AN EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICES ON ADULT LEARNING

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Introduction

Reflective practices, such as journaling, coaching, and narrative stories, represent some of the newer approaches to adult learning and have been identified as a particularly important tool for transformative learning. Reflective practices have also been identified as a critical component of leader development in that they aid in the creation and clarification of a leader's self-identity; a central consideration in designing evidence-based leadership programs and curricula. This white paper examines the benefits of reflective practices and the evidence-basis for their use in consideration of various learning theories. Cultural and technological implications, developmental characteristics, instructional, assessment, and communication methodologies are briefly explored. Finally, reflective practices are considered in a special case of adult learning— leader development—with implications for facilitating deeper learning and leader self-identity refinement and clarification that are increasingly being cited as the "next wave" of leadership development.

Defining Reflective Practice

John Dewey (1933) first defined reflective practice as "*active, persistent, and careful consideration on any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it lends." (p. 133).* Schon's (1983, 1988, 1996) work on reflective practitioners extended the tradition of learning supported by Dewey along with other social scientists including Lewin and Piaget. He suggested that the basis of learning was actually dependent upon the successful integration of the learning with reflection and practice. Dewey and Schon shared the belief that experience was the basis of learning and that learning could not effectively occur without reflection (Imel, 1992).

Imel (1992) defined reflective practice as "*a mode that integrates or links thought and action with reflection"* and one that "*involves thinking about and critically analyzing one's actions with the goal of improving one's professional practice.*" She further described reflective practice as a process where the learner takes on the perspective of an objective observer in order to identify and challenge assumptions and feelings that underlie their learning and then to consider how these assumptions and feelings influence their approach. As a component of adult learning in general, and leadership development in particular, the use of reflective practices has increasingly been considered as an effective tool for deeply embedding and sustaining learning.

Reflective practices can be used as part of a learning transaction or as a post-teaching intervention to extend the learning. Kotkamp (1990) described these two types of reflective practices as "offline" (reflecting on prior action) and "online" (reflection in action). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) suggested that reflective practices progress through a series of three phases: First, the learner returns to the experience and tries to recall salient events to find deeper meaning in the learning. The

learner then connects his or her feelings and emotions that are associated with the experience.   Finally, the learner evaluates the experience through his or her prior experiences, knowledge, and perceptions and then synthesizes this knowledge into new internal learning structures. This is one of several phased descriptions of reflective practices. Atkins and Murphy (1983) note that a review of the literature on reflection tends to vary only by terminology and how the reflective processes are arranged.

Reflective practices typically involve individualized activity and often include some level of introspective writing. There is evidence for writing, in particular, as a key vehicle for reflective practices in that it allows for some separation from the experience to review it with greater awareness (Walker, 1995). Reflective practices have been successfully facilitated using verbal reflections in a group setting. However, even in these group activities, there is typically an activity that guides prior reflection and documentation using journaling prior to the group exchange (Pololi, Frankel, Clay & Jobe, 2001; Grant, Kinnersley, Metcalf, Pill & Houston, 2006; Saunders, Tractenberg, Chaterji et. Al., 2007).

Importance of the Topic

Reflective practices offer a promising enhancement to content and instructional strategy for adult learners. For example, the use of reflective practices supports the higher order thinking processes outlined in Bloom's taxonomy. Progressively more complex opportunities represented in the taxonomy help adult learners to critically analyze what they are learning (Anderson & Sosniak, 1994). Adult learners need opportunities to move from simple knowledge acquisition and comprehension to the last steps of Bloom's taxonomy that include synthesizing the learning into new skills and approaches and evaluating the usefulness of the activity for incorporation into knowledge structures and routine behavior. By deeply examining new learning through a variety of reflective practices such as journaling, coaching, and teaching others what has been learned, the learner conducts progressively more involved critical analysis much like the progressive features outlined in the taxonomy. As the learner deeply considers the knowledge and its application to professional practice, the greater the opportunity to fully embed the new learning into daily behavior.

