Evaluating the Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) Program: Blogs as a Reflection Process

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Abstract

Leadership inquiry lacks robust studies designed to understand processes as opposed to outcomes. This qualitative case study explored the process of reflection through blogs to evaluate the Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) program. We open-coded blog entries for reflection on capacity building and competency development through experiences within the program. Expanded thinking, competency development, and interconnectedness emerged as themes through a collaborative process. Additionally, we identified four subthemes within the themes: change, self-awareness, networking, and affiliations. The majority of intended VALOR program outcomes were readily discussed within emergent themes and the reflection process. The findings within this study support transformative learning and communities of practice as pathways for increasing knowledge and capacity to become change agents. Focus on increasing opportunities for participants to explore applications of newly created knowledge can benefit the program and overall development of participants and their communities.

Keywords: reflection; blogs; adult leadership program; communities of practice

Introduction

It is essential to produce agricultural leaders fully equipped with the competencies and capacity necessary to address 21st century challenges (Kaufman, Rateau, Carter, & Strickland, 2012). One current pathway for building these leaders is through adult leadership development programs. Thousands of adult leadership development programs exist within the United States today. These programs vary in goals, specializations, length of program, outcomes, etc., but all share a common focus of creating capable leaders.

The definition for leadership can be a bit ambiguous. A traditional definition states leadership is "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2013, p. 3). Hanks et al. (2015) refers to leadership as "the collective interactions that inspire others to dream, learn, do, and become more" (p. 1). This definition was developed from a quote attributed to John Quincy Adams (Williams, 2002). These definitions

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differ, but both are based on the premise that leadership development extends throughout one's lifespan. Leadership development can be viewed as a continuous learning process, which is built upon knowledge and experience for advancing capacities (Brungardt, 1997). Leadership development is contextual with learning being unique to every opportunity and the specific program (Allen & Hartman, 2008). Understanding the process for this development, including emotions, thoughts, reactions, and embodied cognitions, is essential to truly understanding how to maximize leadership development opportunities and behavioral outcomes (Dinh et al., 2014).

Dinh et al. (2014) postulate understanding leadership processes as the key to expanding ideas and knowledge regarding current theories. Exploration of these processes can be conducted through evaluation studies, which examine the process in relation to outcomes, rather than just focused on the achievement of outcomes. For agricultural leadership development programs situated within Cooperative Extension, it is essential to conduct rigorous outcome-based evaluations to provide data to demonstrate program value and article outcomes for continued funding (e.g. Black & Earnest, 2009; Lamm, Carter, Lamm, 2016; McClure, Fuhrman, & Morgan, 2012). However, evaluations suitable for the program need to be developed to explore the process of development that culminates in the achievement of specific outcomes (Black & Earnest, 2009; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010). This type of evaluation provides a novel understanding of leadership development and meaningful findings for continued program improvement and the development of programs focused on specific clientele.

Reflection is a process of leadership development, which can be evaluated in relation to program outcomes. Harvey and Jenkins (2014) present a tripartite learning model for leadership, including: knowledge, praxis, and reflection. They defined reflection as "an iterative process for returning to what one has studied, thought, experienced, done, and felt, and an autonomous but still relatively structured and disciplined process of synthesizing lessons, conclusions, uncertainties, and questions" (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014, p. 79). Group and individual reflection, such as journaling, are often activities employed within leadership development programs to challenge participants to focus on their experiences (Allen & Hartman, 2008).

Evaluating the reflective process is difficult and challenging because it is an internal process. However, synthesized lessons, conclusions, uncertainties, and questions shared during journaling activities provide insight into the results of the process (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014). Within the Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) program, blogging is utilized as a tool for fellows to share reflections and experiences from seminars. The term "blog" is an abbreviation for "web log", a web-based journal (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012). A blog allows individuals to express themselves and share information through text, pictures, and sound (Brescia & Miller, 2006; Chu et al., 2012). This evaluation utilized blogs from fellows within the VALOR program to examine the phenomenon of reflection and the relation to program outcomes. We designed this evaluation to provide insight into the process of leadership development and development of related competencies and capacity, which meets intended outcomes of the VALOR program. Further, we aimed to provide an example of how blogs and similar journaling activities can be used to evaluate reflective processes in agricultural leadership program evaluations.

