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Preparing School Leaders

Action Research on the Leadership Study Group

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Introduction

Federal initiatives, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and, more recently, Race to the Top, have raised public concern about the worth of our schools and whether school leaders have the capacity to forge reform efforts and institute programs that advance student achievement and prepare our nation's youth for 21st century life. Within this continuing national conversation, there has been a call for effective school leaders who embody leadership for learning—the ability to develop structures and facilitate the processes and practices that involve school personnel in collective learning targeted to issues related to curriculum and instruction (Brown-Ferrigno, 2007; Louis, 2006).

To meet the challenge of training school leaders who have in-depth knowledge and skills to successfully navigate school restructuring, school leader preparation programs have also been targeted for improvement. This heightened interest in innovative program design has prompted a number of researchers to examine school leadership preparation programs and identify effective programmatic elements including conceptual framework, models for instructional delivery, curriculum focus, and types of learning activities (Darling-Hammond, Lapoint, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). In these studies, adult learning theory and principles of reflective practice have been highlighted as the theoretical frames for those approaches that appear to further the development of prospective school leaders' ability to collaborate and engage others in active participation of task attainment—primary ingredients in leadership for learning. Two promising programmatic designs underscored by these constructs are the workshop approach (Arrendondo & Rucinski, 1994; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2007) and knowledge and skill application laboratories (Eiseman & Militello, 2008).

In my own work as professor of educational leadership and administration, I have developed and implemented a learning activity that is guided by adult learning theory and principles of reflective practice, which I call the "Leadership Study Group" (LSG). I have used this approach in an introductory core six-credit school leadership course in both the dual school building/district leader and school district business leader certification programs. To evaluate and improve the LSG learning activity, I conducted a cyclical action research study over nine iterations of this course. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways does the LSG approach impact students' leadership skills?

2. In what ways does this learning activity facilitate reflection and raise students' awareness of their beliefs, actions, strengths, and weaknesses?

Literature Review

I examined three bodies of related literature: (a) essentials of effective school leadership preparation programs, (b) adult learning theory, and (c) reflection. This information not only provided the framework for this study, but also served as the conceptual underpinning in the initial development of the LSG, the learning activity being evaluated.

Essentials of Effective Leadership Preparation Programs

Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) examined eight exemplary preservice and in-service principal development programs and observed that adult learning theory that links theory to practice was at the center of the program design, sequence of courses, and learning activities. They added that these programs offered a framework to build new knowledge, foster reflection, and aid students in connecting prior knowledge to new learning. Problem solving, rather than subject matter, proved to be the predominant learning strategy. In their acknowledgement of the struggle to prepare leaders for schools with greater diversity and increased demands for accountability, Bruner, Greenlee, and Somers-Hill (2007) concurred that these school changes required leaders who are metacognitive and reflective problem solvers.

In their acknowledgement of the struggle to prepare leaders for schools with greater diversity and increased demands for accountability, Bruner, Greenlee, and Somers-Hill (2007) concurred that these school changes required leaders who are metacognitive and reflective problem solvers.

Attentive to the design of learning activities in leadership programs, Eiseman and Militello (2008) researched and implemented separate laboratory classes to strengthen diagnostic, goal setting, communication, and collaboration skills including conflict resolution. They noted that academic classes usually focused on developing conceptual understandings and providing analytical experiences, while laboratories promoted teamwork. They structured these classes over a two-year period as one- or two-credit courses. For each laboratory, they planned activities in which students were to apply developing knowledge and skills from the more traditional courses in their program of study. Additionally, they cautioned that these tasks needed to produce a degree of disequilibrium for the participants; on the other hand, the level of difficulty should not be overwhelming to students who diligently worked to successfully complete the task. Moreover, Eiseman and Militello noted some of the organizational problems they encountered by adding laboratory courses to their program and strongly suggested that these separate courses become an integral part of a coherent program where academic content is linked with laboratory-like experiences, possibly in the same course.

Adult Learning Theory

Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2015), in their andragogical construct of adult learners, acknowledged that due to their life experiences, adults need to understand the reason to learn something before pursuing new knowledge, are stimulated by a desire for increased self-esteem, and have a fund of resources to advance learning. These researchers also suggested that adult learning principles be integrated into lesson design by (a) raising awareness through real or simulated experiences, so adult learners can discover the gap between their present self and what they want to become; (b) emphasizing self-concept to promote an increased level of self-directed learning; (c) capitalizing on personal experiences and organizing learning activities to foster peer exchange and support; and (d) incorporating self-esteem enhancement activities. According to Brown (2004), the espoused theory of adult education, which frames preparation programs for school leaders, is comprised of the following key areas of study: self-directed learning, critical reflection, experiential learning, and learning to learn.

Hazi and Arredondo Rucinski (2007) noted that instruction targeted at adult learners should emphasize process, rather than content, and suggested the use of role playing, case studies, simulations, and self-evaluations. They also suggested that it is advisable for the instructor to be a facilitator rather that a presenter. This point of view appears to be the underpinning of Arrendondo and Rucinski's (1994) implementation and research of the workshop approach. They suggested that this instructional strategy was particularly appropriate for classes grappling with complex individual or group projects since it permitted students to function in self-directed ways and encouraged them to think deeply about their learning since they were held accountable for the choices regarding the final shape of the project. Students were required to determine an action plan for project completion and identify necessary resources. Arrendondo and Rucinski concluded that the workshop approach promoted (a) student metacognition, (b) planning and creativity in carrying out the final project, (c) an increase in students' level of involvement, and (d) the ability to reflect and assess on the quality of their work.

