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Reflective Thinking: Learning to Lead

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Abstract: There is a converging body of literature that supports the creation of knowledge through the transformation of experience, yet the processes from and through which learning emanates remain obscure. Despite such ambiguity, institutions of higher education have been urged to reinvigorate learning processes and practices in order to focus on empowering learners through enhancing their critical thinking abilities coupled with advanced practical skills. It is argued that while teaching methodologies such as reflective thinking enable the delivery of content, they also reinforce skills required to critique learners' personal views of themselves and the societies they live in. In this way, reflective thinking as a teaching methodology has a potential to aid learners in terms of engaging in personal and contextual transformation. Using the reflective thinking methodology, this study employs qualitative data obtained from learners' reflections on authentic leadership. It explores the way learners interpret and reflect on learning for their personal and contextual transformation.

Keywords: Reflective Thinking, Transformation, Learning, Higher Education

Introduction

THIS PAPER ARGUES that learning is a dynamic process (Font et al. 2010), whereby a greater need for a human exposition on how leaders might develop becomes highly significant. Whilst there is consensus around leadership development, contentions on methodologies for effective leader development persist (Sparrowe, 2005, Bass, 1990). Ladyskewsky (2007) and Natale and Ricci (2006) highlight the influence of reflective thinking on aspects within the leadership framework. The use of reflective journaling in a 360 degree leader-follower feedback has highlighted the influence of these variables on leadership development. In addition, the significance of reflective learning as a predictor of critical self-awareness is emphasised (Natale and Ricci, 2006). Reflection is a process of self examination that is triggered by events and experiences and may directly lead to change in practices (Olivares, 2008). Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004, p.35) note that reflection allows us 'to understand ourselves, our ways of relating to others, and how to participate in our social world'. Earlier, Ricoeur (1976) claimed that reflection is when interpretations are informed by the presuppositions of the interpreter.

Therefore, by adopting the reflective thinking lens, the potential for building a leadership framework becomes significant. Various studies within the higher education discipline, highlight reflective thinking as the process to generate awareness of own behaviour, perceptions, cognitions and emotions. By the same token, the leadership literature also highlights self-awareness as a key competency that drives the reciprocal relationship between those who lead and those who follow (Goleman, 1998). Other perspectives of the leader's devel-

opment include the merits for increasing generic competencies such as critical thinking (Pye and Pettigrew, 2005). Yet generic competencies are widely recognised as being essential for an individual's integration into a rapidly changing workplace where the need to critically consider one's own worldview and its relationship to the world views of others abounds (Tranter and Warn, 2003). Notwithstanding this premise, there are mounting pressures and calls for not only responsible and true leadership but for the pace of authentic leadership to be escalated (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). The quest for authentic leadership has been exacerbated by events such as the unfolding of Enron and the like early this century. Contemporary leadership theory and organisational practice describe authenticity as crucial to transformational leadership with significant impact in the current corporate context of leaders who are true to themselves and whose transparency 'positively transforms or develops associates into leaders themselves' (Luthans and Avolio, 2003, p.243).

Whilst there has been a recent surge in literature on the imperatives for authentic leadership, there is limited research that empirically examines the processes and methodologies for building authenticity. In addition, the mainstream research on authentic leadership suggests a one-dimensional variable where the prerequisite for authenticity is self-awareness (Eriksen, 2009). Sparrowe (2005) however, makes a compelling argument that supports narrative identity. He suggests that authentic leadership is developed both through an inner awareness of the self as well as how leaders constituted the self 'their values' in relation to others. His model (p. 423) advocates being true to oneself by means of prototype matching; observed behaviour is assessed in terms of its consistency with identifiable qualities and reconceptualises 'trigger events'. He claims that such events are particularly relevant because they represent transitions in the plot of narrative identity. A further dimension to leadership values is the impact of culture. The latter however, has largely been ignored within the reflective learning literature. Against this backdrop, learners in a postgraduate leadership class were asked to use their thoughts, beliefs and experiences to write a reflection journal that focused on their understanding and interpretation of authentic leadership. Using Sparrowe's model (2005) of narrative identity, this study employs the processes of reflective thinking, to examine 'How learners interpret their learning and understanding of authentic leadership?'

