

Impact of Personal Growth Projects on Leadership Identity Development

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Abstract

Within personal leadership education courses, leadership educators should include experiences which help students develop themselves as leaders. In this article, the authors discuss results from a qualitative research study involving the analysis of Personal Growth Project (PGP) assignments in a personal leadership education collegiate course. The authors analyzed PGP assignments using the lens of the Leadership Identity Development model (Komives et al., 2005). All aspects of the developing self component of the model including deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills,

and expanding motivations were evident in student reflections about their PGP. The PGP assignment seems to be very effective in promoting the development of students' leadership identity, especially in the "developing self" category of the Leadership Identity Model (Komives et al., 2005).

Introduction

"Personal growth is such an interesting thing that it almost isn't fully learned or understood until after the season of growth." (Student B19)

Boyd and Williams (2010) identified a classroom assignment in a personal leadership education collegiate course designed to foster life-long learning in students. Students in this course are required to complete a personal growth project where they learn a new skill or gain new knowledge. Students are allowed to choose their project with the approval of the instructor. The students must choose to learn something completely new. Examples of projects include learning a musical instrument, learning to cook, learning a new physical activity such as yoga, or expanding their spiritual awareness. Students document and reflect on their personal growth throughout the project and connect course content to their personal growth process. Course content includes topics such as emotional intelligence, personality type, strengths, values, life purpose, creativity, and personal vision. Beyond fostering life-long learning skills, there are other beneficial outcomes to the personal growth project assignment such as developing self-awareness.

As leadership development is mostly personal development, becoming more aware of one's self is a necessary component of personal development (Day, Zaccaro, & Halpin, 2004). To effectively lead others, one must first be able to lead themselves (Neck & Manz, 2007). "The instrument of leadership is the self, and the mastery of the art of leadership comes from the mastery of the self" (p. 344). Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses, what you value and believe, and your preferences for learning, thinking, and relating help you relate to others and establish credibility in those relationships (Komives, Lucas, & McMahan, 2006).

Leadership occurs in the context of interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal skill development enhances our capacity to lead others as we learn from our experiences, acquire new skills, and develop our self-concept (Fritz, Brown, Lunde, & Banset, 2004). Interpersonal skill development is really about discovering who you are. This self-discovery which leads to self-confidence is "really awareness of and faith in your own powers. These powers become clear and strong only as you work to identify and develop them" (Kouzes & Posner,

1990, p. 298). Because people are not fully conscious of all aspects of their identities (Day et al., 2004), leadership educators should help students become aware of the components of their self and develop a deeper self-awareness of the individual.

This paper discusses the impact of using Personal Growth Projects (PGPs) to help students “develop self” in a personal leadership education collegiate course. Students’ reflections from completing a personal growth project were analyzed using the Leadership Identity Development model as the framework (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

London (2009) describes leadership development as a process contributing to continuous growth of the person. One of the four primary components to leadership development is personal growth (Conger, 1992). An integral part of the development process is the concept of continuous learning. London states that continuous learning is imperative if leaders are to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change and the expansion of the global economy. London and Smither (1999) defined continuous learning as “a self-initiated, discretionary, planned, and proactive pattern of formal or informal activities that are sustained over time for the purpose of applying or transporting knowledge for career development” (p. 81).

Leadership educators should try to foster continuous learning experiences in students to help them develop as leaders. One way to do this is through experiential learning activities such as the PGP. Kolb (1984) described experiential learning as a process which links education, work, and personal development. Kolb’s model, based on the work of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1958), and Piaget (1970), revolves around four key points in cyclical form. First, individuals have a concrete experience, which is followed by reflective observations, abstract conceptualizations, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Each point is unique to the learner’s experience. Giving learners an opportunity to reflect on and observe experiences is key to learning in Kolb’s model (1984).

PGPs allow students to experience something new (concrete experience), reflect on their experience and what they learned (reflective observations), state changes they foresee or may encounter (abstract conceptualizations), and apply it to other aspects of their life (active experimentation). By purposefully constructing the PGP assignment, leadership educators create an experiential learning activity for students.

Based on grounded theory research, the Komives et al. (2005) model for developing a leadership identity is a useful framework for assessing the effect of PGPs on student learning and development. Komives et al. proposed a model for developing a leadership identity based on an emergent design. This study linked student development theories with the process of leadership development to build a model for assisting leadership educators in facilitating leadership development in students. In the study by Komives et al., a sample of students who exemplified relational leadership were identified and interviewed to arrive at the process of developing a leadership identity.