Review of Agricultural Leadership Programs

As the agricultural industry continues to diversify, community leaders must be prepared and well-versed in agricultural knowledge to deal with community-wide issues (Galloway, 1997). Agricultural leadership development programs are designed to prepare leaders to solve complex problems and approach challenges within the field, including "volatile commodity markets, increased regulatory requirements, agricultural illiteracy, food security issues, changing

demographics, natural resource depletion, and economic survival" (Kaufman et al., 2012, p. 123). To effectively develop these programs, practitioners must define the context, develop a conceptual framework, attain required content, incorporate appropriate pedagogy, and create learning outcomes and evaluation methods (Kaufman et al., 2012).

Agricultural leadership programs have existed for over 70 years (Kelsey & Wall, 2003). The Kellogg Farmer Study Program (KFSP) was the first statewide agricultural leadership program established in 1965 at Michigan State University (KARL, 2017; Kaufman & Carter, 2005). Today 40 states within the U.S. and seven other countries have similar programs with a foundation on usage of workshops and travel seminars. These programs are all affiliated with one another through the International Association of Programs for Agricultural Leadership (IAPAL) and aim to provide agricultural leaders with the capacity to act as change agents within the industry (Kaufman et al., 2012).

Fellows within these programs benefit from knowledge gained regarding local, state, regional, national, and international issues impacting the agricultural industry today (Kaufman & Carter, 2005). IAPAL programs frequently provide, "adequate networking opportunities and time for fellows to access information for their communities" (Kelsey & Wall, 2003, p. 43). However, fellows are not always given the opportunity to address needs in their communities and transfer gained knowledge to be effective agents of change (Kaufman & Carter, 2005). Programs need to move past awareness to develop leaders prepared to effectively and positively impact their communities and increase social capital (Horlings & Padt, 2013; Kelsey & Wall, 2003). It is essential for IAPAL programs to uphold their intended purpose and develop leaders prepared to transfer learnt knowledge through praxis and reflection (Harvey & Jenkins, 2008).

VALOR Program

The VALOR program is a two-year long leadership development experience designed for adults in the state of Virginia aiming to develop communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills related to the agricultural industry. This program also provides knowledge on global and local agricultural practices, policy, and advocacy efforts. This program is classified as a fellowship, which is "an intense learning experience usually involving a specific topic of interest" (Allen & Hartman, 2008, p. 13). Over two-years, fellows refine their leadership capabilities through a total of 12 seminars with 10 seminars held at various locations across the state of Virginia, one national seminar, and an international tour. Seminar topics cover a broad spectrum of agricultural enterprise and diverse experiences relating to political, economic, and social components. Fellows are asked to complete a blog for each seminar, either as summary or reflection of their experience(s). An overarching aim of the VALOR program is to provide a sustainable future for Virginia's agricultural community by developing change agents prepared to advocate for the future of agriculture.

Program outcomes. The Virginia program is based around the following short-term and long-term objectives:
1. Enhanced awareness, respect, and profitability of Virginia's diverse agricultural systems;
2. Development of new partnerships and fostering of deeper collaboration across Virginia's organizations, groups, and sectors;
3. Improved communication and problem-solving ability of Virginia's agricultural leaders;
4. Increased civic engagement and public affairs involvement for Virginia's agricultural community.

At the completion of the program, fellows from the inaugural cohort partook in a participatory pathway logic model development session to provide their own insight on learning mechanisms, which led to desired outcomes (Burbaugh, Seibel, & Archibald, 2017). Burbaugh et al. (2017) uncovered eight short-term outcomes, six mid-term outcomes, and seven long-term outcomes as a result of the mapping process. This feedback provided an opportunity to clearly communicate the logic of the program and feedback on program design and implementation processes (Burbaugh et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Leaders and followers' backgrounds and histories impact their self-awareness, approach to understanding one another, and response to experiences (Avolio, 2007). When adults engage in reflective learning, they are able to integrate their new experiences for expansion of skills and tools (Densten & Gray, 2001). A community of practice (CoP) engages members in communal meaning making through a shared commitment of understanding (Eckert, 2006). Often CoPs involve collaborative reflection processes, which result in the capacity to develop professional skills, solve problems quickly, transfer best practices, and help recruit and retain talent (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Reflection and CoPs provide guiding frameworks for exploring social learning through leadership development. The conceptual framework for this study utilized reflective learning and CoPs as a foundation for blogs as an avenue for reflective learning in an online CoP.