Reflective Thinking and Sensemaking

Reflective thinking is associated with a level of reasoning that is required in choosing a course of action or adopting a belief. Dewey (1933) argued, to be genuinely reflective, one must sustain a state of doubt or perplexity of the unprocessed materials of the experience, and search for materials that will resolve and clarify the doubt. Other studies (e.g. Moon, 1999) would go a step further suggesting that 'reflection' helps the learner to critically evaluate and accumulate further understandings of the self and the knowledge. Thus, a reflective learner improves his or her behaviour based on the insights gained from this evaluation, Schon (1987; 1983). In addition, the dimension of scaffolded learning alludes to progressive levels of reflection and how making meaning out of the new information is done. It is posited that at the highest levels of reflection, learners will work with the meaning by questioning their own assumptions, consider perspectives other than their own, and broaden thinking into a larger context through transformative learning. Moon (2004) argues that a good learning experience through reflection will not only describe what happens but also poses critical questions about why and how this took place, and reflection may also introduce

variables or alternative scenarios which might have been possible in the circumstance leading to alternative outcomes. Frequently, such an exercise provides the reflecting individual with an opportunity to express feelings about parts of the learning process. Weick (1995; 1999) champions an internal focus of sensemaking, contending that there is a need for deeper awareness in organisations when theorising through intuition, feeling, stories, experience, awe, vocabulary, and empathy, and most importantly the ability to listen attentively that will assist in the definition of a new paradigm, and theories that have practical as well as academic value. There are some criticisms of Schon's (1991) model of reflective practice, with suggestions that there is a need to add reflection-on-self-in-action/reflection-on-self-on-action, and understand how these deep seated beliefs of oneself would affect the way individuals understand, evaluate and interact with others.

Schwandt (2005) argues that sensemaking in leadership is portrayed as comprising human interactive actions or a 'process' that includes the use of prior knowledge to assign meaning to new information. Whilst both sensemaking and learning focus on the creation of meaning and action linked with cognition, as well as the importance of both subjective and objective knowledge, the differences appear with respect to the role of critical reflection and the impact of social structuring on meaning making. Hong-Sang and Brower (2008) caution that the understanding of sensemaking remains somewhat fragmented, and that discussions have not yet fully integrated related ideas into a conceptual framework that includes the contextual terrain in which these activities occur. Therefore, it becomes imperative to add to the understanding of how individuals make sense of their actions, knowledge and experiences and the way these will influence future cognitions and actions. Cunliff (2002) strongly supports the need for both educators and learners to take a critical view of their dialogical practices and what may constitute 'good' learning conversations. Furthermore, practical reflexivity is highly championed as the process that allows for self-understanding, ways of relating to others and participation in a social worldly context, and heightens self-awareness (Cunliff and Easterby-Smith, 2004). It has the potential to play a significant role in understanding how leadership practices can be further developed. Nonetheless, Whiteman and Cooper (2011) warn of the dangers when sensemaking is not employed, and individuals display an inability to make sense of cues which might introduce hidden vulnerability. This highlights the importance of sensemaking for individuals and more importantly for leaders, through which reflection might become more effective, and with experience individuals might master such ability that will have the potential to improve the leadership style.

Authentic Leadership

Transformational leaders seek to gain trust and support from organisation members, to inspire followers and to obtain emotional commitment to the organisation's future vision. An antecedent to generating genuine support and true commitment to the organisation's vision is authentic leadership. Avolio, Luthans and Walumbwa (2004), succinctly maintain that authentic leaders possess a deep awareness of their thinking and behaviours and most notably, the leader's own values and moral perspectives. Shamir and Eilam (2005) suggest that authentic leaders are bona fide and true to themselves. Their actions and their leadership are based on their personal values and conviction. Constant reflection on personal values is therefore needed for effective leadership to ensure that the vision is driven by genuine commitment to personal values.

