

## REFLECTION AS A LENS FOR A LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflection on my application of a methodology for learning and research I (first author) undertook for a Master in Professional Practice (MPP;Thompson 2017).

My research methodology is described as a hybrid of auto-ethnographic and qualitative. For me this means a reflective process provided a lens through which to view the research I was undertaking. It provided a bridge between a formal survey “project” and the work-based experience and reflection evidence that combine to form the basis for the findings and recommendations. In this way, a triangulation of the different sources of information provided a validation for each other.

The MPP is one of Capable NZ’s suite of Professional Practice post-graduate qualifications. It provides an integrated learning and research pathway for experienced practitioners. The goal is an advanced professional framework of practice, articulated in a “practitioner thesis” where the defensible argument is that professional framework of practice. The process starts with a review of learning that leads to stating the learner’s aspirational framework of practice (eg: “to become a thought leader in values driven software development”). This is paired with an organisational practice goal (for example “to create a culture of values driven software development”). The main work then becomes the professional development thread, interwoven through reflective practice to the work-based professional practice change (usually formally described as “autoethnographic action research”). Learners are supported by academic and professional mentors. The graduate profiles for both the MPP is written in terms of higher levels of thinking in a post-disciplinary sense, rather than for specific disciplines.

As the MPP is future focused and is not guided by any particular disciplines’ extant body of knowledge, learners are required to create new research, employing an autoethnographic approach to research (Otago Polytechnic 2017). Autoethnography is an established research method based on the researcher engaging in “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). Autoethnographies are increasingly being seen as a valuable learning and teaching tool (Golkowska 2015). Autoethnography allows learners to collect, analyse and interpret self-narratives and this approach “provides an accessible and engaging introduction to research, since it fuses the roles of the researcher and subject into one” (Golkowska 2015. p. 369).

Within the framing of autoethnography, the methodology of undertaking the practice development project must suit the context. Hence the reflective-based practices of autoethnography act as a shell for the specific work-based research methods. In this case, the framing can be considered as a series of nested processes as demonstrated below:

## Development of Andy as Leader

### Development of Learning and Leading Model

Qualitative survey of learners on outdoor leadership programme.

This means a matryoshka doll approach to research but with different research methods in each layer. These layers are, of course, not independent, and work-based learning has to deal with the vagaries and complexities of the work environment, so there must be a “relative pragmatism” (Portwood 2007) to the research methodology.

In the remainder of this paper we examine three examples of how this nested research process worked in practice. Some background on my journey and research questions are given for context. This paper doesn't present detailed survey/interview methodology or overall results of this research but rather focusses on the relationship between the qualitative and ethnographic approaches.

### WHO IS ANDY?

Because the MPP is about the development and articulation of a personal professional framework of practice, the perspective of the learner/researcher is paramount. Hence the practitioner thesis includes a substantial personal self-reflection and review of learning. I summarise this here to give context for the reflective aspects of the case studies that follow.

I have worked in the outdoor education industry since 1987. In this time, I have completed my Post Graduate Diploma in Outdoor Education. I hold New Zealand Outdoor Instructors Association (N.Z.O.I.A.) qualifications at level 2 in Alpine, Rock, White Water Kayak, Sea Kayak, and Bush and assess at a national level. I have chaired two national qualification and tourism associations and contributed to varied tertiary groups for a targeted review of qualifications and internal committees. I presently work for the Otago Polytechnic as a Principal Lecturer; Programme Coordinator; Outdoor Education Facilitator; running a two-year Diploma in Outdoor Leadership and Management (DOLM), Level 5. I am involved with developing leadership programmes for the Otago Polytechnic and sit as a staff representative on the Leadership Council.

What interests me is being able to develop people's emotional and cultural intelligence, their personal resilience and helping people grow their potential. I believe this is a vital part of leadership development. I continually reflect on my teaching career and reflect my effectiveness and the validity of leadership training. Often throughout this time, there are days where reflection and analysis of performance are completed. However, moreover, it is forced when you have not done very well. When your day has been fantastic, a sigh of relief exhales, and you move on. I am interested in how we prepare learners for future authentic leadership that enables them to make decisions based on values and ethics that benefits the greater good, especially when their days do not always go so well or suffer the 'school of knocks'.

What attracted me to study via the MPP was the professional practice study. Work-based study suited me as fundamentally I wanted to challenge myself not only with my teaching and education background, but I also wanted to gain a deeper understanding of my teaching pedagogy.

### WHAT WAS MY PROJECT?

While not the focus of this paper, it is useful to understand the context for this research. The MPP research endeavoured to investigate what works for the learner's personal leadership development in a tertiary education setting. I wanted to explore the application of leadership skills learned within leadership training into participants' professional and personal lives. The purpose of the study was to comprehend a learner's perspective on leadership

training. Also the influence and effectiveness of leadership training and create or enhance a framework which facilitators could use to aid participants in transferring the leadership learning. As a facilitator, I also hoped to inform my facilitation of personal leadership training to improve its effectiveness at Otago Polytechnic.

Personal leadership development occurs in an array of complex and intricate ways and what works for learners is not a 'one size fits all' answer. Leadership evolution is moving fast, and if humans are to co-exist in this world, we need to emerge our thinking to keep up the nuances of leadership in the 21st century. To be a great leader, it takes a constant consciousness of developing emotional and cultural intelligence within the confines of the surrounding social structures (Van Heerden 2010, Fredrickson 2013, Sinek 2014).

