

## **Reflective Journaling: Building Bridges between Theory and Practice**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Assessing practitioner experience as it relates to subject theory can be challenging, but critically important, in homeland defense and security programs where student experiences are often utilized in the process of applying learning objectives. Consequently, a common question that faces educators is: How can seemingly unique practitioner experiences be consistently applied to appropriate theory and assessed for the understanding of course learning objectives? This commentary explores how reflective journaling can utilize unique practitioner experiences that can be applied to learning objectives. The commentary concludes with a model of how educators can apply reflective journaling to assess learning of course objectives and improve individual and organizational performance.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Adult learners use learning perspectives that enable them to reflect on experiences to help promote the learning process (Kolb, 1984). This is especially true for programs in the social sciences (Fisher, 1996), nursing and education (Schon, 1983; Kolb, 1984). One can also suggest that given the characteristics commonly displayed by adult learners and context references adult learners typically show (Kolb, 1984), and since the emergent academic disciplines of Emergency Management (EM) and Homeland Security (HS) clearly exhibit these same characteristics, one might argue that experiential learning methodologies would apply to EM and HS academic programs.

Experiential learning can be described as unplanned or emergent learning that is based on experience rather than planned learning that is based on clearly defined outcomes of a course (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning draws on practitioner experiences and how they can be applied to course instruction and learning outcomes.

Research suggests that reflection is a significant part of the experiential learning experience (Kolb 1984; Watkins & Marsick 1983; Argyris, 1993). However, a criticism of experiential learning and reflection is the unplanned nature of the learning that can be difficult to assess and evaluate (Bourner, 2003). For example, an instructor may want to draw on the experiences of students to discuss a specific learning outcome; however, one cannot guarantee that each student will have an appropriate experience on which to draw. Despite this uncertainty, learning practices that support reflection are popular in experiential learning pedagogy.

This commentary discusses the role reflective journaling plays in the experiential learning process and how it is used as an assessment tool for evaluating student learning. It offers a model to assess the unplanned or emergent learning experiences with course learning outcomes. The commentary concludes with a discussion on how the reflective learning model can also be used to support organizational learning.

**Experiential learning.** Experiential learning theory is grounded in the intellectual traditions of social psychology, philosophy, and cognitive psychology and involves learning from prior experience (Kolb, 1974). At the heart of experiential learning theory lies the fundamental belief that learning occurs through active involvement of an individual with concrete experiences (Walters & Marks 1981 as cited by Saunders 1997, p. 17). Hoover and Whitehead (as cited by Saunders 1997, p. 97) explain that experiential learning emphasizes the full involvement of the learner's intellect, feelings and behavior.

In experiential learning, the processing of experiences leads to reflection and the integration of new concepts into existing knowledge. Kolb (1984) describes experiential learning as a four-stage learning model that is based on reflection. According to Kolb (1984), an individual experiences an event, then reflects on the experience and draws conclusions from it. Finally, based on the conclusions, the individual develops new outcomes that can then be applied to new experiences.

**Action research and action science.** Research also suggests that experiential learning includes the concepts of action research and action science. In action research, actions are typically developed in a group setting, based on reflection (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). In action science, individuals are designers of actions. They design programs to achieve intended consequences. These design programs are called "theories in action" (Argyris, 1993). Learning is accomplished through observing espoused theories, theories that an individual claims to follow, and theories in use, theories that can be inferred from a person's action (Argyris, 1993). Learning occurs through active reflection and feedback of the differences communicated between the espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris, 1993). Specifically, Argyris (1991) discusses an experiential learning model as a series of loops that are deeply involved with reflecting on experiences. Single-loop learning improves an existing process without questioning its basic operation. Double-loop learning reflects on underlying beliefs such that they can do things differently. And, in triple-loop learning, a person's underlying view and perspective about themselves shifts. All three learning loops are experiential based and involve reflection by the learner. Gibson, Hauf, Long and Sampson (2011) suggest reflective learning can be used to expand learning opportunities beyond traditional academic assignments. In their discussion of service learning, a form of experiential learning where students and community members work together to solve community issues, Gibson et al., (2011) discuss how reflective learning can help students internalize and apply learning experiences. Similarly, Sanzo, Myran, and Clayton (2010) suggest that introspection provides the

capacity for understanding individual and organizational situations. Sanzo et al., (2010) discuss how through reflection exercises, individual learning was experienced and how it could be transferred to organizational-level learning.