Adults experience transformative learning when a frame of reference is altered based upon reflection and discourse. Within transformative learning, "the process involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). One's frame of reference is their assumptions, including associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses, on the truths or understanding of the world around them (Mezirow, 1997). A transformative experience involves individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships (Sammut, 2014). To engage in transformative learning and reflective practices, individuals must be open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted (Densten & Gray, 2001). These traits require capacity to reflect and understand how your own experiences provide genuine ways for learning. Leaders must seek out and readily engage in opportunities and with others to expand their thinking to interpret, decide, and behave in ways that are more inclusive (Avolio, 2007; Brookfield, 2016).

CoPs are simple social systems or "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002, p. 4). A CoP exists within a wider framework of thinking attributed to learning as a social process (Wenger, 2010). The domain (shared interest), community (engagement with others), and practice (sharing of ideas) are the three central characteristics required to be a CoP (Wenger, 2011). With a set of communal goals, CoP members create and explore shared knowledge (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Wenger, 2010). Within a CoP, individuals share experiences and interests which allows participants to challenge each other's assumptions and support each other through transformative learning processes.

Blogs provide an opportunity for reflection within an online CoP (Dennen, 2014). Chu et al. (2012) support blogging as an avenue for collaborative learning, reflection, communication, and social support. Within the VALOR program, fellows engage within a CoP encompassed of other and previous fellows. However, this CoP extends to a larger complex social system with others

with broader shared interests (Wenger, 2010). Blogging provides fellows with opportunities to be vulnerable through self-reflection and network as advocates within the agricultural industry.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate how fellows in the VALOR program reflect on capacity building and competency development through blog entries. Conducting evaluations to provide evidence for the value of the program and outcomes for continued funding is crucial for programs situated in Extension (Lamm et al., 2016). This evaluation aimed to provide evidence of reflective learning and align findings with program outcomes. This research aligns with research priority 5 of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda, *Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs* (Thoron, Myers, & Barrick, 2016) by evaluating the impact of an agricultural and natural resources leadership development program. This study sought to address the following questions:

RQ 1: How do fellows in the VALOR program reflect in blogs on their experiences within the program?

RQ 2: How do the blog reflections of fellows in the VALOR program connect with outcomes of the program?

Methods

We designed a qualitative case study to explore how fellows in the VALOR program reflect on capacity building and competency development through blog entries. The population for this study consisted of fellows in three cohorts of the VALOR program. A stratified, purposive sample was taken from blog entries made by fellows throughout their time within the VALOR program (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). Three researchers independently open-coded the sample of blogs. Through a collaborative process, open-codes were compared for inter-coder reliability and developed emergent themes.

We selected a sample from blog entries of all 32 fellows (*n*= 32) from three cohorts within the VALOR program. At the time of data collection, fellows from cohorts one and two had completed the program and cohort three fellows were halfway through the program. A demographic overview of fellows includes an age range from 25 to 56 years; 21 men and 11 women; 3% Latino/a, 13% Black, 84% White; and occupations that include, but are not limited to, finance (lending and development), small business ownership, marketing/communications, education (middle, secondary and collegiate), government (local, state, and federal), agricultural production (livestock, crop, fruit/produce, dairy), international trade, corporate sales, and regulatory inspection, with both public and private sectors represented. In the VALOR program, fellows are asked to complete at least one blog at each seminar over their two years in the program. The program director did not provide guided questions or structure for the blogs, but rather allowed fellows to create blogs based on their own reflections and takeaways from each seminar. Seminars are held bi-monthly for a total of 12 seminars.

We utilized a stratified, purposive sample from the blog entries (Ary et al., 2010). To diversify the experiences and seminar topics being discussed within the blogs, we selected two blogs from each fellow and made a best attempt to select blogs with varying dates throughout the program. It is important to note that all 32 fellows did not complete 12 blog entries, which served as a limitation within the sampling method. We masked selected blogs for identifying information prior to the coding process.

