailored to leadership education.

- *Examples.* Educators ask students to cite examples of their experience that illustrate a leadership theory or concept. The group discussion allows the students to learn from each other.

- *Weekly dialogues.* Students participate in weekly structured dialogue about leadership with other student leaders either face to face or electronically.
- *Minute papers.* Students write for one minute about a leadership topic. The papers are then exchanged and discussed with peers.
- *Values clarification.* Students are asked to describe their feelings about leadership, describe their actions related to leadership, describe their thoughts about leadership, and describe the contradictions they experience related to leadership.

**Using Case Studies.** Role-playing activities allow students to apply ethical guidelines to case studies (concrete experience), reflect on the case study from multiple perspectives (reflective observation), and begin to conceptualize the ethical implications of the case study (abstract conceptualization) (Teixeira-Poit, Cameron, and Schulman, 2011). All the reflection activities mentioned above can be used individually or collectively to encourage students to think, write, and speak about their experiences. Doing so allows students to critically examine their own rationales and thought processes, and introduces them to different perspectives.

## **Application of Experiential Learning and Reflective Pedagogy to Leadership Education**

Leadership educators have the opportunity to guide students from merely participating in activities to making meaning of their experiences. In this reflective process, students can better understand themselves and their role in the leadership process. Through programming, most student service areas currently implement opportunities for students to experience development opportunities.

Using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle we offer examples of how leadership education occurs across student service areas and suggest reflection activities adapted for each phase of the learning cycle in Table 4.1. Although there are a variety of ways to reflect on each activity, these are just examples of ways to incorporate more reflection into general leadership activities. Each encounter can be enhanced with the suggested reflection questions and activities built into the student experience.

## **Conclusion**

Reflection and leadership are complex and dynamic concepts. Bradley (1995) emphasizes that reflection extends beyond a tool for learning and encompasses a life-long habit of the mind, a habit that is characteristic of highly skilled professionals. This lifelong habit and characteristic is also true for building leadership capacity, both in ourselves as professionals and in the students we work with. Leadership education occurs in a myriad of

**Table 4.1. Examples of Leadership Development Opportunities and Reflection through Student Service Areas**

| <i>Learning Cycle Phase</i> | <i>Concrete Experience Learning by Encounter</i>   | <i>Reflective Observation Learning by Reflecting</i>  | <i>Abstract Conceptualization Learning by Thinking</i>   | <i>Active Experimentation Learning by Doing</i>   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Career Services             | <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend a job/career fair</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> Which potential career option appeals to me and why?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> One-on-one meeting with Career Advisor</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend informational orientation of recreational facilities</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How does fitness relate to my personal self care?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Meet with staff to develop fitness plan</p> | <p><b>Activity:</b> Complete electronic career development assessments/instruments</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> Which potential career option appeals to me and why?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Concept Map of Majors</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> Participate in ropes course</p> | <p><b>Activity:</b> Discussion of pros and cons of a specific career choice</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> Which potential career option appeals to me and why?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Values Clarification</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend lecture or presentation on outdoor education theories</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How do these theories relate to my leadership style?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Case Study Application</p> | <p><b>Activity:</b> Serve as Mock Interviewer</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How do my communication skills impact how others view me?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Three-Part Journal</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> Serve as Fitness Trainer or Group Exercise Class Leader</p> <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How can I best lead others toward better health?</p> <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Self-Assessment</p> |
|                             |  |   |  |   |
|                             |  |   |  |   |
| Campus Recreation           |  |   |  |   |



|  |  |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend college success skills workshop (for example: time management or study skills)</p>                              | <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend individual counseling session</p>   | <p><b>Activity:</b> Read mental health articles</p>   | <p><b>Activity:</b> Serve as Peer Counselor/Advocate</p>                                    |
| <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How can I improve my personal management to maximize my academic and personal performance?</p>              | <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How can I work on my inner self to be fully present when working with others?</p> | <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How can I improve my knowledge in counseling to best serve others?</p> | <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> What am I learning through this experience?</p>              |
| <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> One-Minute Paper</p>  | <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Personal Journal Writing</p>  | <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Vocabulary or Examples Writing</p>                                     | <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Weekly Dialogue with other Peer Counselors/Advocates</p>     |
| <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend cultural festivals or other events not within students' identity groups</p>                                     | <p><b>Activity:</b> Small group discussion of social justice issue (e.g., sexism, racism, classism)</p>          | <p><b>Activity:</b> Attend lecture or presentation on multiculturalism or related subject</p>         | <p><b>Activity:</b> Serve as a Diversity Ambassador</p>                                     |
| <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> In what ways can I connect with classmates who identify with a different culture or religion than I do?</p> | <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How do my values align with social justice issues?</p>                            | <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> What language can I use to educate others on multiculturalism?</p>     | <p><b>Reflection Question:</b> How can I enact social change as a diversity ambassador?</p> |
| <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> One-Minute Paper</p>  | <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Values Clarification</p>  | <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> One-Minute Paper or Small Group Discussion</p>                         | <p><b>Reflection Activity:</b> Weekly Dialogue With Other Diversity Ambassadors</p>         |

activities, not only in structured programs labeled leadership workshops. Educators can provide intentional learning opportunities through connecting each of these leadership experiences with reflective learning. These developmental opportunities create the necessary tension needed to encourage growth-producing encounters that add to an individual students' total life experience.

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