

The “write” way to lead: The power of writing in educational leadership

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Abstract

Reflection can play a critical role in an educational leader’s capacity to sustain and improve their leadership practices. Reflection in the form of writing allows leaders to slow down and carefully attend to their own thinking before facilitating collective thinking and decision-making in those they lead. Though educational leaders are often focused on supporting the development of writing skills in their students, writing is equally important for themselves as leaders. This paper examines the journey of three K-12 practitioners who experience reflective writing as a core curricular component of the Masters in Public Education Management program at Yale School of Management. We offer our perspectives on having dedicated writing time in the leadership development curriculum as well as recommendations for practitioners seeking to infuse reflective writing into their individual and organizational leadership praxes.

Introduction

While writing is a critical skill for students, it is equally important for education leaders. Reflective writing helps to clarify the ambiguity present in education leadership and helps leaders identify possible solutions to tough problems. It helps practitioners apply an analytical framework to management challenges by critically re-examining the historical roots of present challenges and imagining new ways to tackle issues in the future (Sen, 2009). Reflective writing provides space for leaders to practice and refine critical messages that they need to share with others. It unlocks innovation by helping leaders absorb and make sense of new information, deepen their critical thinking, and continuously improve their leadership approach (Choi et al., 2022). As education leaders work to create the conditions for brave spaces and courageous conversations in their organizations, it is critical that they stay grounded in their purpose and aligned with their values. Given the extensive ethical dilemmas that education leaders face, the need for space to reflect, clarify, and reconcile is significant. Reflective writing helps leaders to pause and focus so they can sharpen their thinking and strengthen their ability to communicate with conviction and precision. As a program focused on deepening the capabilities and impact of K-12 professionals in public education, reflective writing is integrated as a key component of the Masters in Public Education Management program at Yale School of Management.

This article positions reflective writing as a leadership tool by providing a look at the reflective writing journey of three practitioners during the program, their response to the tool, and the impact it has had on their leadership.

Practitioner Experiences

Tonya

I prided myself on being deeply reflective. Decision after decision, event after event, I would review them, seeking ways to improve. But I never put those reflections on paper. That all changed at Broad, where the power of written reflection was woven into the fabric of the program.

At the end of our first day, with our beautifully embroidered, blue, The Broad Center at Yale School of Management journals in hand, Dr. Stephaine Dunson set the stage for a transformative journey with a prompt that echoed through the room: "After this first day of classes, what's on your mind that needs to be acknowledged?" This seemingly simple question opened the floodgates to a profound exploration of our inner thoughts and feelings.

As my cohort was crafting what I imagined was the next great work of our generation, I sat frozen, my mind silent, my heart overwhelmed, and my soul shaking. Staring at my blank page, I felt a mix of emotions, but mostly uncertainty and apprehension.

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"What if I don't...I have a feeling of not belonging and it makes me unsettled. I am embarrassed that I feel ill prepared, not as smart, and that I don't belong."

Day one, writing felt like trying to draw water from a well that had run dry. Grateful for the privacy of my journal, I battled self-doubt. But when Stephaine called for volunteers to share, I surprised myself by raising my hand. In front of the group, I admitted to feeling inadequate and like an impostor. Yet, instead of ridicule, I found solace in the shared vulnerability of others. Day one—survived.

During reflections, we were given the space to be raw, genuine, and unapologetically ourselves. In embracing this vulnerability, we discovered a powerful common ground. Sharing our daily reflections became a catalyst for a unique bonding experience. Disrupting the distance among strangers, our honesty brought us closer together. We became a community bound by shared insecurities, aspirations, and a commitment to growth.

The struggle to write persisted through the days that followed, yet I heeded Stephaine's advice: "even if the words do not come, just keep writing." When I ran out of words for the prompts, I wrote whatever I was thinking at the time. Rereading my journal in preparation for this article, I found notes about things I needed to finish for a class. Many, many notes were about how excited I was to be in the program and how much I liked, then loved my A-Team, Joy Unbounded, (Emily, Tera, and Brian). There were notes about the type of leader I wanted to be and what I needed to learn to sharpen my leadership skills. Writing has become therapeutic, and my journal a space where I review my unfiltered thoughts without shame or judgment.

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"I am excited about all that I learned and did this week. This opportunity has transformed me! I was concerned that I might not measure up, that I didn't know how to think as deeply as everyone else, but I am just going to give it my all and become all that I can be!"

Fast forward to our graduation from Yale University and my first Broad Center Forum Conference. Reflective writing, once an intimidating challenge, had transformed into a powerful tool. It has transcended the program, to become a regular practice in both my personal and professional life. It is not a daily ritual, but as I continue to evolve, refine, and grow, reflective

writing has become a compass guiding me. Each word on the page represents a step forward, a testament to the transformative power of introspection.

Sharicca

At the beginning of the program, I did not think of myself as a writer. I never had. My relationship with writing felt more dutiful than skillful. Producing a concise, analytical business memo was familiar and comfortable to me. However, what I did not realize at the time was how much writing is about discovery as it is about producing. When I realized reflective writing would be a key component in my master's program, I was excited to learn how to expand my relationship with writing and explore how to integrate it into my leadership practice. A year or so before starting at Yale with the encouragement of my therapist, I developed a practice of freewriting. Writing without restrictions had become a powerful tool to solve problems and gain clarity in my personal life. When I saw reflective writing as part of the curriculum for my master's degree, I was eager to discover how writing could be illuminating in my professional life.