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Advantages.
Research has shown that a period of deep reflection on information being taught can lead to deeper meaning and can aid in the synthesizing and application of the learning. For example, Baldwin, & Lucas (2012) suggested that a formative reflective journal included as a component of an educational program can enhance critical thinking.   Reflective practices can also help to increase creativity (Roberts, 2009), document progress made, and plan for future learning (Baldwin & Lucas, 2012). Reflective practices can positively affect professional growth and development by

leading to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems that confront practitioners (Osterman, 1990). Finally, reflective practices, particularly journaling, can demonstrate what has been learned, accentuate favorable learning conditions conducive to independent thought, offer a safe place to express feelings, examine poorly structured problems, and encourage deeper learning (Kerka, 2002).

Disadvantages.

Disadvantages associated with reflective practices include the lack of time required to fully engage in the actual practice. Journaling requires a period of contemplation and additional time to document or share emerging thoughts, ideas, and insights. Research has shown that learners, particularly younger learners, resist the time commitment associated with journaling; preferring instead to engage in group discussions and verbal reflection (Baldwin & Lucas, 2012).

Another disadvantage associated with reflective practices is the potential learner vulnerability and discomfort that may occur from examining deeply embedded beliefs, values, and feelings. This vulnerability and discomfort may be risky or of high sensitivity depending on the background and experiences of the learner (Baldwin & Lucas, 2012; Peters, 1991; Rose, 1992) and the learner may reject the approach outright.

Culture, Community, Societal, and Technological Impact

Adult learning is predicated and largely influenced by cultural, community, and sociopolitical contexts (Dirkx & Lavin, 1991). Most research stresses the role of context in the process of learning from experience and the need to view multiple construction of realities before knowledge can be brought to bear on a specific problem. To this particular point, Dirkx and Lavin (1991) noted:

> *For educators in this orientation, experience and learning are not regarded as neutral and what is to be learned cannot be considered outside of the social relationships in which experiences occur. Analysis often focuses on the relationship of various social structures to the distribution of power among groups. The aim of facilitators working from this perspective is the transformation of meaning perspectives and/or the development of critical consciousness among their learners (p. 52).*

Another aspect of the cultural influence on adult learners is the development and maintenance of narratives across several domains in which the adult learner operates. Merriam, Cafferella & Baumgartner (2007) noted that cultural narratives greatly influence the adult learner's sociocultural milieu—and have tremendous influence on how and what the learner actually learns. These narratives are not just cultural. Adult learners are influenced by family narratives, political narratives, and even organizational narratives.

Because reflective practices require self-reflection and the identification of defining narratives, they offer a useful way for the adult learner to identify the cultural, community, familial, and sociopolitical factors that may be influencing their thoughts and behaviors. This is particularly useful for an adult learner participating in leadership development initiatives. Reflective practices can prime the adult learner to identify those often-invisible scripts that often go unexamined until there is some type of crisis or catastrophic event (Merriam, Cafferella & Baumgartner, 2007).

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Reflective practices appear to be most frequently researched in education and are adaptable to a wide range of cultural and societal contexts (Galeia, 2012). A growing number of research articles have addressed the value of the practice with adult learners (see, for example, Cervero, 1988; Cervero, 1989; Imel, 1989; Mezirow, 1990). The practice has also been researched extensively in the field of medicine (Baldwin & Lucas, 2012; Chamters, Brosnan, & Hassel, 2011; Aronson, 2011; Sandars, 2009; Wallmam, Lindblad, Gustavsson, & Ring, 2009). Increasingly, the value of reflective practices is being evaluated for leadership development (Hertnecky, 2008; Lord & Hall, 2005; Markus, 1977).

Reflective Practices and Learning Theories

Research has shown that reflective practices can lead to deeper meaning, synthesized and embedded learning, and increased creativity (see for example, Roberts, 2009). For the adult learner, the use of reflective practices can positively affect professional growth and development by leading to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems that confront practitioners (Osterman, 1990).