We conducted an iterative process to provide reliability within the coding and meaning making process (Creswell, 2013). Three researchers open-coded the blog entries independently (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two of the researchers work closely with the program. Therefore, an external coder served to provide a more objective assessment (Creswell, 2013). Each researcher provided analytical codes for passages, which discussed personal development or built capacity through experiences. After independently coding all blog entries, the three researchers met to discuss codes for inter-coder reliability and to collaboratively examine patterns for emergent themes (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016).

This collaborative process included extracting coded passages, compiling codes for each passage from each researcher, and verbally discussing reasoning behind each code. We continued this process until the codes met saturation and the researchers agreed upon meaning. We determined saturation when codes being discussed were no longer revealing new properties or concepts (Creswell, 2013). Analytical codes were then examined for patterns to generate emergent themes and subthemes. We compared themes and subthemes to the intended outcomes of the VALOR program established by Burbaugh et al. (2017).

Limitations

There were several limitations within this study. The sampling frame served as a limitation because all seminars were not equally represented within the sampling frame based upon fellow entries. We attempted to diversify the represented seminars as much as possible through the data collection process. Additionally, fellows received varying and vague instructions for completing their blog entries. Therefore, some of the blog entries simply included a detail of experience rather than connections of topics and reflection. Several blogs did not yield any coded passages for extraction. We attempted to reduce biases through practice of reflexivity.

Reflexivity. Creswell (2013) deemed reflexivity as essential to reveal how one's biases, values, and background may shape the study. To increase trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000), it is essential to share the backgrounds and connections to the program of the researchers who coded and made meaning of codes. Two of the researchers worked directly with the program being evaluated. One researcher is the graduate assistant for programming and the other the graduate assistant for evaluation of the VALOR program. Based upon these close ties to the program, the two researchers acknowledged biases for viewing the program through a positive lens. To mitigate these biases, the third researcher, with no direct ties and minimal previous knowledge regarding the program, served as an external researcher. This researcher is a graduate student in agricultural education and was a previous extension agent. Given the collective experiences and backgrounds, the researchers recognized biases for the power of extension work. The researchers employed biases monitoring and reflection throughout the process to reduce the likelihood of impact on the study.

Findings

Three themes, expanded thinking, competency development, and interconnectedness emerged from the meaning making process. Embedded within these themes were four subthemes: change, self-awareness, networking, and affiliations. Several of the fellows only provided details of their experiences within their blog entries and did not include reflection upon experiences. This resulted in several blog entries having few to no passages extracted for coding.

Expanded Thinking

Often the fellows wrote about experiences, which expanded their knowledge base. At times the fellows explicitly stated a new factoid or piece of knowledge, which they added to their own personal databases. Others described experiences as eye-opening, resulting in continued expansion of their views within the agricultural and natural resource industry. Fellow 17 noted:

> As I gazed in amazement at the 20,000 strawberry plants, my first thought was how sore my back would feel after picking strawberries after about 2 hours (and that would only yield a couple gallons). But with the "Pick Your Own" harvest strategy, the end consumer provides the harvest labor while obtaining a hands-on agriculture experience. Brilliant! It was an interesting path (urban traffic, a few subdivisions, etc.) that led us to [Farm]. Our visit offered a great example of how farmers can interface with consumers in an urban setting.

In this passage, the writer expressed how strategies within diverse contexts require different avenues for success. We observed this thought process throughout many of the passages with fellows noting how experiences caused them to reconsider the agricultural industry and led to a further understanding of the diversity within the industry. For example, fellow 1 shared, "it just goes to show that agriculture comes in many different shapes and forms, and we all need to work together to support all of it." From this mindset, fellows often expressed self-awareness and a consideration for continued change within the industry.

Self-awareness. Within this subtheme, some fellows moved beyond expanded thinking and shared how this new-found knowledge impacted their own views of themselves and the world. For example, one fellow discussed how they were challenged to reconsider their own beliefs.