Reflection

Reflection is endemic to adult learning theory and is featured in each of the previously described school leadership activities/programs, which were developed using andragogical principles. According to Osterman and Kottkamp (2004), reflective practice is a professional development strategy in which one engages in self-examination to promote a deeper understanding of one's behavior and performance with the intent to alter personal approaches and improve professional functioning. Through the process, participants have the opportunity to embrace a changed self. The reflective cycle begins with an unsettling problem that cannot be resolved by established protocols. The learner's awareness of the problem promotes active investigation of effective tactics and solutions, which then leads to reconceptualization and testing new strategies.

Smyth's (1989) description of reflection as a four-part process may be viewed in a professional setting in which practitioners articulate their behavior, contemplate the notion of how to be a professional, address how they can alter their practice, and reform practice accordingly. This appeared to be Short's (1997) intent in her use of a variety of reflective techniques in administrative preparation programs. She highlighted the importance of increasing the capacity of prospective administrators to decipher ambiguous and unique issues and noted that reflection appeared to be a method to further an individual's ability to modify behavior. In a later work,

Short (2002) reaffirmed the use of group reflection, but cautioned that students need to form trusting relationships and be trained in effective feedback techniques and listening skills.

Barnett and O'Mahony (2006) defined reflection as a "learning process examining current or past practices, behaviors, or thoughts in order to make conscious choices about future actions" (p. 501). They also offered strategies to assist teams in establishing a reflective culture. They suggested the use of inventories at different junctures in the team's development at the onset of their project to assist them in establishing standards and disclosing beliefs to promote collaboration. Moreover, they warned facilitators that resistance and conflict are common occurrences in teams since not all members appreciate the value of reflection.

Donaldson (2008) identified the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive domains as central to aspiring leaders' understanding of leadership challenges and tasks. He emphasized that in learning to lead, students should examine the way they interact with others in conducting meaningful work by (a) raising relevant questions, (b) contemplating how their relationships may be changing, (c) examining how their role has developed, and (d) assessing their insights about how schools can improve. He suggested that aspirants focus on their action and reactions and think about how their skill set affected their relationships and their ability to motivate others. Additionally, he encouraged them to self-assess strengths and weaknesses in their pursuit of a style of leadership that is personally true and sustainable.

In general, the literature emphasized the need for instructors to design and implement activities to encourage and refine reflective practice to advance aspirants' understanding of their values and beliefs, along with provoking alteration of behaviors that may be detrimental to practice, especially collaboration efforts. According to Mullen and Cairns (2001), many practicing administrators were not taught collaboration skills, the use of active listening, or effective communication skills, which are essential to individual and group reflection and critical to not only changing one's behaviors but also to productive functioning groups.

As a professor of leadership, I am committed to providing not only the conceptual underpinnings of leadership, but also opportunities for students to develop skills associated with leaders in thriving schools. With an understanding of adult learning principles, students in my classroom encounter learning activities that demand reflection to ferret out their values and beliefs, require investigation and deliberation, reinforce knowledge and skills characteristic of effective leadership, and promote self-analysis. In this light, I continue to create curriculum and experiment with teaching strategies designed to achieve these results. The LSG is one such learning project.

Context of Study

This study is focused on the LSG, one student-centered learning activity in a six-credit introductory core course within the dual school building/district leader and the school district business leader programs. In this course, the curriculum emphasis is on the following three interrelated areas: human relations, leadership, and school–community relations.

Leadership Study Group: The Learning Activity

In designing the LSG, my objectives for the students were for them to be able to: (a) identify specific leadership traits, styles, and the contexts and circumstances in which leadership emerges; (b) experience group dynamics and the rewards and challenges of teambuilding; (c) apply human relation and decision-making skills; (d) practice oral and written communication skills; (e) undertake group problem-solving for creative product development; (f) clarify leadership beliefs and confront whether these were aligned with their actions; and (g) determine areas of strength and weakness for their own leadership development.

For this activity, self-selected groups of four to seven students conduct a comparative study of two leaders. By exploring the core of leadership underscored by a conceptually based leadership text selected by the group from a comprehensive bibliography, the study group considers the nature of leadership by probing the life of one leader as portrayed in film and another through reviewing biographical information. A 1- to 1 ½-hour presentation is required in which the study group shares the information gathered in an interesting format (e.g., role play, debate, and board games). Students are encouraged to present excerpts from the text, related websites, and video clips that highlight relevant concepts about leadership. Additionally, the study group is required to address the similarities and differences between the leaders and discuss the personal lessons learned from study group participation and how they are related to effectiveness as a school leader. Lastly, a one-page summary sheet to include key points learned about leadership and a bibliography is prepared and distributed to the class. As the instructor, I provide an overview of the project objectives, am available to meet with groups if requested, and respond to procedural questions. In this activity that is framed by adult learning theory, my role could be characterized as a "guide on the side" due to the high degree of planned self-directed learning.