Kerka (2002) noted that a particularly useful form of narrative learning for the adult learner involves maintaining a journal in order to process information and to integrate existing knowledge and form new meaning. The act (and art) of journaling requires a contemplative period where events and topics are considered, reflected upon, examined, and integrated with existing learning. For adult learners, the increased self-directed learning is a compliment to the requirements of reflective practice. In particular, reflective self-awareness is a motivational process considered to be a key to learning—and a particular feature of the adult learner (Ridley, 1992). Several articles explore the use of journaling to increase critical thinking for students, to help learners understand their own process of learning (Moon, 1999), to structure complex experience and focus attention on key features that either inhibit or facilitate learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Boud & Walker, 1990), and to serve as the organizing force in the inquiry of self-identity (Hertnecky, 2008). Reflection requires individuals to recapture their experience, conduct some deep thinking regarding the significance of

that experience and evaluate its application to current and situations (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985).

Action Learning

Reflective practices are tied to action learning and action research as learners attempt to improve the understanding and application of their knowledge and learning through self-reflection (Kemmis, 1985, 1986). Also known as Action-in-Learning Theory, the use of reflection during and after a learning event allows the practitioner to derive a deeper understanding of the information by considering it and then applying it immediately to a real-world situation. Schon (1983) describes reflection-in-action process as a process as follows:

> *The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (p. 68).*

Reflective practices, therefore, go hand-in-hand with action learning in that reflection completes the process of learning by doing. As stated earlier, Dewey (1938) and others within the same tradition of social science view learning as predicated on both the action or experience and reflecting upon the action or experience.

Experience-Based Learning

Experience-Based Learning theory is also complimentary to the application of reflective practices for the adult learner. A key challenge of teachers of adult learners is to find and maintain the balance between the learner's self-directed learning process and goals while providing assistance or "guiding from the side" in a way that facilitates the adult learner's process. Reflective practices, particularly journaling, appear well suited for this purpose (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Boud & Walker, 1990; Cell, 1987; Walter & Marks, 1981). Cunningham (1983) suggested that reflective practices are critical to helping a student extract meaning from experience and that experience-based learning is not effective without a period of reflection.

Narrative Learning

Narrative learning is associated with significant benefits to adult learners and aligns well with reflective practices. Narrative learning also offers powerful possibilities for leadership development. By cultivating and retelling stories and documenting and reflecting upon experiences, adults can learn in a manner that engages more than their logic--but their own dreams, aspirations, and identities. Merriam, Chaffarella & Baumgarnter (2007) suggested *"we not only view our own lives as narratives but we are surrounded by and embedded by narratives."* (p. 208). Further, narrative learning has very strong links to both adult development and transformational learning. Further,

narrative learning provides a means of understanding adult development through a narrative framework. *"Life narratives are retrospective, always in process, unfolding"* (Merriam et. al, 2007, p. 213).

There is a cognitive bias to reflective practice as it is applied to adult education. Jordi (2001) notes that the bias is that rational human beings extract cognitive knowledge through experience. She suggests that embodied experiential learning should not give preference to the body over the mind as a source of knowledge nor should researchers reject reflection as an exclusively cognitive process.

Reflective practices are also key to examining defining and clarifying stories of leadership. Gardner (2011), a prolific researcher and writer most often cited for his theory of multiple intelligences, proposes a cognitive approach to the qualitative study of leadership in the book he co-wrote with Laskin titled *"Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership."* He wrote:

> *I believe that the cognitive view introduced here provides a fresh perspective on the nature of leadership. When one thinks of the leader as a story teller whose newly fashioned stories must wrestle with those that are already operative in the minds of an audience, one obtains a powerful way of conceptualizing the work of leading. It is important for leaders to know their stories; to give them strength; to communicate them effectively, particularly to those who are in the thrall of rival stories; and above all, to embody in their lives the stories that they tell.* (p. xix).