Method

Reflective journaling is thought to enhance and impact on learning through its transformational effect on learners' relationships. By employing the process of reflective thinking, the facilitation of self-awareness and practical reflexivity is heightened. Against this backdrop, forty-two learners undertaking a postgraduate leadership course were surveyed. The learners came from a diverse range of backgrounds and a mix of participants; some maintained significant work experience while others had only recently completed their undergraduate degrees enrolling immediately into a postgraduate course. Their ages ranged between 22 years and 57 years. Work experience spanned between very little or none to a maximum of 35 years. In addition, some participants had no leadership experience, whilst others had more than 20 years' experience at middle or lower level leadership positions. Participants in this study were also from diverse cultural backgrounds, including 40 percent Australian students and 60 percent of students from various Asian countries, namely Malaysia, India, China, Indonesia and Thailand. While culture as a significant predictor in leadership values is noted (Kim et al, 2004); nonetheless, due to the variances in the number of participants from each of the countries, a cultural comparison was considered beyond the scope of this paper and was not undertaken.

This study employed reflective thinking as a method for learners to undertake a critical review of what leadership means to them and dimensions that they believe are critical for leader's development. By employing a leadership course at a micro level, this paper argues that through the processes of reflective thinking, critical leadership skills can be developed and used at a macro level. With the deployment of various resources learners ponder how such values were acquired, then question what actions are suitable that lead to discussions of the consequences of living out these values within the context of their work and/or personal experience and roles as leaders. To enable the development of authentic leadership, we designed the curriculum to incorporate current research, industry feedback and practical application of leadership values around contemporary theories that challenge and demand self-awareness of a leader's fundamental values.

Thus, in this study learners select six leadership values from the curriculum and write a reflective log on each value. Each log is updated on an ongoing basis during the semester, thereby ensuring continuous learning. Throughout the semester, we provide learners with a range of resources such as researchers in the field of leadership are invited to the class to share their findings. Building on the systems approach, learners are also provided with resources such as media editorials and pieces, video presentations, peer-reviewed journal articles; all this is coupled with the highly valued industry and community leaders who provide in-class guest presentations. They engage learners in discussions on real leadership issues and the values they have developed. As a formative part of the assessment, learners engage in discussions with their peers by sharing their values, listening to their classmates' reflections, their experiences, thoughts and ideas in completing the reflective log, their perceived value of such reflections, and any other thoughts that they might have concerning these values. They compare and evaluate the leadership values each had selected and what aspects influenced them. These reflective exercises facilitate the expansion of learners' personal leadership development and help guide their decision making and strategic thinking. Employing data from forty two learners' reflective logs, this study examines the interpretations of learners' learning within a leadership framework.

Using a qualitative analysis approach, the reflective logs were transcribed verbatim and imported into a qualitative analysis software package (NVivo8©). Qualitative techniques are particularly suitable for this context because as Pini (2005) argues it provides a deeper understanding of the kaleidoscope of perspectives on how meaning is shaped. The data were analysed first by reading the transcripts to achieve an overall sense of the reflections. Responses of learners were then compared and contrasted. Initial codes were developed from the data that referred to the similarities and differences between the reflections and the leadership values and codes categorised to reflect the experiences and interpretations of learners. Also, the coding and categorisations were cross-checked by the researchers to ensure consistency. Using the elements of authentic leadership by Sparrowe (2005) (Figure 1), these were then analysed to assess the extent to which authentic leadership is developed both through an inner awareness of the self as well as how learners constituted the self 'their values' in relation to others engage in self-awareness.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis generated several themes, but for the sake of this paper only three themes will be discussed (1) interpretation of learning and understanding of leadership, (2) incorporating learning for transformation, and, (3) construction of leadership. The themes and categories identified suggest that the learners' experiences in this research reflect deep levels of self-awareness but not in the way expected. As Kim et al (2004) highlight a leader's behaviour/ values may become ethical or unethical depending on whether the behaviour/value is accepted or not, a critical contingent factor being the influence of culture. For example, rather than awareness stemming from the self to include heightened understanding, the results suggest that the experiences of the learners reflect personal and social transformation. This is similar to the arguments proposed by Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004, p35) that leadership is 'to understand ourselves, our ways of relating to others, and how to participate in our social world'. In cultures such as horizontal-collectivism, leaders and followers value equality and group membership, whereas in horizontal-individualistic cultures, leaders and followers value equality and independence (Kim, et al, 2004).