As an example of a LSG presentation, one group delivered an informative and interactive study of leadership by integrating knowledge derived from Barth's *Learning by Heart,* Ortiz's biography of Eva Peron, and the movie *12 Angry Men*. This thoughtful, creative production inclusive of a Socratic seminar, props, a PowerPoint backdrop, and a dramatic soliloquy capitalized on each group member's leadership strength(s) as well as specialized talent(s). The class was highly engaged in the exercise in which the students were asked to contemplate quotations from Barth's work and connect the meaning of leadership with effective leadership functioning in schools. Additional provocative questioning and introspective commentary by the facilitators continued to move the dialogue to a deeper level.

The selection of key clips from the film illustrated Barth's goat and sheep concept, in which he questioned whether principals and teachers are determined idiosyncratic goats or a herd of sheep, and demonstrated how school climate and interactions between formal and informal leaders and followers can change over time when there is a skilled leader to facilitate empowerment and reflection. The theatrical presentation of *Evita*, enhanced by a rich script integrating direct quotes from the biography, painted a clear picture of the leader and her leadership style and proved to be another stimulant for a meaningful discussion of leadership in light of the conceptual framework offered by Barth.

In another study, a group integrated knowledge derived from Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the film *Dave,* and information about New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg into a cohesive, entertaining, and engaging production. The students created a play in

which two group members embodied the characteristics of *Dave* and Mayor Bloomberg and placed each in the interview process for a school principal's position.

In clearly outlining Covey's concepts and applying these principles to the school setting, the team promoted reflection about self, school leaders, and those leadership behaviors that are key to success in an administrative role. Additionally, they creatively maintained the audience's attention and stimulated engagement by (a) reviewing Covey's seven habits through short briefs reinforced by an easy-to-follow and colorful handout for quick reference; (b) producing a digital résumé for each leader with carefully selected video clips appropriate for an educational setting; (c) situating the interviews in a context by defining the culture of the district and desirable leadership traits; (d) facilitating the interview with predetermined realistic questions; (e) debriefing the interview with a summary form to illicit feedback from the class and solidify the selection process while simultaneously reinforcing the seven habits; and (f) providing a reflection of the group's collaboration process. Additionally, they distributed the Seven Habits Profile to further individual reflection. Also noteworthy was the group's attention to threading concepts learned during the semester to further contextualize this study of leadership.

Revisions of the Leadership Study Group

By engaging in action research, it is commonplace for teachers to design and experiment with "iterations of activities by cycling back and forth between identifying a problem, trying a solution, reflecting on learnings, and trying new solutions" (Creswell, 2014, p. 622). Therefore, endemic to this method of inquiry, I reflected on the LSG after each semester. As I moved through this dynamic process, I revised this learning activity several times based on student input together with my concern that some groups were not achieving the learning objectives. I also returned after implementing these iterations of the LSG to monitor these actions to determine their usefulness. The most significant change was the creation and implementation of a number of reflective exercises to foster both advancement in group functioning and personal understanding of one's role in promoting collaborative problem solving.

Methods

To examine the value of the LSG, review iterations, and plan for additional modifications, I devised an action research plan to determine if this learning activity provided opportunities for students to practice leadership skills and facilitated reflection. These concerns were of foremost importance in my initial design of this student-centered instructional experience.

Action Research

Mills (2010) explained action research as a systematic investigation conducted by teacher researchers to gather data about the effectiveness of teaching and learning in their classrooms. The intention is for them to become more enlightened about their practice and, ultimately, improve student outcomes. Additionally, Wallace (2000) described this research design as being focused on practice, while Fullan (2000a, 2000b) noted that action researchers demonstrated readiness to change. Furthermore, Riel (2010) affirmed that action research is different from other research designs in that "there is less concern for universality of findings and more value is placed on the relevance of the findings to the researcher." Moreover, Sagor (2011) asserted that an action research project is particularly worthwhile when the researcher (a) is focused on

professional action; (b) has a significant level of control over the work; and (c) has the promise of improved practice. Fortunately, academic freedom is firmly upheld in my working environment and therefore, given the focus of this study, as well as the possibility that this research would further enhance instruction and advance student learning, I was reassured of the merit of this endeavor.

Action research studies may vary in length, complexity, and in the actual procedures used to conduct such a study. Nevertheless, Johnson (2011) stated that this method of inquiry was usually preplanned, structured, and progressed systematically, which fostered observation of one's practice and provided easy-to-share findings. Additionally, Johnson (2011) categorized action research as a "series of quick looks taken at different times in a variety of ways" (p. 62). He concluded that essentially, action researchers followed these five steps: (a) refine the area of study; (b) select the data collection method; (c) collect and analyze data; (d) determine the way the findings can be used and applied; and (e) share findings and develop an action plan with others. Although Sagor (2011) acknowledged that there was no routine process to conduct action research, he proposed a four-stage process with the researcher "clarifying vision and targets, articulating theory, implementing action and collecting data, and reflecting on data and planning informed action" (p. 4).

In my action research plan, I concentrated on performance targets, the benefit of this instructional activity on student learning and process targets, and the types of improvement that could enhance my teaching. Additionally, I reviewed the relevant literature prior to designing LSG and in the course of formulating as well as evaluating this action research study. Johnson (2011) asserted that action research may include a review of the literature in addition to an opportunity to connect educational research with practice, and added that the process of grounding action research in theory may occur before or after the study. He noted that researchers could begin the study by conducting a preliminary review of the related literature or wait until the data is collected and then compare their findings to the conclusions drawn by other researchers.