> Is the person in the windshield looking back at me being intellectually honest and consistent in the views and beliefs that he holds? Somewhere between the libertarian ideal of nothing and the totalitarian ideal of everything lies the proper role of government. (Fellow 2)

Another mentioned having to think a bit deeper about what you know and think you know, "having grown up [in] the [Area], I thought I was somewhat versed in the Mennonite ways and lifestyle. I guess that is part of growing up, you realize what all you do not know" (Fellow 32). Within this seminar fellows had learned more about the impact of culture on agricultural practices. This fellow believed they had a strong basis for knowledge on Mennonite culture, but was surprised to hear additional information that caused the individual to become more self-aware of their assumptions and perception of the world.

Fellows also expressed self-awareness through a development of purpose and understanding for one's role as a leader. Fellow 28 wrote:

> Be practical. Be a good opponent. Be informed. Never break a promise. Don't change horses in the middle of the stream. Learn to evaluate and weigh issues. Don't underestimate Legislators. Be understanding. Be friendly. Be reasonable. Be realistic. Be sure of what you ask for, you might just get it!

This fellow synthesized what they learned from a seminar and communicated how this knowledge would impact their own work as an agricultural leader. This quote expresses the need to continually be self-aware.

Change. Fellows often equated expanded thinking to a call for change within practices and views for the future, which generated this subtheme. One fellow spoke about the current challenges facing the industry and an example of a company considering the future through their current practices.

> What will be the changes in styles and sizes of companies requiring imports and exports? what will be the changes in methods of transportation?, what will be the changes in the types or shapes of goods that are moved around, or in the materials themselves? These are complicated questions but are crucial to understand the ways in which trade will change over the next 5, 10, even 50 years. The [Company] has all this on their mind as they continue growing and moving forward. (Fellow 23)

Another spoke about their own experiences in the program being an avenue for change. This fellow stated, "on a personal level, participation in VALOR program is a step towards diversification and innovation" (Fellow 4). Fellows spoke about the need for continual chanfge through diverse and innovative initiatives, which were focused on the future.

Competency Development

Frequently, fellows blogged about their own competency development and how the tools furthered their personal development as a leader and could benefit the industry. Fellow 2 commented on emotional intelligence as a competency for positive engagement:

> What became clear was that, if results are to be obtained by leaders of agriculture in Virginia, a conscious awareness and study of EQ during interactions with others – superiors, subordinates, peers, everyone – will increase the likelihood of a positive engagement.

Another wrote about the role of communication and their role as a communicator:

> I think this seemed fitting as the seminar was about communication, and we all assumed it was about communicating in our industry, but I also think it was about communicating with the past fellows. One thing we have to remember is to communicate with the people that have done something before, so you can make the most out of what you are doing, and not repeat the same mistakes. (Fellow 1)

Both fellows expressed ways to utilize their competencies to be good stewards of the program and the industry.

Interconnectedness

Within fellows' blogs, they discussed interconnectedness at length. Many fellows saw VALOR as an opportunity to become more connected with others in the program, state, and industry. For example, a fellow spoke about the program's role in benefitting people and communities. Fellow 20 stated, "one of the things I am interested in learning through the VALOR experience is how to better help people from all walks of life better understand agricultural practices and to make better decisions and EDUCATED decisions for themselves." This fellow intended to utilize their development through the program to build capacity for others. Another fellow took a similar stance but focused more on the potential for capacity development within the agricultural industry.

With a mission to develop leaders who can effectively engage all segments of the Virginia agricultural community to create collaborative solutions and promote agriculture inside and outside of the industry, I'm thrilled that the program welcomes a diverse set of interests and leaders. (Fellow 19)

While fellows frequently blogged about these views on capacity building, others had a different view on interconnectedness. Some fellows spoke more about their own opportunities to increase their networks and others expressed an affiliation to the state and agriculture.

Networking. Many fellows voiced the importance of building networks both within and outside of the program, which resulted in the development of networking as a subtheme. Fellow 4 wrote, "One of the most valuable aspects of VALOR thus far has been access to individuals and organizations making things happen in the industry." This fellow saw the value of building a network as a pathway to improve the industry. Another fellow spoke about previous networking opportunities that were beneficial to their development and attributed these previous experiences to their excitement to continue growing their network through the program.