In the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model, six stages of the developmental process were identified as leadership constructs (Komives et al., 2005):

- Awareness.
- Exploration/Engagement.
- Leader Identified.
- Leadership Differentiated.
- Generativity.
- Integration/Synthesis.

“Leadership identity develops through six stages moving from awareness to integration/synthesis” (Komives et al., 2005, pp. 608-609). These stages are conceptualized as cyclical, which allows for individuals to go between stages and repeat stages, learning and acquiring information through each repeated stage. Five organizational categories also emerged for the process of developing leadership identity:

- Developmental influences.
- Developing self.
- Group influences.
- Changing view of self with others.

- Broadening view of leadership.

Developing self, one of the categories emergent in Komives et al. (2005) study, was the focus of this research study. Dimensions of personal growth were evident in the developing self category, which includes “deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills, and expanding motivations” (p. 599).

Deepening self-awareness involves moving from having a vague sense of self to affirming your strengths, weaknesses, and roles in which you thrive. According to George (2007), members of the Stanford Graduate School of Business Advisory Council listed self-awareness unanimously as the “most important capability for leaders to develop” (p. 69). Self-awareness includes affirmation of personal values, sense of personal integrity, strengths, and weaknesses.

Self-confidence evolves through meaningful experiences, which support a positive self-concept. This self-confidence results in taking more risks and a feeling of empowerment (Komives et al., 2005).

Learning to “relate to and communicate with people different from themselves” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 601) is a part of establishing interpersonal efficacy. By working closely with others who are different from you, an appreciation of diverse points of view and the valuing of different perspectives occur.

Applying new skills occurred as a result of being involved in different experiences. Public speaking skills, delegating, motivating, team-building, facilitating, and listening skills are examples of new skills which can be acquired due to engagement in multiple experiences (Komives et al., 2005).

While making friends or participating in interesting activities was an initial reason to get involved in experiences, as students gained more experience, their goals were refined and their focus changed to that of seeking out those things which meant something to them. Their experiences sparked a “deep sense of commitment to something and knew that passion would be a strong motivation to action” (Komives et al., 2005, p. 602). Expanding motivations includes following your passion or interest, exploring and engaging in a concept beyond the initial introduction to it.

There is very little empirical research found in the literature regarding the leadership identity development model. Furthermore, research on the leadership identity development model focuses on how students developed their leadership identity. For instance, Oldham (2008) focused on the “unique collegiate experiences of African American students at a predominantly White institution,

with the intent of finding avenues to further support not only their academic journeys, but also their personal growth and development” (p. 108). This research study focused on the use of a collegiate course assignment in helping students develop self. While theory is useful in describing, explaining, and predicting student behavior, influencing student development is the ultimate goal of leadership education and practice (McEwen, 2003). Komives et al. (2009) recommended that “all leadership courses and other educational experiences should integrate opportunities for self-awareness and personal assessment that were critical to the development in each of the LID stages” (p. 37).

The use of PGPs promotes leadership identity development in students by providing experiences from which they can develop their sense of self. Through their PGPs, students are challenged to participate in an experience which takes them out of their comfort zone and creates new conditions and contexts from which to grow. By reflecting on these new experiences, students deepen their self-awareness, build self-confidence, establish interpersonal efficacy, apply new skills, and expand their motivations.

Methodology

Understanding how a leadership identity is formed is a severely multifarious phenomenon. According to Conger (1998), qualitative research “can be the richest of studies, often illuminating in radically new ways phenomena as complex as leadership” (p. 107). Basic qualitative methodology was chosen as the most effective means to investigate the research question.

As Flaum (2002) noted, effective leadership is often learned during leadership experiences. Because of this and based on the work of several leadership scholars (Flaum, 2002; Brungardt, 1996; Bass & Bass, 2008), the researchers chose to frame this study in the inquiry paradigm of phenomenology. Phenomenology explores “how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Population and Sample

The population for this study is undergraduate students enrolled in a personal leadership education course at Texas A&M University. One of the objectives of the course is for students to become more aware of, apply, and reflect upon personal leadership capacities. Students achieve this objective by participating in the abovementioned PGP.

The sample of this study consists of 90 students' PGP reflection papers. Three different instructors during the Spring 2010 and Fall 2010 semesters contributed random samples of students' PGP reflections (a total possible n of 229). A sample of 34 reflections came from the Spring 2010 section, 26 from one section in the Fall of 2010, and 30 from another section in the Fall of 2010. Purposeful random sampling was chosen to "to reduce bias" (Patton, 2002, p. 244) in sampling three different sections of Personal Leadership Education. Each reflection paper was given a code identifying which section (S, J, or B) it was taken from and numbered at random.