As a professor who has extensively studied and practiced educational leadership, I was familiar with a number of relevant research studies regarding the significance of incorporating principles of adult learning theory and reflection in creating instructional strategies and materials to develop leadership skills, and had used that information to initially frame the LSG. Nevertheless, it became apparent to me that additional review of the literature would advance understanding of my findings and further inform my practice. Therefore, my review of the literature occurred at several junctures in the study—initially, to provide a context for lesson design, at the onset of the study to determine data collection procedures, and later, to deepen the meaning of the results and support my continued quest to strengthen teaching and facilitate learning.

Data Collection

Ferrance (2000) reported that in action research, various data sources are used to better understand the complete scope of school and classroom occurrences. Moore (2004) added that teachers modify instructional approaches substantiated by authentic evidence, such as class assignments, students' performance, and observation of students' work.

Triangulation, the manner of viewing a subject from several vantage points, enhances "accuracy and credibility" of the researcher's findings and "is achieved by collecting different types of data, using different data sources, collecting data at different times, in addition to having other people review your data to check for accuracy and adjust your findings" (Johnson, 2011, p. 83). Furthermore, Ferrance (2000) recommended the use of at least three data sources and that researchers compile and present data in an organized fashion, which allows for the identification of trends and themes.

For each of the nine semesters that I conducted this study, I collected multiple forms of qualitative data, which included the following:

- Artifacts from the LSG presentations, such as PowerPoint presentations, original scripts, songs, poems, raps, videos, games, and related response formats including ones using technology software;

- Completed reflection forms from the presenters on which they were asked to provide statements regarding group dynamics, a self-assessment of their own participation, and the level of their satisfaction with the presentation. Additionally, they used a rating system of 1-5 (poor to excellent) to evaluate their own functioning as a LSG member in the areas of communication, cooperation, work responsibilities, team dynamics, and attitude;

- Completed feedback forms from nonpresenting classmates on which they were questioned about what they learned about leadership from the presentation and the insights the presentation provoked about their own leadership style or behaviors. These students were also asked to comment regarding their view of the LSG's functioning and rate them on a scale of 1-5 (poor-excellent) in the areas of creativity, content, presentation flow, visual aids, and handouts;

- My formal evaluation memos to the LSG, which in a lengthy narrative addressed the presentation content, team collaboration, and individual reflection, and also included the average ratings in the respective categories noted above from the class as well as the presenters;

- End-of-semester class evaluation forms in which students provided feedback as to their view of the value of the various learning activities employed throughout the semester;

- My journal entries from individual student exit interviews;

- E-mail responses from graduates to my inquiry regarding the LSG.

Data Analysis: Findings

To improve this instructional activity designed to build a knowledge base and promote a skill set for aspiring leaders, data were analyzed with coding formulated through the emergence of

predominant themes. This analysis relates primarily to practice with particular attention to improvement in collaboration and teamwork, as well as in reflective behavior. In this section, the themes are presented as they relate to each of the two research questions.

Question 1: In What Ways Does the LSG Approach Impact Students' Leadership Skills?
In general, team members appeared to internalize the leadership concepts presented in the leadership text they selected as they compared and contrasted the two leaders. In the process of preparing for their presentation, they synthesized the respective leadership principles, applied them in their analysis of the leaders' character and style, and even more significantly, attempted to use the strategies they found attractive as they collaborated in their LSG. In this learning activity, students were challenged to further develop their collaboration skills. From the onset of forming groups, students realized that they would need to effectively work together to advance the project. Team members documented their process of developing common goals, interacting with one another, and moving toward product completion. In this accounting, they revealed the challenges and rewards of teamwork and some of the leadership skills they practiced. Students gained experience in the following ways:

> In the process of preparing for their presentation, [students] synthesized the respective leadership principles…and even more significantly, attempted to use the strategies they found attractive as they collaborated in their LSG.

Managing disequilibrium. Students outlined the manner in which they discovered their vision for this project. Initially, they talked about "spinning their wheels" and feeling "overwhelmed," and expressed the necessity to "frame and reframe questions" to better understand the depth and breadth of the assignment, and to select text, film, and additional leaders to be researched. "Brainstorming and sharing ideas" were critical to determining not only the elements of their project, but also the format of the presentation. They repeatedly referred to the need to "refocus, reassess, and regroup" and to "keep lines of communication open." Some members noted that during this process, they played "devil's advocate." Many talked about "assuming both leadership and follower roles." At times, they would "sit back and listen," and at other times, they would "take the reins and bring the group back together." There were also students who appeared to be more assertive by e-mailing ideas for team members to contemplate and/or prodding the group to revisit the decision and to think more creatively about the project. Some students had trouble "relinquishing control." One student lamented that she learned she was a "perfectionist who does not like to delegate or give up responsibility." She accepted the need to change and understood that "thought-out delegation" is required to ensure "progress in an administrative role."

Other students quickly ascertained the value of dividing the workload among the team members; yet, in doing so, they also grappled with the delegation process, reporting their own strengths and preferences, and coordinating individual efforts. As one student explained, "I strived to find a balance between delegating authority and stepping in as the authority when I thought the group was floundering."