I was fortunate again the past year to be accepted into VALOR – [cohort]. All I could think of upon receiving my acceptance is….what an opportunity to learn even more, build a bigger network and work even harder for my community. (Fellow 15)

Both fellows viewed networks as beneficial and shared sentiment about the value of the networking opportunities offered through the VALOR program.

Affiliations. Within this subtheme, fellows discussed interconnectedness as an affiliation to their state and/or the agricultural industry and an avenue for advocacy within the industry. For example, Fellow 16 saw the seminars as an opportunity to gain knowledge and experiences to benefit their community, state, and industry.

I need to look at each as an opportunity to learn and grow as an individual but just as importantly I need to look at each as an opportunity to play my part in building a stronger ag and forestry economy locally and statewide. (Fellow 16)

Another commented on the importance of understanding a growing and changing industry to be an effective advocate for their industry of affiliation. This fellow stated, "Times have changed, but I think learning how meat is processed is an important part of a holistic agricultural education and is vital to being an effective advocate for agriculture" (Fellow 25). Fellow 6 took a more political stance acting as an advocate for the agricultural industry, by expressing frustration in the current state of administration involved in policy change for environmental issues.

I do not begrudge a group [']s efforts to protect the environment or the life that inhabits it. I do not question the scientific rational[e] for policy change regarding the environment or the life that inhabits it. I was surprised by the stark difference in opinion between the people "on the ground" and the administration. I am frustrated by the over reliance of leadership that maintains organizational direction based solely on "them versus us" mentalities. I am concerned that as a country we have put ourselves into cliques wherein we allow ourselves to purposefully ignore the bigger picture, missing the forest for the trees. (Fellow 6)

This fellow vividly shared an affiliation with the agricultural industry and disdain for blame for environmental issues being attributed to the industry.

Theme and Subtheme Connections to Program Outcomes

We compared the themes and subthemes, which emerged through this study, to program outcomes to explore connections between blog entry reflections and the intended program outcomes. The short-term, mid-term, and long-term outcomes associated with each theme and subtheme are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Program Outcome Connections to Themes

	Short-term	Mid-term	Long-term
Expanded Thinking (Self-awareness & change)	● Knowledge and understanding of industry ● Better understanding of others and differing perspectives ● Technology adoption and awareness ● Self-awareness	● Information analysis and critical thinking ● Understanding the role of the government in industry	● Credible advocates for the industry ● Address industry challenges ● Sustainability and viability of industry
Competency Development	● Enhanced communication skills ● Conceptual understanding of leadership skills	● Develop dialogue skills to better understand and engage others ● Applying leadership principles and skills ● Leadership habits	● Self-efficacy and skill building
Interconnectedness (Networking & Affiliation)	● Engage diverse viewpoints	● Build relationships	● Strong, diverse network ● Influencing policy
Not Included	● Listening skills		● Civic engagement

Note. Outcomes were derived from Burbaugh et al.'s (2017) article and compared with themes. Two of the outcomes were not readily discussed in selected blog passages.

The outcomes aligned with expanded thinking were namely based on increasing understanding, awareness, and the need to address change. The outcomes related to competency development focused on increasing skills and self-efficacy. Interconnectedness aligned with themes related to relationships and communicating with others. This analysis found listening skills and civic engagement were not discussed in the examined blogs.

Conclusions and Implications

Understanding leadership processes provides new opportunities to expand current knowledge regarding current theories and models (Dinh et al., 2014). This study examined VALOR fellows' blog entries for reflections on capacity building and competency development through experiences within the program. We then connected the three emergent themes, expanded thinking, competency development, and interconnectedness, to intended program outcomes.

Burbaugh et al. (2017) identified the learning activities, which led to desired outcomes through a participatory pathway model approach. Within this study, it was not clear whether the program was the only contributing factor or only one of many contributing factors, which resulted in program outcomes. Because we are social beings and learning is a product of our environment, there is never a way to contribute an intervention as the sole reason behind an outcome. However, by examining products from reflective processes, connections can be attributed to learning, which aligned with outcomes to specific experiences within the VALOR program. We conclude blogging or journaling activities (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014) were a useful tool for exploring reflective processes.