Data Collection

The type of data collected should be emergent from the research design and the purpose of the research. In this phenomenological study, it was concluded that students' reflections of their experiences in their personal growth projects would yield the most rich data. In phenomenology, reflection is retrospective, not introspective (Van Manen, 1990), so asking students to reflect on their lived experiences within the PGP assignment fulfills this retrospective reflection. As part of the PGP assignment, students were asked to reflect on their PGP experience. Students cogitated on how their chosen project effected their leadership development as well as how the PGP helped them experience models and theories covered in class. The random sample yielded 90 usable reflections. These reflections vary on length and chosen PGP.

Data Analysis

Deductive content analysis was conducted on the 90 student sample reflections. The developing self component of the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model (Komives et al., 2005) was used as the deductive lens. In order to establish inter-rater reliability, all three researchers conducted separate hand-coded content analysis. Each researcher coded the reflections into unitized data in accordance to their perception of LID application. Data units were extracted from the original sources and then categorized into core consistencies (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). The combined efforts of the researchers resulted in over 200 unitized data segments. Inter-rater reliability or the triangulation of analysis, in which "two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings" (p. 560) adds to the reliability of data analysis (Patton, 2002).

Because the same procedure of unitizing data was used by all researchers, triangulation was established by comparing the data units which were assigned to the five sub-categories of the LID model. Data units, which were coded into internally homogeneous categories by the researchers, were used as a viable pool for describing the findings of the research. The narrative descriptions of the data

units and core consistencies provided sufficient detail to enable the reader to make adequate interpretations and transferability decisions. An audit trail including the initial hand-coded content analysis and compilation of data units into core consistencies was kept with each coded writing sample to ensure dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1989).

Findings

This study examined the leadership identity development of students who completed a PGP in an upper-level course on personal leadership education. Specifically, the researchers examined students' development as it relates to the Developing Self component of the LID model (Komives et al., 2005). The Developing Self component consists of five sub-categories – Deepening Self-Awareness, Building Self-Confidence, Establishing Interpersonal Efficacy, Applying New Skills, and Expanding Motivations.

Deepening Self-Awareness

Eighty-five point five percent of the sample described becoming more aware of certain personal traits than they were before the personal growth project. Areas of self-awareness that were reported included realizing how they learn and solve problems, their levels of patience when tackling new and unfamiliar tasks, as well as their levels of drive and persistence in completing their projects.

One student noted, "It (the project) forced me to take a long hard look internally, where I came to realize things about me that I thought were good, but also many things that I know I need to improve on." Student B21 observed, "I normally rely on people for help with many things in life. This project made me see that I am capable of learning new things and doing tasks on my own."

Other students, such as S26, noted that "I really like learning new things" and "I learned that I excel under pressure!"

Building Self-Confidence

Almost 52% of the sample described an increase in self-confidence as a result of completing their growth project. This increase in self-confidence instilled within the students a desire to continue attempting new things and move out of their comfort zone. Many students noted that this new-found confidence would encourage them to seek leadership roles and be more vocal in their organizational meetings.

Student S19 claimed that “My life has already changed a great deal from taking this class (Crossfit), it has truly inspired me to be better in every aspect of my life.” Another student noted, “a new confidence in me has come with it. Now I am no longer afraid to tackle new challenges that are placed in front of me.” (S21) This same sentiment is echoed by other students. “This experience has helped me realize that I should not let fear keep me from trying something new” (B22) and “In the future, if a strenuous assignment is placed before me, I know that I have the capability to go out and accomplish it.” (J4)

Establishing Interpersonal Efficacy

More than 44% of the sample reported increases in their interpersonal efficacy. This lower percentage might be explained by the number of projects where students worked independently and thus did not have the opportunity to interact with others and build this skill. Those who did report gains in this area noted stronger relationships with family members and friends who shared an interest in their topic as well as new friendships that were established.

“My ego has had to take a back seat while learning this skill (archery) and I am now more empathetic when others come to me for help.” (J12)

This student understood the need to identify followers who can compensate for her weaknesses as a leader. In the context of her cooking project she described the experience stating, “I see with greater clarity the need for people on my team or in my community that complement what I do well by picking up the slack where I am weak. If I am an especially salty and starch-heavy course of chicken and dumplings, then I need people with me who add sweetness like a pie or crisp, lively energy like a green salad.” (B5).