Although the definitions and models of experiential learning differ, they all involve the processing of experiences that leads to reflection and the integration of new concepts into existing knowledge.

**Reflection and reflective journaling.** Boyd & Fales (1983) define reflection as “internally examining and exploring issues of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in changed conceptual perspective” (p. 99).

Scanlon and Chernomas (1997) discuss a three-stage model of reflection:

- Step 1 – Awareness of an event that stimulates thought about a situation or event.
- Step 2 – Critical Analysis that brings to bear the knowledge and experiences to analyze the event and applying it to develop new knowledge.
- Step 3 – Learning or the development of a new perspective based on the critical analysis of Step 2.

The literature also discusses the role journaling can play in formalizing the reflection process in learning. Asselin (2011) suggests that in a study of students in a RN-to-BSN program, structured reflection changed perspectives and practices of the students. Fisher (1996) found that journaling helps students make connections to experiences on their own terms.

Bourner (2003); Hubbs & Brand (2010); and Bright (1996) discuss the challenges of incorporating reflection into the classroom. For example, Bourner (2003) discusses how reflection has been characterized as part of the “unplanned” portion of learning and of being subjective. Commenting on a different issue, Hubbs & Brand (2010) discuss how journaling has been characterized as busy work if it is not done in meaningful way. Bright (1996) suggests that reflection can be problematic as a teaching methodology because it is based on uncertainty and unpredictability of student experiences.

A review of the literature emphasizes the role of reflective journaling on the individual level. However, there is also research suggesting that reflective journaling can impact organizational level learning. This is particularly important in the professional-type degree programs where, one can suggest, that there can be a direct impact on organizational performance through the journaling process. Sanzo et al., (2010) observed how a study of a school district leadership preparation program suggested both individual- and organizational- improvement through reflective journaling exercises. Senge (1994) also discusses the role reflection can play in organizational change and how reflection can help overcome what is referred to as mental models. Mental models are the defensive

mechanisms in individuals that prevent them from seeing the value of organizational change. Senge (1994) suggests that reflection can help an individual analyze an issue and overcome the mental model that prevented them from seeing the value of the change. Additionally, he discusses how reflection can improve one's vision of an organization and develop practices that are more aligned with its goals.

Despite the rich debate on the role reflective learning and journaling can have in higher education and its ability to be assessed, it is a logical tool for teaching to adult learners and can be easily set up despite unique individual student experiences.

**A model for assessing reflective thinking.** To better reflect the value that many perceive in reflective journaling, the literature suggests that an assessment tool should be developed that evaluates the experiential learning experience and its application to course learning objectives. A similar and second challenge would be to develop a model of assessment that could be applied to organizational learning. With such a tool, both planned and unplanned learning experiences could be evaluated to ensure course and organizational learning objectives are met.

Bourner (2003) suggests dividing reflective learning into two dimensions: Reflective Thinking and Reflective Learning. Reflective Learning addresses the reflection on the actual experience of the student. Reflective Thinking addresses critical thinking or evaluation of the experience. According to Bourner (2003), although the experience may have been unplanned, the analysis of the experience can be evaluated and assessed by adapting the concepts of critical thinking and applying them to reflective thinking.

Bourner's (2003) adaptation of critical thinking concepts to reflective thinking helps distinguish the difference between reflective thinking and reflective learning. In higher education, instructors are also concerned with whether course learning objectives are being met. Therefore, an evaluation should also be made to determine how the reflection supported an understanding of the course learning objectives. Through the use of reflective journaling, the application of the course learning objectives could be assessed.