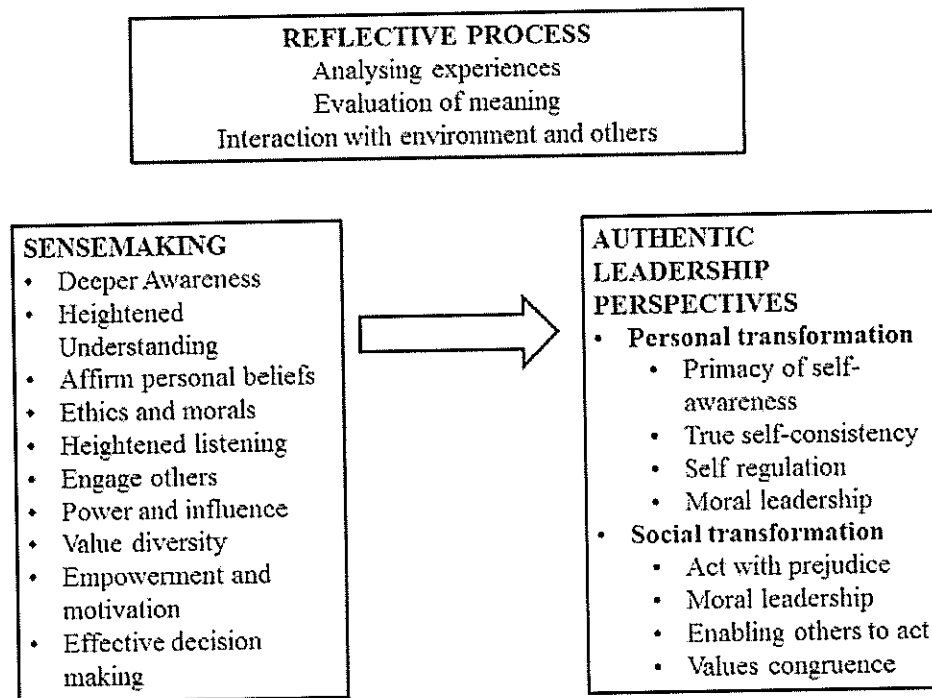


Figure 1: Common Elements in Contemporary Perspectives on Authentic Leadership

The sections to follow will provide a discussion of the selected themes coupled with an examination of the nature of sensemaking and reflective thinking processes.

Interpretation of Learning and Understanding of Leadership

With regards to this theme, this participant believes that using the process of reflection and by relating theory to personal experiences, he/she has developed an improved understanding of leadership.

'This is one effective way on how we could be able to understand the topic by relating it to our personal working experience. I like the reflective journals; it's a new way to get better understanding through the unit.' (Reflection Journal 1)

In this context the leader values the employees' contributions through motivation, delegation, and most importantly through the application of participatory management (Gardner, 1990). Effective empowerment is impossible unless leaders are aware of and be honest about their weaknesses, are open to feedback, and are willing to accept the fact that they cannot achieve the goals single-handedly.

'The question is how do leaders find out what motivates their employees? Is it a case of trial and error? What about asking employees what motivates them? The truth is

some employees would never have taken the time to reflect on what motivates them.'
(Reflection Journal 2)

Learners felt that similarities and differences would play a role in the understanding of leadership and organisations, as highlighted in the following comments:

'Reflection was interesting; it is extremely difficult to actually highlight differences between people, despite the fact that visually we are very different. Instead we look more to our similarities with our differences mattering very little if at all to us'. (Reflection Journal 3)

With regards to similarities and differences, Margaret (2003) attempted to establish a relationship between leadership style, individual differences in personality, moral orientation and ethical judgment. They investigated two levels, namely (1) the behavioural level, linking the most recent leadership theory to the notion of organisational virtues, the applied ethics notion of moral immensity and the moral psychology notion of personal moral orientation, and, (2) at the mental representation level, exploring the underlying mechanisms of mental representation of leaders' moral orientation and possible consequences of differential covert encoding for: ethical decision processes and; leadership behaviour.