Applying New Skills

Nearly 57% of the sample reported learning new skills that could be applied in their leadership roles. The ability to listen to others was a key skill noted by students. Other leadership skills included improved problem solving and time-management skills. Continuous learning is an essential attitude for leaders.

This student proclaimed, “I can take the steps I used in cake decorating and apply them to any new thing that I want to learn in the future.” (B2) Another student stated “I have always taken the easy route in life and this project helped me to see that sometimes it is more beneficial to stray away from the safe zone in order to expand your knowledge.” (B4) Student S12 observed, “I actually saw that in different situations that I actually could see my strengths take action.”

Expanding Motivations

Expanding motivations is described as narrowing or focusing goals and seeking a deeper commitment to something (Komives, et al., 2005). Almost 39% of the sample noted growth in this area.

Student B15 stated, “This project alone made me realize the importance of finding a career that suits my strengths and addresses my personality type. ...I am determined to find a career that addresses my creativity and allows the artistic side of me to flourish.” Student S11 found a new passion in the project, “I think that this experience is going to become a pastime that I will embrace for the rest of my life.” “I realized that even knowledgeable leaders also have room to grow and learn more,” noted student J33.

Student B26 noted that “in many situations, you may have all of the resources sitting right before your eyes, but be unable to put them all together. The project helped me look at those pieces and instead of just seeing pieces, I saw the big picture that those pieces, when working together, could create. As a leader, people will look at you to be that person who is able to take those pieces and create the ‘bigger picture’ that no one else can see.”

Student J10 learned that leaders cannot do it alone: “I cannot do everything by myself no matter how strong I think I am at any given thing. I need a team of people around me to tell me how they were able to succeed and give me perspective when I look at something too narrowly.” (J10)

The actual number of students making at least one comment for each sub-category is listed in Table 1. Additional themes emerging from the sample included:

- Their chosen project reduced stress in their lives.
- Increased levels of patience.
- Learned independence.

Table 1

Number and percentage of students reporting in each sub-stage of the LID Model, N=90.

LID Subcategory	n*	Percentage
Developing Self-Awareness	77	85.5
Building Self-Confidence	45	51.8
Establishing Interpersonal Efficacy	40	44.4
Applying New Skills	51	56.7
Expanding Motivations	35	38.9

*Note: n=number of students from the sample of 90 that exhibited growth in that trait.

Conclusions

The PGP assignment seems to be very effective in promoting the development of students' leadership identity, especially in the "developing self" category of the Leadership Identity Model (Komives et al., 2005). Researchers found evidence of each component of Developing Self (deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills, and expanding motivations) in students' reflections. The greatest area of growth was in Developing Self-awareness. Sparrowe (2005) notes that self-awareness is a key component for developing authenticity. Continual development of self-awareness is part of the journey to students' developing their leadership identity. Over one-half of the students gained self-confidence in their ability to complete new and challenging tasks. Kolb (1999) found that self-confidence to be a predictor for identifying emerging leaders for further training and development. Because developing relationships is critical to effective leadership, improving Interpersonal Efficacy is an important concept in developing a leadership identity. More than 50% of the students were able to see how the skills they developed in their PGP could be transferred to a leadership role. Taking concepts learned in one context, reflecting on their application in a different context, then testing those concepts in that new context perfectly describes Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984). The Expanding Motivations subcategory had the fewest number of students indicating growth. The prompts for reflection in this assignment were not designed to have students reflect on this concept and could indicate the lower number of students reporting growth in this area.

Recommendations and Implications

Having students complete a PGP assignment can be effective in helping them develop self. Developing self is important in leading others (Neck & Manz, 2007; Komives, 1998). As leadership educators, we should be concerned about how students learn leadership. Huber (2002) stated “as leadership educators, we help people to understand what it means to be a leader” (p. 31).

This PGP assignment has implications for leadership educators who teach personal leadership education courses. As the research concluded, leadership educators could use this PGP assignment to help students develop self. The reflection is a critical component to this assignment. Providing students with a few questions to think about in regard to their personal growth is important in this process.

This assignment gives students the opportunity to learn something new, take risks, learn outside the classroom, and do something they really enjoy. This ultimately leads to promoting “developing self” in order to grow as a leader and gain self-knowledge.

Additional research is needed that focuses on other outcomes of the PGP assignment. Other possible avenues include examining the effect of the PGP on the development of emotional intelligence, as well as the development of the attitude of life-long learning.

Comparing courses which use similar projects to develop personal leadership skills and knowledge would add to the validity of the study. This would also cross-validate the assignment as a viable option in personal leadership development.

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