From a transformative lens, adult learners must question their deep-rooted assumptions and beliefs to adopt a new paradigm and gain new knowledge (Sammut, 2014). This social learning process often encompasses a phase of disorientation, one of personal reflection, and an open engagement in discourse (Mezirow, 1997). Self-awareness arose as a subtheme within expanded thinking, which reflected exploration of a transformative learning process. For example, Fellow 2 explicitly discussed reexamining one's self in relation to experiences within the seminar. Fellow 32 reflected on realizing they did not know things they had previously believed they did. Within this passage, the fellow reminds us of the importance in being open-minded and seeking additional information to identify blind spots (Brookfield, 2016).

Although many fellows discussed transformative processes, others did not reflect upon their experiences, but rather utilized their blogs to detail the seminar. We noted a trend in the blogs discussing the international seminar being predominantly focused on specifics of the experience rather than reflections upon the experience. None of the blogs on the international experience within the sample provided any reflection upon the benefit of inclusion of an international experience or transfer of global perspectives. Increasing the focus on developing reflective processes and providing more instructions for blog entries are opportunities to improve the curriculum and enable fellows to receive greater gains from seminars.

Interconnectedness as a theme aligns with an individual's CoP. Networking opportunities and inclusion as a fellow within the program allows participants to build and form their CoP. A previous study of an agricultural leadership program supported networking opportunities as an important part of the experience for participants (Kelsey & Wall, 2003). However, this study called for focus to shift to means for influencing and developing capacity within one's community (Kelsey & Wall, 2003). Recall, there is also a need to connect one's CoP to a complex social system of interrelated CoPs (Wenger, 2010). Within this study, we found implications of affiliation with and within a wider social system. Participants discussed their want and drive to impact their local communities and the agricultural industry.

Fellows also identified a need to be open to change and to be in a role that drives change. However, most blogs lacked application for the "how". Fellows clearly expressed a desire to increase capacity within their local communities, the state, and agricultural industry, but few moved past awareness to express means for increasing social capital and impacting their communities as suggested as a need in previous studies (e.g. Horlings & Padt, 2013; Kelsey & Wall, 2003). Additionally, civic engagement was one of the two intended program outcomes, which did not align

with an emergent theme. Practitioners should spend more time exploring the "how" with fellows to ensure knowledge transfer is occurring and external capacity is being built.

Recommendations

This qualitative case-study evaluation provided insight in the leadership process and developmental outcomes of fellows within the VALOR program. The findings indicate several recommendations for program improvement and continued inquiry. In practice, fellows should be encouraged to engage in more reflective discussions with one another and provided more instructions and guidance for utilizing blogging as a reflective process. Guided questions for blogging, especially for the first few seminars, could bolster a more reflective blogging process. Additionally, fellows should be encouraged to take advantage of each other's blogs as a CoP and to share their blogs and the blogs of other fellows with the wider agricultural community. Program personnel should consider opportunities to engage alumni of the program and strengthen opportunities for community development through a web-based platform (Yang, 2009).

Fellows should be provided with more opportunities to make meaningful connections with their current work, new-found knowledge, and experiences within the program to increase transferability. More engaged reflective processes will benefit these connections, but explicit discourse must occur (Mezirow, 1997). Fellows are completing the program with increased competencies and capacity to positively drive change within their own communities. Fellows need to explore different methods and avenues for application of tools learned within the VALOR program. Without a plan for application, fellows will not be as equipped or likely to partake in civic-minded projects and increase social capital. Program personnel should explore opportunities for reflection upon application to increase an understanding for transferability.

In summary, within leadership inquiry it is essential to explore processes and outcomes of the leadership programs. This program and similar programs are tasked with increasing the effectiveness of leaders equipped to address 21st challenges within the agricultural industry (Kaufman & Carter, 2005). To do so, it is essential to create robust evaluations, which provide sufficient insight to drive program support and implement improvements to the program (Lamm et al., 2016). These evaluations should examine all elements in the tripartite learning model for leadership: knowledge, praxis, and reflection (Harvey & Jenkins, 2014). Evaluating reflective processes is challenging because it is an internal process. By examining results of a reflective process, we were able to explore how emergent themes within fellows' blogs aligned with program outcomes. It is recommended that other leadership programs use similar methods to design rigorous evaluations.

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