By modifying the reflective thinking questions developed by Bourner (2003, p. 270), a model was developed that includes the assessment and evaluation of the student's understanding of an experience and how it could be applied to course learning objectives.

The questions to evaluate Reflective Thinking of the student on the course learning objectives could include:

1. What course learning objective(s) did you recognize from the experience?
2. How did you apply the learning objective(s) to the experience?
3. What did you learn about the learning objective(s) from the experience?

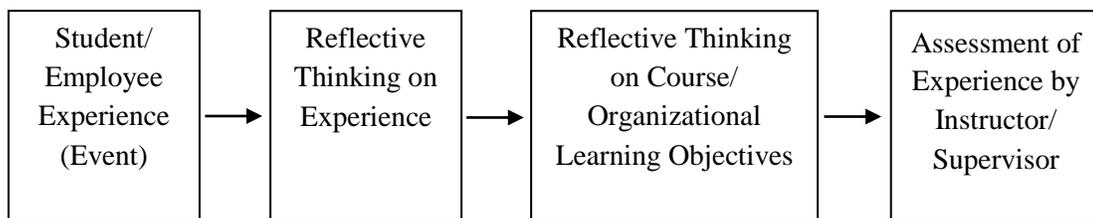
The questions to evaluate Reflective Learning of the student on the experience could include:

1. What does the experience suggest to you about your strengths?
2. What does the experience suggest to you about your opportunities for improvement?
3. How else could you view the experience from the course perspective?
4. What did you learn from the experience?
5. What might you do differently when faced with a similar experience?

Thus, Figure 1 describes the reflective learning model as modified from Bourner (2003) that includes an assessment of the experience and course learning objectives. In the model, the student experiences an event upon which she reflects. Using reflective thinking, the student responds to the questions for reflecting on the experience and learning objectives of the course. Finally, based on the student responses, the instructor can then assess the reflective thinking of the student, for both the student experience and learning objectives of the course. As a result, an assessment by the instructor can then be made on the student's understanding of the learning objective(s). Similarly, this could also be applied to an organizational-level reflection where an employee reflects on an experience and how the actions support organizational learning objectives.

**Figure 1**

**Reflective Thinking Assessment Model**



(adapted from Bourner, 2003)

**Examples of reflective journaling.** The assessment of the journaling suggests students successfully reflected on their experiences and on the learning outcomes of the course. For example, student comments included:

*What course learning objective(s) did you recognize from the experience?*

Student Reflection: “Identify grant and other funding resources available to community agencies and organizations.”

*How did you apply the learning objective(s) to the experience?*

Student Reflection: “Typically we think of grants as being offered by outside foundations and organizations. However, cities offer grants to those agencies providing programs and services... After having the opportunity **to learn and understand how revenue is brought into the**

**city and the resources that they then offer to outside programs and services, it has made me aware of the many opportunities that we have to receive funding...”**

*What did you learn about the learning objective(s) from the experience?*

Student Reflection: “Knowing that we can engage our own city in support of our organization was a great opportunity... **we had a separate grant writer apply for those funds... This gives us one more place that we can go to for funding resources for our organization.”**

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This commentary discussed the role reflective learning can have in assessing the understanding of course learning objectives through student experiences. One can suggest that it can be a valuable teaching practice in homeland security and emergency management programs where there is also a strong connection between experiential learning (practitioner experiences) and course learning objectives. The challenge in fully appreciating these practitioner experiences has been the assessment of the unplanned learning experiences of the student. A model that can evaluate the reflective thinking (Bourner, 2003) of the student experience and the application of course learning objectives can resolve this challenge. Through the use of reflective journaling and a model to assess reflective thinking, the student can reflect on an event they experienced and demonstrate an understanding of course learning objectives. As a result, the full learning experience can be evaluated and assessed.

Although this commentary primarily discussed the role of reflective learning on an individual level, there are implications on the organizational-learning level as well. Further research should be considered on how the Reflective Thinking Assessment Model could be applied to organizational-level learning and performance.

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