Core Self-Evaluation Theory

Core Self-Evaluation (CSE) involves fundamental evaluations about the self and are advanced through reflective practices (Judge, Locke, and Durham, 1997). Latham (2012) suggests that these appraisals are "bottom line" conclusions that people hold about themselves in relation to their self-worth and manifest in four correlated traits (i.e., self-esteem, locus of control, neutoriticism/emotional stability and generalized self-efficacy). It can be argued that core self evaluations cannot occur without a period of self-awareness and self-reflection—two elements of the adult learner's process that can be facilitated by reflective practices.

Core self-evaluations can be a key to leadership development. CSE is a critical connection to core self-evaluations as the process of clarifying self-identity addresses the specific core traits established in core self-evaluations. For example, the core trait of self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to be successful in the tasks they undertake) can be explored through a coaching conversation or a journaling entry--with emphasis on past experiences that may have diminished self-efficacy and develop insights regarding how self-efficacy can be restored or enhanced. Activities that help the person examine their core self-evaluations would be a useful activity for employee motivation and overall development.

In many ways, reflective practices offer an "application arm" to the various theories of adult learning. Each theory, on its own, is arguably incomplete without a process of reflection and self-evaluation. Reflective practices need to be cultivated by adult learners and the people who instruct them in order to derive maximum learning benefits.

Developmental Characteristics

Preliminary research shows that there appears to be a connection between a degree of self-awareness and the ability to form self-assessments that are meaningful and required for reflection. This research ties to core self-evaluations as stated earlier. All experiences, new knowledge, and events are filtered through a reflective lens. Through journaling and other reflective practices, learners are challenged by probing questions and scenarios that requires critical self-examination. A degree of self-awareness is essential in this process.

Reflective thinking is a precursor for incorporating critical thinking and the use of reflective processes may help to stimulate critical thinking. Evaluations of instructional efficacy have often examined the demonstration of reflective practices as part of the overall instructional approach as a way to examine level of critical thinking. For example, 60 participants from institutions of higher learning volunteered to answer a questionnaire to determine the level at which they reflected on their teaching practices as an indicator of their level of critical thinking. It was found that most of the teachers did not reflect deeply on their teaching practices. They did not seem to practice the four learning processes: assumption analysis, contextual awareness, imaginative speculation and reflective skepticism, which were indicative of reflection. It would suggest that critical thinking is practiced minimally among teachers (Choy & Pou San, 2012). As a result of their failure to adopt reflective practices in their own work, the probability that teachers will facilitate the use of reflective practices in others is diminished.

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Reflective Practices and Instructional Methodologies

Methods used to teach reflective practices vary widely but there are some common elements. Roth (1989) suggests that reflective practices should begin with an attitude of inquiry; questioning the "what," "why," and "how" behind behaviors of self and others. Further, he suggests additional practices including keeping an open mind, seeking, comparing and contrasting alternatives and perspectives, hypothesizing, synthesizing, and testing.

Peters, (1991) presents a model for teaching reflective practices based on a process entitled DATA (Describe, Analyze, Theorize, and Act). In this model, the learner begins by identifying the problem, task, or incident that needs to be examined

(***Describe***). The learner would then identify and evaluate factors (i.e., assumptions, antecedents, underlying beliefs, rules, motives, and consequences) that contribute to the problem (***Analyze***). Third, the learner would then evaluate a theory of how and why certain elements are influencing his thinking and generate theories about how to proceed (***Theorize***). Finally, the learner would execute on the best theory—and evaluate the impact of the decision for subsequent actions (***Act***).

Reflective practices can also be taught by providing a platform for the activity. For example, instructors of adult learners could assign journaling or other autographical writing and have the student either share the writing with the instructor (as part of a reciprocal writing process) or report on progress while keeping the actual writing content personal and confidential. Autographical writing, in particular, is a unique form of journaling requiring more distance from the self than journal writing (Merriam, Chaffarella & Baumgarnter, 2007). According to Karpiak (2000), because autographical writing requires evaluating a life for its larger meaning, it expands the knowledge of the self and the world—therefore it is learning in the best sense.