Although students acknowledged the “recursive” and “messy” nature of the process, they recognized the importance of this element in drawing them closer and fostering a deeper commitment to each other and the creation of an outstanding presentation. In some classes, students, who had previous associations and may have developed a trusting relationship prior to this experience, had a less stressful experience in analyzing the information and determining a presentation format. In other groups where the students were beginning to form relationships and/or may have included a combination of forceful and reticent team members, this process was more challenging.

Fine-tuning listening and speaking skills. There were a number of students who noted that in the collaborative process, they developed effective listening skills which they credited to building a “cohesive” team. One student noted that in listening and acknowledging the strengths of others, she learned that there are “multiple ways to approach any particular subject and [her] way may not prove to be the best.” There were students who referred to themselves as being “tolerant of their team members’ ideas” while others “realized that people of different backgrounds bring a valuable diversity to the table” and they were therefore more “accepting of [atypical] personalities.” Some team members indicated that they “readily gave up control when other members in their group had noteworthy suggestions.” However, they then “piggybacked on those ideas to help move the discussion to a higher level of thinking.” Other students purposefully “let go of control to let the vision come from the group”—they were “convinced that trust would develop and were validated when it did.” Moreover, they advised, “Sometimes the best thing leaders can do is be quiet and let the change happen around them.”

Some students moved out of their “comfort zone to support team members and learned the function of risk taking in creative problem solving.” On the other hand, some students who were shy found their voice. One student acknowledged, “I learned to state my opinion instead of being a follower and being in agreement with everyone. I needed to take more initiative when I saw the group working toward a direction I felt would be ineffective.” Additionally, some team members who demonstrated palpable passion and drive realized that they developed a following, which fostered team unity.

Exercising compromise and tact. Students reported that they practiced “negotiations and attempted to encourage a win–win solution” to differences. These students verbalized that they knew the “importance of the product,” but were convinced that the “process along the way resulted in a real high quality presentation.” As one student noted, “An important quality of a good leader is empathy and being able to see others’ viewpoints when dealing with issues and resolving conflicts.” Also acknowledged was that “communication is key to establishing trust, with the leader modeling an open mind” and a process of “give and take.” Equally important is the leader “not losing [his/her] cool—staying calm and methodically proceeding forward, keeping things in perspective.” One student articulated, “Sometimes it’s easy to get angry or upset; still, as a leader, you need to take the ‘high road’ and deal with situations without letting your own feelings get in the way.” In general, students emerged from this experience with a greater appreciation of the skills required to effectively collaborate with others on project development. Most students agreed with this student’s response, “The skill I honed was being diplomatic in the face of adversity.”

Sharing leadership and responsibilities. Some students took charge of certain aspects of the project because they knew that they had proficiency in this area—such as "developing scripts, writing songs and poetry, constructing PowerPoints." Others facilitated the process by "scheduling meetings, defining roles, and delineating tasks." One student revealed, "I started off very task-oriented and acted as an organizer. I needed to back off when technically challenged and let that responsibility be handled by one of my group mates who was better suited." In some groups, there were students who did "not meet the group's established deadlines and either one or several other team members prodded these individuals" or "the remaining members picked up the slack." Though in most groups, students agreed, "If they listened to each other, got to know everyone's strengths, it was easy to delegate and be assured that everyone would work to full potential."

In many groups, students believed that every group member "had their leadership moments." In describing an example of a positive working group, a student recounted weekly meetings, frequent e-mail communication, and group members' expressions of understanding and encouragement. She noted that there were challenging moments when one or more group members passionately expressed an idea that was not met with an enthusiastic response by the others. On the other hand, she continued to explain the resulting tension was easily defused by a "sense of humor, a concerted effort to be efficient, and a desire to apply the leadership text to school life as well as the two leaders in [their] study." In general, students recognized that this activity was "great practice for dealing with how to distribute jobs and roles" as well as "learning how to prioritize goals and objectives" for product development.

Question 2: In What Ways Does This Learning Activity Facilitate Reflection and Raise Students' Awareness of Their Beliefs, Actions, Strengths, and Weaknesses?

The struggles of teamwork promoted much reflection by students about their strengths and weaknesses in relationship to their perceived abilities to function effectively within this collaboration. Additionally, as students learned about leaders who inspired them, they contemplated their own character traits and questioned whether they could be a leader of this ilk. For some students, this activity forced them to confront the demons that not only affected them professionally but also personally and, at the same time, helped them decide if they really wanted to be a school leader. Following are the insights students achieved through the LSG process:

Recognition of the limitation of strengths. Many students who enroll in the program have a strong sense of self. For some, this exercise validated those skills and character traits in which they had a degree of pride; but, on the other hand, it also illuminated how these benefits could be liabilities. One student explained, "While I have always thought of myself as unique, I realize that I find it difficult to express myself for fear of ridicule. As I grow into myself, I see the need to be more fearless and assertive." Other students recognized their flexibility; yet, they also realized that this could work as a detriment, as this student indicated, "I was a creative force and flexible. I challenged myself to take a more submissive role—in retrospect I would have held group members more accountable."