At the end of class on the first day, we had our first reflective writing experience as a group. I wrote:

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What a treasure it is to be given time to reflect. It is how I solidify thoughts, discover new insights, refine my approach, and spur new growth. Reflection- written reflection- is a tool that I need to use more often.

It was refreshing to not be asked to write for the purpose of proving what I knew. We were writing to discover. Letting my thoughts flow without the pressure of grades or the expectation to conform to a particular standard for expression was freeing. During our writing sessions, I would often start with questions and observations that were top of mind at that moment. This allowed me to acknowledge my surface thoughts and then go deeper. With guided prompts and the freedom to write without constraints, I was able to excavate possible solutions that had been buried in the corners of my mind. I was finally able to see more clearly what had been weighing on me. Towards the end of the first week after multiple writing sessions and rich class discussions, I wrote:

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I feel my future self standing with ancestors and elders beckoning to my current self. She is calling me to a higher level of leadership, where I simultaneously walk alone and with the community. Leadership where I get quiet, still, and listen to wisdom...Both my future self and my current self acknowledge that the road ahead will stretch me and pull me out of my comfort zone. They both acknowledge that the discomfort is okay. It's a necessary part of growth and it's time to go....

Change is needed. When it comes to change, I believe efforts should be collective with no uneven distribution of power. I believe in the promise of the collective...[T]ogether, better strategies can be born and implemented. Our efforts will fall short if we leave it up to one portion of the system to take the lead. Families, students, teachers, admin, staff, community members all have to work together to design solutions that have a chance of being successful.

Over the course of the program, I stepped into higher levels of public leadership. With the new responsibilities came steeper challenges. I took on a new role where I was tasked with finding common ground among stakeholders who held strongly oppositional views and with identifying sustainable solutions among deep constraints. The facilitated writing helped me to reframe situations and imagine new possibilities in areas that felt gridlocked. Our writing sessions ended with rich dialogue that helped me expand my thinking further. A block of individual writing time was frequently paired with time to share from our journals in small groups and then with the entire class. It was writing that helped me to order my thoughts and see a pathway forward. The group discussions about our written reflections helped me to gain my footing. Hearing the challenges I faced echoed in the words of my classmates was validating. Building solutions together was invigorating. Our common values and collective identity became apparent and I gained not only a clearer sense of self but also gained a network of peers that I could continue to grow with even beyond our program.

Jesse

I have always loved reflective journaling as a tool to explore my thoughts and feelings. It has been a way for me to check in with myself: *How am I feeling? Why do I feel this way? How can I process this?*

The Broad writing exercises had a different effect on me, however. Perhaps it was the fact that we always journaled at the end of a long day filled with academic content but my journal reflections were less about *how I was feeling* (typically tired) and much more about how to solve problems. The reflections were a way for me to organize, synthesize, and apply the learnings from the day to challenges at work. My brain wandered off to questions like: *How do I*

strengthen academic systems? How do I frame this new initiative so that it sticks? How do I approach change management for this priority so that it invests key stakeholders?

It's as if my brain was filled with random bits of unorganized information and my hand was trying to organize it for me. These journal reflections served as the first drafts of language that I went on to refine and use at work. Here is an example of what eventually became the vision for our teacher coaching framework:

Our vision for effective coaching at Alliance is that we invest in every teacher's development and celebrate the great work they are already doing for scholars. We believe that strong coaching is based on relationships, the teacher has a voice in their development with coaching being tailored to their needs, it is meaningfully connected to a long term development goal, rooted in evidence of scholar learning. We don't believe in prescribing one specific framework (the how), however, we believe that the following practices (the what) should live in any coaching relationships and there are many frameworks that can fulfill these practices.

Here is another example of the framing for my team's KPI (Key Performance Indicator) Stepback:

The intent behind the 22-23 KPI Stepback process is to:

- 1. Help inform how we can be more effective to continue to improve our strategy and processes towards scholar learning.*
- 2. Establish a healthy culture with data. We celebrate things that are going well. We look where we might still focus and modify our time by looking at root causes of issues before making any adjustments to our supports.*

3. Practice & deepen our data analysis skills over time.

These two examples –a vision for a teacher coaching framework and framing for our data analysis process – are key priorities in our network. I rarely have the time to synthesize my thoughts into compelling, coherent, and clear language to invest our stakeholders. I am deeply appreciative of the protected time I had at Yale to be alone with my thoughts, so that I could synthesize key learnings and apply it to creating clarity for others.

Considerations for developing a reflective writing practice

Reflective writing is a useful tool to help educational leaders strengthen their own critical thinking, as well as their teams'. To gain the benefits of reflective writing, leaders should consider allowing time to become accustomed to writing for the sake of exploration instead of communication. Like other forms of professional development, time should be allocated and scheduled for reflective writing to ensure that teams devote time to it. Groups can be used to deepen the learning process with time to hear what others are facing and discovering in their leadership journeys.

Considerations for Incorporating Reflective Writing Practices into Self and Team Praxis		
Pre-Writing	During the Writing	Post-Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Frame the journey including the why and normalize that it might take some time to be accustomed to free writing. ● Calendar out a regular cadence of protected writing time for the school year (i.e. 15 minutes monthly during your team meetings). ● Try to select times when people have energy to dedicate to this process (i.e. avoid Friday afternoons or after a Board meeting). ● Sample prompts for the start of a writing session: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What feels unresolved for you? ○ What excites you? ○ What is troubling you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Frame the prompt and give people two minutes to free-write. For some prompts, let people know that they will share something from what they have written. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If they were notified that there would be time to share, ask people to share from their writing.

Table of considerations for incorporating reflective writing practices into self and team praxis.

References

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