Henderson, Berlin, Freeman, and Fuller (2002) in their work targeting significant event analysis to enhance reflective practices for undergraduate medical students, noted:

> *Evidence suggests that effective reflection requires learners to appreciate the benefits of the reflective work they are being asked to undertake, and for facilitators to spend time explaining the importance of reflection, and to introduce frameworks and suggestions for effective reflection. Taking time over these fundamental 'hooks' for learners should significantly improve their attitude towards and experience of reflection.*

In teaching adult learning professionals like medical students and leaders, research has shown that instructional methodologies can be enhanced by creating real-world scenario-based reflective opportunities, including but not limited to significant event analyses (Chambers, Brosnan, & Hassell, 2011). As a result, many medical schools are actively pursuing reflective practices such as journaling, autographical writing, and event analysis to help medical students develop learning strategies that can extend throughout their careers.

Reflective Practices and Assessment Methodologies

Assessment methodologies for reflective practices are as varied as the methodologies themselves. Some suggest that the very act of introducing a reflective practice can be used as a baseline to gauge competency and proficiency and then to allow for remediation and mentoring for those that struggle with it (Chambers, Brosnan, & Hassel, 2011). For example, if it is found that a learner does not work independently to complete critical reflection activity, he can be assigned a mentor who helps to guide the desired behavior until it becomes a habit. The key is early mastery when considering the optimal use of reflective practices. Doman et al. (2006) found in

a retrospective survey of final year medical students that they self-reported that they should have been introduced to the practices in the first year of the program. Therefore, it is suggested that a pre-assessment (before the reflective practice is integrated into the adult learner's practices) be taken as a baseline measure and that the practice be introduced as early into the learning experience as possible

Reflective Practices, Communication and Collaboration

Reflective practices can be used in tandem with online learning and in dialogue, making them flexible and appropriate for adult learners in a variety of educational settings.   In one example of the use of reflective practices in an online environment, pre-service teachers of a language arts class used online dialogue to engage learners in reflective strategies that included clarifying, enhancing, providing evidence, challenging, and different thinking. As they dialogued and wrote reflective summaries, these students deepened their comprehension of literacy instruction and enhanced their meta-cognitive awareness of instructional practice as teachers of literacy (Pedro, Abodeeb-Gentile & Courtney, 2012).

Reflective practices have also been found to be an effective complement to computer supportive collaborative learning (CSCL). Ma (2013) found that high levels of social interaction and collaboration contributed to the establishment of a community of reflective learners, nurturing a space for promoting critical reflective capabilities through co-creation of new understandings and interpretations for transformative outcomes. Ma's findings are promising, however more research is required to explore the best online collaboration and communication strategies organized around reflective practices.

In one promising application facilitated by this author, students in a yearlong leadership development program were provided with published companion journals (Sartain & Davanzo, 2013) organized around a series of reflective themes aligned with the various workshop topics. At the start of each subsequent workshop, there is a period of reflection whereby the students worked in small groups to share insights that came from the journaling activity. The students were welcome to share as much or as little of their reflective writing. Over time, a collaborative environment began to emerge that both encouraged student journaling and the debriefing period that began each workshop allowed a safe way to process insights with others. Future research is required to empirically test the actual utility of the journaling process and its overall impact on individual development outcomes.

Particularly with online learning, there are challenges with negotiating issues of identity, authenticity, ownership, privacy and learning performance. Ross (2011) noted:

> *Working online amplifies the destabilizing and disturbing effects of compulsory reflection, and the combination greatly complicates the humanist notions that legitimize their use: that there is a 'true self' which can be revealed, understood, recorded, improved or liberated through the process of*

> *writing about thoughts and experiences. Online reflective practices are implemented without acknowledgement of the difference being online makes, and issues of power in high-stakes reflection are disguised or ignored. These practices normalize surveillance of students' emotional and developmental expression, and produce rituals of confession and compliance.*

In this regard, although reflective practices can be a compatible addition to online education, the way that the reflective practice is introduced, monitored, and evaluated needs to be done in such a way that it is not another mandatory weekly post or assignment entry, but is, instead, a highly personalized process that enhances the adult learner's experience.