Creativity was another quality that many students appreciated in themselves. Yet, as noted by the following quote from another student, this, too, had a downside. She stated, "I am confident in

my ability to be creative, but my fear is that I will struggle to find the best way to solve problems. I strive to think of models that have not been used before and that takes me forever." Another student remarked that she prided herself on being goal-oriented, but as a "pacesetter," she did not always "listen carefully to others." Several students identified themselves as being "efficient and well organized," but began to understand that these behaviors, at times, prevented them from being open to input from others. Another student noted a propensity for "strong opinions" coupled with an "ability to express herself and persuade others verbally and in writing." She noted her "excitement about task completion" and her inclination to create "to-do" lists. Although she had always thought of these characteristics as good leadership qualities, she discerned the importance of proceeding through the "decision-making processes slowly, asking questions, and being comfortable with a lack of resolution." She commissioned herself to work on "developing patience, and listening carefully to the thoughts of others." She was determined to "contribute to team decisions and not make unilateral ones."

Identification of weaknesses. Group work provides a forum for students to view themselves in contrast to others—or a "benchmark" —as one student stated. Although, as a teacher, I refrain from comparisons. I have come to understand that this behavior is commonplace, especially in classes where many students see themselves as leaders.

For many students, self-management or impulsivity became a focal point. They were concerned about "putting a foot in their mouth," "saying a decision in haste," "being too quick to comment," and generally, "losing patience." One student realized that she needed to "sit back, listen and watch instead of jumping in with all of the ideas." She recognized the importance of brainstorming and entertaining the responses from other group members whose problem-solving solutions may prove more effective.

Another concern for students was inflexibility. They had difficulty "seeing the whole picture" and were so "concerned about the product that they did not pay adequate attention to the process" or take the time to rethink options. Others saw themselves as loners and confided that they did not enjoy group work or "seeking advice from others." Notwithstanding, after this experience, most students of this mindset acknowledged that it was "helpful to ask for assistance" and view "problems from another's perspective"; it was also comforting to not feel the burden of "always being in charge." There were students who chided themselves for being unwilling to compromise and noted their rigidity. Students who were uncomfortable with change or may not be receptive to innovation registered similar concerns. As one student confessed, "I like predictability and routine. Change, although it often has a positive outcome, is hard to adapt to—I need to continue to keep an open mind."

Being a "people pleaser" and "second guessing" one's self were perceived weaknesses for some students. They recognized their own insecurity, and wanted "to care less about what others thought of them" and become surer of themselves and what they valued. One student noted that she needed to become more "commanding and authoritative" so she could "stand up for what she felt was best." She knew that some group members didn't "fully grasp the concept of the assignment," and because of a lack of confidence, she did not intervene, which resulted in a less than exemplary outcome.

Confirmed and/or questioned leadership ability. In this activity, some students, especially those who had served in quasileadership roles, such as lead teachers, staff developers, or had positions in other venues, gained even greater confidence in their ability to lead. As one student said, “My facility to connect to and understand people seems so natural and easy that I did not recognize it as strength—I now do.” Another student affirmed the ability “to figure out personalities and work with anyone.” She also realized that she could “weather the storm” of group dynamics and problem solving. Students voiced deeper understanding of positive leadership behaviors, such as this student who revealed that he was “flexible enough to listen and follow through on other people’s ideas,” but also had the self-assurance to “add [his] ideas.” Some students indicated how much they valued who they are, as well as understood the importance of maintaining that aspect of self. A student who saw herself as a “visionary” wanted to be sure she would not become complacent. Another student who believed he was “able to balance being daring with tradition” wanted to remain alert to the challenge of knowing when to move from one end of this continuum to the other.

Students discussed their “enthusiasm for leading,” and their “desire to encourage thought,” “spread information,” and “inspire others to prepare students for this ever-changing world.” In contrast, some students questioned whether they had the capacity to “communicate” effectively, “make difficult decisions,” “engender ownership for new ideas,” or propagate a “shared vision.” One student acknowledged that he “did not relate to others who are unmotivated, lazy, and unenthusiastic” and pondered whether he had the ability to inspire by presenting a “positive, upbeat, and visionary attitude.”

Others discussed ethical concerns as noted in these students’ queries: “Do I possess political courage? I have been reflecting on moral purpose and what I would do in certain situations. How would I evaluate the right decision?” In a few cases, students “realized [they] didn’t want to be a leader.”

Discovery of behaviors that foster synergy. In summarizing her experience in the LSG, one student enthusiastically explained, “Put six leaders in the same room with limited structure and see what happens; it was truly magic. We listened, we argued, we compromised, we worked hard, we learned, and in the end, we had an experience we will never forget.” Many groups emerged from this activity with similar sentiments, and those that demonstrated all the variables of group synergy produced an array of informative and innovative presentations in which they synthesized the leadership concepts and the attributes of the leaders in a memorable format. Original songs, poetry, plays with highly developed scripts and costuming, games, contests, cooperative-learning activities, and quizzes are just some examples.

