

Improving Social Engagement: Reflection as a Guiding Force for Constructive Dialogue and Mutual Respect

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Abstract: Wlodarsky and Walters' study explored the reflective practices of college faculty, as they defined reflection and discussed processes, which they used to facilitate reflection on their professional development. A qualitative coding strategy was used, then an analytic concept mapping procedure described by Novak and Gowen (1984) was employed. Findings include the emergence of the *Event Path* model, and an unmistakable pattern of change that derived from identification and correction of deficiencies in practice. Second, reflection is a process of discovery of strengths and successes, to confirm and plan for continuation in that same path. Future research on how the *Event Path* model can facilitate constructive dialogue and mutual respect amongst college faculty model was discussed.

Keywords: reflection, faculty members, workforce development, adult development

Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue, there are no shortages of challenging opportunities for organizations and the people that work within them. In these extraordinary times, the challenges seem only to be increasing in number and complexity. They stated, "the abundance of challenges is not the issue. It's how we respond to them that matters. Through our responses to challenges, we all have the potential to seriously worsen or profoundly improve the world in which we live and work" (p. xi). At the core of this discussion of challenge and opportunity, threats and circumstances, is the issue of *change*. In higher education, the issue of change relates to a number of key stakeholders, one of which is faculty members.

The literature on reflection is vast; too much to capture, therefore, efforts were focused on reflection and its association with behavior change. Meryl Thompson (2010) suggested that reflection and reflexive practice are a close examination of one's own thoughts and behaviors, leading to learning from experience and an experimental disposition toward outgoing activity. This outgoing activity could be perceived as a change in behavior. According to Nguyen et al. (2014), although reflection has been viewed as a thinking process, it does not mean that *reflecting* and *thinking* are synonyms; it includes further elements such as "thoughts and actions; attentive, critical, exploratory and iterative processes; an underlying conceptual frame; a view on change; and self" (p. 1180).

Kahn et al. (2008) found a direct link was made in each educational program between reflective processes and professional development, with the use of reflection to support self-improvement and adaptation of practice prevalent to varying extents. This was typically set within a context of change within higher education.

Wlodarsky and Walters' study was developed to consider the influence of reflection as an element in bridging decision-making and change in professional contexts. The research questions answered using the data were as follows: what does the reflective *process* look like? Were there similarities among the individual respondents with respect to their specific processes? Lastly, how might this practice relate to the professional development and personal growth for professionals?

Research Design

A convenience sample was recruited comprised of 17 professors within a college of education at a private, liberal arts university in the Midwest. The faculty who volunteered comprised approximately 33% of the total college faculty at the time of the study. The sample included individuals who selected to participate at an anonymous level—completing the survey only. The specific survey item read as follows:

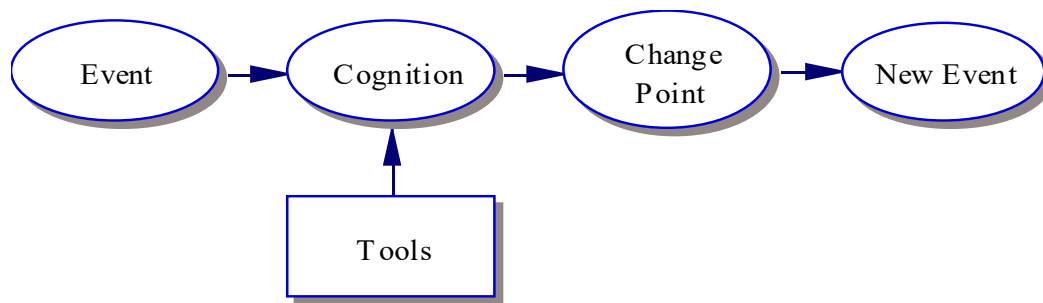
Write out a brief definition of reflection and describe how this practice might relate to your professional development as a faculty member. As part of your definition, describe the tools you use to facilitate your reflection(s).

A constant comparative procedure, which is a qualitative coding strategy, was used to examine the process(es) described in the responses to the item above. Initial themes and categories among the narrative responses were established as a first step in enhancing the credibility of the project. The themes which emerged have been observed in related literature as cited throughout this paper, providing additional confirmatory support for the reliability and credibility.