Reflective Practices and Leader Development

In one special case of adult learners, reflective practices offer an opportunity for enhancing leader development initiatives. Most leadership development interventions are largely targeted to address surface structure skills and short-term interventions (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, & Mainella, 2006; Lord & Hall, 2005). These approaches may short change the complex and more layered aspects of leadership that may be required to develop effective leaders over the long-term. Reflective practices, in contrast, facilitate the deep thinking required for integrating new concepts, techniques, and elements of the self so that they can be sustained over time.

Specific ways that that reflective practices enhance leader development require additional exploration. Preliminary research, however, has shown that one leadership meta-structure includes the personal articulation of a leader's self-identity and core values which have been found to be central to flexible leadership skills given that different values prime different identities (Lord & Brown, 2001). Sparrowe (2005) suggested that leader self-awareness activities would be enhanced by autobiographical work including writing a personal story or keeping a leadership journal. He further suggests engaging learners in a review of trigger events due to their significance as representing "transitions in the plot of narrative identity" and as an aide to self-consistency and to develop alternative scenarios and ways of being.

Sparrowe (2005) also provides other exercises to help leaders involve others in the narrative construction. The key here is to help the leader to document a process that is internal, obtuse, and often unexamined. By incorporating a reflective practice, events can be reevaluated, factors inhibiting success can be identified, and new pathways can emerge. Even the process of articulating these beliefs to others can help to strengthen them.

Leader development approaches offering the most promise would be those learning opportunities that focused on the deliberate development of the aspects of the self-concept and require deep thinking regarding the concepts, techniques, and approaches being taught.

These findings suggest that leader development approaches offering the most promise would be those learning opportunities that focused on the deliberate development of the aspects of the self-concept and require deep thinking regarding the concepts, techniques, and approaches being taught. Guided opportunities ranging from journaling and executive coaching to skills development workshops and mentoring could be tailored to address any limitations in self-efficacy, self-consistency, and self-esteem that extend beyond the typical "ship and dip" executive training experiences. One method is to examine the leader's personal history and narrative stories and examine key trigger events as antecedents to their effective leadership development to help gain clarity and concordance with values, identity, emotions, motives, and goals (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). Further, teaching self-regulation techniques and providing opportunities to self-examine through the leadership development experience is essential as is the practice of positive modeling to help develop followers.

Implied in this new model is the need for deliberate, measured, and long-term opportunities for leaders to examine their self-identities and to explore principles associated with expert leadership and to deliberately practice new concepts and techniques over an extended period of time. Lord and Hall (2005) suggest that formal instruction and practice may be more effective with adult learners because they can draw upon multiple examples and stories to make principles meaningful and have the cognitive and meta-cognitive resources needed to benefit from the practice and mature self-identities to more efficiently assimilate formal principles into their identities. They further suggest that, as a leader matures, he or she may also include more principled knowledge as part of the meta-structures that guide the access and use of information. Surface level skills give way to deeper values-based and other-oriented cultural awareness and self-focused gives way to other-focused, principled leadership. Leadership training content should, therefore, incorporate principles of leadership in addition to activities that build self- and other awareness.

Conclusion

Reflective practices can enhance the adult learner's understanding and retention of new information. They can help to more deeply embed new knowledge and skills so that the learning is sustained over time. Reflective practices are also flexible enough that they can compliment various learning theories, strategies, and techniques. Their flexibility can also be used to create effectiveness in a variety of learning environments including online platforms. Both the current proof of the efficacy of reflective practices and the suggested potential power of their use in other

settings, including the specific environment of leadership development, it is suggested that instructors of adult learners explore how to incorporate these practices into their overall instructional design and delivery.

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