Groups which developed extremely imaginative presentations extolled the benefits of this project, enjoyed the exercise, and agreed that they were amazed with what they were able to produce. In these teams, students recognized the power of synergism to elevate everyone’s performance. These team members also realized that the fun factor was not a frill, but provided some of the glue that bound the group together and allowed them to overcome the frustration hurdles of moving from an individual agenda to a synergistic relationship. In these synergistic groups, members acknowledged that they played different roles at different times in their collaboration—they lead as well as followed. They also effectively used the talents of the group

members so that each individual shared the "limelight" in a way that was most comfortable for him/her. Group members noted an exceptional output of cooperation, respect, and responsibility toward each other in addition to a genuine excitement for their production. Several students in referring to their presentation indicated that they "owned it."

Although all groups produced meaningful presentations, some teams did not experience synergy. In debriefing, team members in their personal reflections were fairly candid about the challenges of group work and the struggles to formulate consensus. In some cases, they thought that they were "trying too hard to agree" and were "fearful of some controversy of ideas." In general, those students who did not perform as well as they had hoped accepted their responsibility for the outcome. In some cases, they thought of themselves as "too controlling" or "too timid" which negatively influenced the group's functioning. They acknowledged that the combination of a closed climate with members who had difficulty with ambiguity and other members who did not fully participate seemed to diminish the group's ability to attain a shared vision for the project and thereby, a lack of ownership in their work together. To their credit, they accepted their behavior as well as this experience as an opportunity to grow. After this activity, they understood that with additional respectful confrontation of each other's suggestions, they might have achieved a more tightly unified and stimulating presentation.

Inspiration to further grow and develop. As students examined leaders under a conceptual lens, they began to see that these men and women continued to grow and develop. In most cases, these recognized leaders demonstrated the ability to learn from perceived errors, strengthen their belief system through controversy, and with time and experience, face obstacles with fortitude and a sense of hope. As one student affirmed, "It is comforting to know that leadership styles are skills-based—one can develop and improve areas of weaknesses through deliberate action." Some students indicated that by participating in the study group, they began to recognize those positive qualities they didn't possess, and yet, they felt encouraged to learn these behaviors to become a better leader. One student commented that he was committed to spend "more time reflecting on the various components of leadership" as well as his own qualities to create a plan for self-improvement. He also was curious about how others perceived his leadership abilities.

Students, most notably, appreciated the value of reflection. One student stated, "Being able to analyze and scrutinize yourself is essential in becoming a strong leader. If you can't evaluate yourself, how can you evaluate others?" Another student added," I believe that it is important to constantly reflect on who I am as a leader and be aware of how my actions may or may not be impacting others." Most students accepted that they were "still a work-in-progress." A third student recommended, "Don't stop reading about leadership, motivation, change, management—anything that would increase your knowledge base." Some students immediately began to improve

Many students began to modify the personal characteristics that hampered their performance, while a few realized that a leadership role did not appeal to them.

those behaviors they wanted to change as illustrated by this student's remark: "I am now constantly looking at things in a different way."

Discussion

The findings revealed that the LSG cultivated collaborative leadership practice and reflection. During this learning activity, students incorporated and experimented with behaviors that enhanced teamwork and concurrently targeted skills they needed to improve to become more effective group facilitators. They learned to: (a) overcome differences to develop a shared vision; (b) actively listen as well as clearly and diplomatically articulate their thoughts; and (c) distribute leadership. Additionally, in the process of collaboration together with discussion and an end-of-activity reflective exercise, students identified those behaviors that positively affected team building in addition to those that negatively impacted on the team's functioning and diminished project development. Moreover, many students began to modify the personal characteristics that hampered their performance, while a few realized that a leadership role did not appeal to them.

LSG: Embodies Effective Leadership Program Components

The LSG incorporates essentials of adult learning theory, inclusive of reflection and active engagement—key elements in exemplary school leadership preparation programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). As a student-centered learning activity, the participants were responsible for developing a process to work with one another to conduct research and design their final project. The majority enjoyed this elevated degree of self-directed learning and in the course of action, learned more about themselves (Knowles, Horton III, & Swanson, 2015).

As the students struggled to integrate the information they culled from their research about leadership into a meaningful and entertaining presentation, they were forced to search for new approaches and reflect on effective strategies aside from their abilities to implement the team plan (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). In this respect, this activity had many of the elements described by Arrendondo and Rucinski (1994) in their study of the workshop approach, including increased metacognition and creativity. It also provided a degree of disequilibrium, which Eiseman and Militello (2008) posited as an essential task component for learning.

The necessity for students to interact with the additional pressures of gathering information and formulating a presentation by a specific deadline provided them with a realistic experience of team task completion and a milieu for further reflection about their communication, human relations skills, on top of readiness for school leadership. It also allowed them to begin to monitor and adjust some behaviors that they identified as being counterproductive to teamwork (Arrendondo Rucinski, 2005; Blase & Blase, 2004). In some ways, this activity can be likened to knowledge and skill application laboratories instituted by Eiseman and Militello (2008), which fostered goal setting, communication, teamwork, and conflict management. Though, the added benefit was that this activity was integrated into an academic course; thereby, students were simultaneously engaged in cognitive and analytic exercises in addition to skills development and a reflection component. In this respect, the LSG mirrors Donaldson's (2008) model for principal development that addresses cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains.

Increase Reflection Exercises to Advance Self- and Group Awareness

The use of reflection forms with provocative questions presented at the completion of this activity concretized the reflections ruminated by the participants during the activity. In retrospect, ongoing personal in addition to group reflection activities would have furthered individual reflection and of equal importance, facilitated group functioning.