Incorporating Learning for Transformation

There is an awareness and acknowledgement of the congruence of leader and organisational values. In this regard, and almost two decades ago, Posner and Schmidt (1992) argued that interest in managerial values has become stronger as academics and practitioners, alike, have recognised the importance of alignment between personal and organisational values. Nonetheless, Posner and Schmidt (1992) provide empirical evidence that the values that can be of importance to both individuals and organisations might change with time (Schmidt and Posner, 1992). Thus, there is a need to continuously ensure balance and congruence to allow for the development of authentic leadership that enhances the relationship between leaders and followers. In a more recent attempt to understand the issue of consistency, Hoffman et al. (2011) conclude that the frequently supported effect of transformational leadership on work group effectiveness is contingent upon followers perceiving consistency with the organisation's values, as opposed to the leader's own personal values. In addition, their evidence underscores the importance of considering group-level effects when investigating explanatory mechanisms of the leadership process in general and of transformational leadership in particular. In this regard communication would be a key for employees to understand the values of the organisation and that of the leader to enhance work relationships.

'My leader was clearly self-aware or was assisted to develop self-awareness and in this way came to realise that his behaviours were not supporting the values of the organisation. This to me is an inspiring leader and a leader who is prepared to make significant change to enable him to live the values of the organisation and to therefore become a stronger leader.' (Reflection Journal 4)

In addition to congruence, students felt that training is of importance, thus they indicated that training might transform workplace practices. In this respect Fisher (2009) contends

that managers and leaders are confronted with the responsibilities of leading and empowering followers. Nonetheless, those in leading positions may yield better results when they couple their practical wisdom with a theoretical foundation, which might be achieved through proper education.

'From my experience, I realised that salary is not the only factor for motivating employees. A healthy environment and employee recognition are the main motivating factors – I understood during my working days that training and development programs, appreciation and recognition and healthy working environment could help the effective leader to motivate the employee productivity as well as to increase the future businesses.'
(Reflection Journal 5)

While learning might assist in transforming leaders, comments from students also highlighted the importance of self-awareness; moral leadership and trust, sub-themes that we incorporated under the second theme of 'construction of authentic leadership'.

Construction of Authentic Leadership

Under this theme, self-awareness, moral leadership and trust were featured in students' reflections. In this respect, individuals with high level of self-awareness are sensitive to the emotion they are experiencing. They are capable of reflecting on why they are experiencing this emotion and how their emotion affects their thoughts and behaviours. They also reflect on their personal values and goals. These people have a strong sense of self-worth and are decisive even under uncertainties and pressure.

'I think to act as a leader a person must go beyond the authority of their position and put themselves out before others with the aim of convincing others to do as they say or want. Moral leadership is what one is, as opposed to what one does.' (Reflection Journal 6)

However, constructions of authentic leadership are influenced by culture. For instance, in national cultures of horizontal collectivism, a leader's homogeneous behavioural pattern is accepted, whereas in contexts of vertical collectivism a leader's heterogeneous behavioural pattern is accepted (Kim, et al, 2004).

In addition, a new focus on moral leadership in business is suggested, one that explores the view that genuine leadership is based on moral principles and the vision of a good life for followers as well as leaders (Becker, 2009). An antecedent of moral leadership is a leader's conviction whereby personal morality of authenticity and the solid structures of corporate ethics exist.

'Being aware, step back and reflect on what it is or was happening and it helps with decision making and performance.' (Reflection Journal 7)

Indeed, there is a need to create trust, but most importantly there is a need to repair trust when deficit is discovered. In this regard, Kramer and Lewicki (2010) argue the importance of trust in organisations and they call for repair of trust to allow the organisation perform

better. Such a deficit of trust might be created due to the display of prejudice by any party in the organisation. This importance is reflected in the students' comments:

'I believe that leaders who go to the trouble of cultivating relationships of trust with their superiors and they offer honest feedback, can make a huge impact on the quality of leadership in their organisations.' (Reflection Journal 8)

In addition to the above, students felt that follower engagement, empowering, enabling others to act (e.g. Gardner, 1990 and Kumle and Kelly, 2000) would be of importance too as evidenced in their comment:

'Understood the need to engage everybody in genuine conversations and communication between and among organisational member.' (Reflection Journal 9)

Thus constructing authentic leadership would involve hard work on the part of the leader, and understanding of the importance of morality and trust in such an exercise. Most importantly, leaders should be self-aware and can develop this through developing a narrative built on cues supported by sensemaking of themselves and others. These reflections might be largely influenced by national contexts.