An analytic concept mapping procedure described by Novak (1998) and Novak and Gowen (1984) was used to organize the narrative. This procedure allowed the researcher to organize and to label participant responses. The coding strategy, following Novak (1998), treated words and phrases (grammatical units) as discrete conceptual units of equal weight. Based on a logical-rational use of vocabulary definitions, these conceptual units were then clustered to establish themes. These themes were then cross walked to the literature cited previously to establish the reasonableness of the themes and to control or constrain researcher bias. The researchers employed a colleague with expertise in data coding to assist in the analysis process. The researchers/authors and this colleague/coder coded the first participant's survey responses together to standardize the coding process. Following agreement on the process to be used, two additional participant responses were coded, and compared to monitor agreement on the process and consistency of coding. Finally, the remaining responses were coded, creating a total of 17 concept maps.

Fourteen of the 17 concept maps were developed from participant responses have strong similarities. This implies that a preponderance of participants use the same reflective process to consider their own professional activities. The meta-map depicts the typical path followed by the respondents (Figure 1 below) and is consistent with the 14 maps developed around the respondents' narratives. For 3 of the 17 respondents, there was not a clear indication that a behavior change (new event) was implemented.

Figure 1. *Event Path for Professional Reflection*



The typical path followed by the participants indicated a precipitating *Event*, followed by an intentional period of *Cognitive* processing of information. The *Cognition* component served as the point in which some problem was formulated. The information processed during this cognitive period was derived from *Tools*, which is a form of data collection by the respondents. Common types of tools used by these respondents varied from individual to individual; including but not limited to journaling, input from peers through direct observation, input from peers when the event is identified by the individual requesting feedback, and student input. For 14 of the respondents with strong similarities mentioned above, these phenomena are followed by a *Change Point*, where a decision or judgment is made about future behavior. The *New Event* terminology is limited to the occurrence of an actual change in behavior.

Discussion of Findings

It is believed that the *Event Path* model is a simplified approach for analyzing the professional reflections of college faculty members, and that the terminology supplied by the respondents in the survey narrative can be viewed as indicators of individual cognitive, epistemological, developmental, and reflective levels or stages. Furthermore, it was clear from the response language that affective elements such as satisfaction, and confidence or the lack thereof, were threaded through and not distinguishable from these other dimensions of human development and self-evaluation. Consequently, this model provides an organizing framework, which may be useful for self-evaluation and professional development of individuals, planning professional development for faculty members, or perhaps evaluating the professional growth of faculty.

Reflection allows individuals to confront and interrupt existing performance to insert an evolved and changed vision of the future, and then act to see that future materialize. A reflective approach to change protects the individual and the organization from repeating the mistakes of the past in the unrealized future. Reflection, as demonstrated in the *Event Path* model at the core of Wlodarsky and Walters' study, is a process that can lead to change, but which connects past practice and experience to the unrealized future in an informed manner. The information collected through the tools of reflection, processed cognitively in a way that leads to informed possible futures from which to select trial pathways, guards the professional against thoughtless, reactionary, and fad-driven pivots into a future that is in no way preferable to the past.

Implications and Future Research

The AAACE conference theme, *Improving Discourse Through Adult Education* became the catalyst for a future research project questioning how reflection can facilitate constructive dialogue and mutual respect amongst college faculty through the use of the *Event Path* model. As stated, the model emerged from a study that focused on existing performance. This model could be operationalized by faculty to reflect on existing opinions, expression of differing values and/or a general lack of discourse itself. In summary, could operationalizing the *Event Path* model improve discourse among adult educators and learners?

Through the use of this model, participants of this future study would engage in a mental process in which they may gain a stronger sense of mindfulness consciousness. This awareness could generate a more respectful and dynamic dialogue that allows for productive decision making and actions. In preparing for this study, “events” or issues in which there is a difference of opinion, differing values among faculty need to be identified, as well as determining the context in which the model would be operationalized, for example, individual interviews, focus groups, or peer observations.

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