Students could have benefited from a number of personal reflection techniques, such as a reflective analysis journal, (Brown, 2004; Short, 1997) together with "inner dialogues" (Donaldson, 2008) in which students are prompted to think about their behaviors and how they affect others at given intervals during the learning activity. Additionally, Arrendondo Rucinski's (2005) sample professional development activity, which combined personal and group reflection followed by readings and discussions about negative actions, may have encouraged deeper reflection besides a behavior change earlier in the group process, thereby advancing both reflection and the team's end product. Barnett and O'Mahony's (2006) suggestion of well placed inventories at different points in the team's work cycle may have also assisted in focusing the team on their purpose as well as their achievements to date.

Professor as Instructor, Facilitator, and Model

The results of this study have implications for the role of the professor in (a) deciding the content, concept, and skills to be presented through direct instruction; (b) facilitating and determining related student-centered activities for supplemental practice of conflict resolution strategies; and (c) choosing how best to model reflective behavior.

Preteach conflict resolution techniques. Scott-Ladd and Chan (2008) confirmed the importance of "present[ing] conflict as a healthy process to improve decision making and debate" (p. 243), and recommended that students who are working in teams be taught conflict resolution strategies. They also suggested establishing a regular feedback component for the team to gauge the efficacy of the way they were resolving conflict. In this way, students are able to evaluate their progress and identify difficult issues that may need resolution to avoid undermining group functioning. Although at the conclusion of the LSG, all students appreciated the necessity to build trust, relinquish control, listen to, and respect each member's contributions, specific instruction in conflict management techniques might have lessened some of the frustration during the process. Furthermore, students manned with a set of strategies could use team conflicts to practice newly learned techniques rather than grapple with ones that might not be effective. Perhaps with attention to instituting training in conflict management techniques, more students would have been comfortable in assuming leadership at different stages of the process.

Facilitate and model. In educational leadership classes, the professor should both facilitate learning as well as model reflective behavior (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2006; Donaldson, 2008; Eiseman & Militello, 2008; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2007). Activities such as mini-simulations and role plays provide opportunities for students to experiment with new behaviors and can be complementary to a more elaborate "laboratory-like" activity such as the LSG. As an example, a 5-minute role play in which there is an antagonist can offer students a range of proactive behaviors along with a clinical forum to discuss resolution strategies with the professor orchestrating the proceedings. Moreover, it is recommended that professors periodically ask students reflective questions and demonstrate their own commitment to reflection by verbalizing

reflections about what is being learned from students and what that means for their personal and professional development (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2006).

In this course, I have frequently used case study simulations to reinforce conceptual understandings, provide practice of leadership skills, and stimulate reflection. Conversely, I could have purposefully supported students use of effective conflict resolution skills had I more formally connected these short student-centered activities with skills associated with the LSG. It is also customary for me to reflect out loud; on the other hand, here again, I did not associate this behavior with LSG objectives. With this insight, in the future, in addition to modeling reflection, I will also articulate how these reflections have helped me continue to improve my work.

Enhancing the LSG

To deepen reflection and further assist students in collaborative efforts based on the results of this study, in addition to being more attuned to verbalizing reflective practice and discussing how increased self-awareness has impacted my performance, I plan to modify this learning activity by implementing the following instructional components:

- Create a lesson and a correlated PowerPoint presentation to teach conflict resolution strategies. The lesson will include several role-play scenarios in which students can practice these techniques and debrief. I will also add select videos on conflict resolution to the course website.

- Design additional feedback forms for students to reflect on the team's functioning at various stages of the process. As suggested by Scott-Ladd and Chan (2008), I intend to devote "10-20" minutes periodically, over the course of this activity, to ask the teams to "identify what [is] working well, areas for improvement, and to identify strategies they [can] use to build on their strengths" (p. 243).

- Infuse the use of journal writing to promote ongoing personal reflection.

Conclusions

Action research primarily advances a teacher's professional development through data gathering, analysis, and reflection. It is a way for teachers to distinguish between teaching techniques that are well liked versus their usefulness (Reeves, 2004). Based on this study, I am reassured that my students acquired concepts and skills to help them become leaders who know how to build relationships, promote collaboration, facilitate problem solving, and be reflective. In this process, they embarked on the journey to recognize their strengths and identify those skills they need to develop as they progress through the leadership training program.

Action research is a "commitment to not only one's own practice, but to the practice itself" (MacIntyre, Flores, & Noddings, as cited in Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 142). It promotes a sense of value in contributing to the professional community (Tucker & Stronge, 2005). By communicating the results and conclusions of this study, I have sharpened my own practice by reflecting on the attributes of this learning activity and planning actions that, based on the data, should enrich this project. Moreover, this analysis has implications for the study of leadership

preparation by providing an example of a comprehensive student-centered instructional activity which is aligned with effective leadership programmatic components and serves to strengthen essential skills for leadership for learning. It also illustrates how multiple instructional strategies that promote cognitive and skill development can be integrated within a "laboratory"-type format to effectively build leadership ability. Most importantly, I hope I have provided a stimulus for professors of leadership to engage in action research studies to assess and improve other student-centered learning activities for emerging leaders—ones that promote teambuilding and self-awareness.

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