Goleman (1998) argued that an effective leader needs to have the ability to empathise. Empathy is the capacity to understand the emotional experience of another person from that person's frame of reference (Berger, 1987). An effective leader also understands the diverse worldviews and values of different groups, can read key power relations and conflicts accurately and manage these differences effectively. Sparrowe (2005) emphasises that to lead authentically, leaders need to be unselfish, but most importantly they need to empower their followers. This participant notes the conscious thinking of what has not been done.

'I am much more aware now of how I have not been an effective communicator for the teams that I have led. Now though, I consciously work on informing others, encouraging participation and setting direction. I actively assign tasks to others and have them report on progress.' (Reflection Journal 10)

As indicated earlier, motivation is important, when talking about leadership. Students felt that leaders would have an influence on their followers as they enhance their motivation, simultaneously; they need to have an understanding of the different values and requirements of different employees and how they need different approaches to be motivated. This in a way echoes the traits of not only transformational but also the charismatic leader (Conger, 1999). In support:

'As a leader I let my followers decide sometimes which strategy or tactic to use. I like them to have authority and power which allows them to make some key decisions on certain occasions. The shift to shared power and company – wide participation frees leaders to concentrate on the big picture and frees employees to apply abilities and talents. In light of my reflection, I think leaders create the environment that determines employee motivation and satisfaction.' (Reflection Journal 11)

The kind of leadership that can restore confidence comes from individuals who are true to themselves, and whose transparency positively transforms or develops associates into leaders themselves (Luthans and Avolio, 2003, p. 243). This is evident in the works of (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, and May, 2004; Avolio and Locke, 2002). Sparrowe (2005, p. 420) also makes a strong point of reiterating the need for authenticity as a 'moral compass' by which personal transformation occurs.

Thus, and from the analysis above, transformational leadership might be achieved through sensemaking, establishing relationship between the cues directed towards the leader from within the inner-self and from others. This might be achieved through understanding one's values and those of the organisation, also through engagement with others, empowering others, which might ultimately lead to the motivation of others to achieve the organisation's vision and goals. This all can become reality through the display of trust in followers, as well as trust of followers in their leaders. Such trust would be generated through the establishment of solid relationships that are based on transparency and morality. However, this cannot be generalised, as there would be other contingent variables that might affect the extent to which sensemaking and reflection might assist in transformational leadership.

Conclusion

This paper has provided evidence from Australia and incorporates the learning experiences of both national and international participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. To date, much of the literature on reflective learning has been undertaken in Anglo contexts, whilst the leadership literature highlights national culture as predictors in values driven leadership. In conclusion, based on the above analysis, and noting the influence of cultural contexts we would like to highlight and stress the importance of 'reflective thinking', but through and intertwined with sensemaking; a practice that can be used by leaders and within organisations to assist in the development and building of authenticity within leaders. Though this study has its limitation, in that it is building on qualitative data from forty-two postgraduates over two semesters at one university, yet, the analysis of this data had highlighted the importance of 'reflective thinking', its relationship to sensemaking and more importantly to authenticity. Furthermore, key findings of this research reinforce Sparrowe's model for authentic leadership that requires both self-awareness coupled and interweaved with the eagerness to develop others. In addition, this study has demonstrated that 'reflective thinking' can be used as an effective methodology for developing authentic leaders; however there is also a need for building a systems model that incorporates reflective thinking by engaging with real and fictional leaders and their experiences. A further consideration will be isolating for cultural influences on reflection and leadership values. This study marks the start of a bigger and longitudinal study that would allow more in-depth analysis through the collection of more data through different techniques in the future.

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