Leadership research is wide ranging. Personal leadership development is one aspect and has been around since humans first existed, and indigenous cultures have continually found leadership styles to suit their cultures (Sveiby, 2009). However, there is little research starting the initial view from a learner's perspective, asking what works for learners? Then considering what synergies, key components and relationships between facilitator and learner at a tertiary level are key to successful personal leadership development.

This research provided scope to explore a perspective from the learner and enabled me to listen to what the learners saw as the key things of leadership, what worked to help them explore this topic and how they utilised their learning into their personal and professional lives.

## CASE STUDIES

The goal of the MPP research, then, was to investigate personal leadership development from a learner's perspective and looks at a model that will help both facilitator and learner in their leadership relationships. The methodology capitalises on the intellectual capital as a professional outdoor facilitator, instructor and guide (Costley, 2001) by applying the principles of work-based learning.

In the following sections we present and discuss three case studies that illustrate the relationship between the survey and the reflection. The research was approved by Otago Polytechnic Ethics Committee with consent for use of quotes in the thesis and subsequent publications. Individuals' names are not real.

### CASE STUDY I

In this first case study we present a section from the practitioner thesis that considers preconceived leadership perspectives.

During the interviews, the participants discussed what they had done before coming onto the leadership training programmes. The participants identified and acknowledged that they came with some level of preconceived ideas about leadership. For example, Katrina says,

*"I googled, and I read about leadership but what I was understanding was not true or not what I thought after the course".*

Another participant, John suggested,

*"I used to think of leadership as being, ... the top dog and loud and ... the assertive leader. But I definitely learned that there's- ... different leadership styles..."*

Katrina goes on to discuss how her preconceived ideas of leadership have now shifted towards a more contemporary style of leadership. These preconceived ideas were about job title and hierarchy, but she has now discarded these. She states:

*"prior to the programme I thought it was a job title and it was about authority... but after I finished the program ... that is completely wrong that there is no such thing like authority there is no such thing as like hierarchy if you are talking about true leadership these things don't even really come into play".*

True leadership, from what Katrina discusses is about being on a level playing field between people, where there is little or no hierarchy with the system.

### **Reflection**

Observation and reflections suggest that there is still a predominant culture of people who believe in a more hierarchal style of leadership. Someone who predominantly leads from the front can create a higher perceptual status and can promote a higher level of knowledge than others in the group. Instructing and guiding in an outdoor environment often demands the guide or instructor be in this situation, where he/she may have to lead from the front. Also, they may often have the greater experience and knowledge about the particular subject area. Comments from Katrina and John's preconceived ideas on leadership provide evidence throughout the data.

This ideology of the Great Man leadership theory may create a culture where the learners are looking towards that particular person to be the fountain of knowledge and lead from the front at all times. Over the years of teaching in this field, through reflections, it has been my observation that the DOLM and Leading Frontiers programme has become about empowering learners to take responsibility and become leaders within a team. This process takes time, as they build their experience references, and discover how to become leaders within a team and not rely on just one person to lead yet also understand their own social structures and emotions.

My reflective notes and feedback data from both leadership programmes constantly refer to the learner's perspectives and what they observe of the people in these roles. Reflective data suggests this is a challenging and daunting responsibility to have for facilitators. It always astounds me how facilitators, instructors, and guides are observed by learners. Even when not fully engaged with the learners, and facilitators are in the background. Like a celebrity without the monetary wealth, fame, or ego the facilitator must remain humble and grounded, to understand themselves, be self-aware and have a good understanding of their values. It is important to be able to demonstrate these on a daily basis. The level of emotional intelligence a facilitator must have, and role modelling is ongoing.

## **CASE STUDY 2**

The impact of role models and transitions are considered in this second case study.

The facilitator plays an important part for the learner as a role model. The participant's responses suggest that the facilitator's teaching style can have a big effect on how the learners learn. It is evident by Diego's conversation when asked what effect the facilitators made in his learning experiences,

*"...watching the coordinators and lecturers running the course and how they are a lot of the time being leaders, but step back leaders. ....the biggest learning curve, leadership for me is watching ... people who are teaching at a place at the highest level of leadership, being leaders without you realising that they are being leaders".*

*"...practicing watching the instructors, cos they are, you know your role models and just watching their technique and just thinking ah, they do it like that, I'll try that next time and just tips and stories from instructors from their life experiences like the stories that they can pass on where they may have been doing something wrong and they learn the hard way and had a nasty experience..."*

Participants described transition of perspectives from training to professional or personal life. The participants suggested that there are many types of leadership styles outdoor education facilitators use to present leadership training. Often this is synthesised over a period, as they develop their experiences and discover what suits them. Fred acknowledges the range of styles an organisation needs by his comments,

*"Recognising that we have different leadership capabilities, skills and styles, ... relative to need, time and context, and recognising also, and that impacts on me, ... We need leadership across a raft of areas....Recognising that about myself changed the way I behaved in my management role... emotional intelligence I think it's fundamentally sprung out of empathy for me, understanding, respect".*

Robin talks about her leadership skills transitioning into her personal life and compares this with her work environment,

*"where's [my husband's] strengths [are] in other areas with Henry [her son] that I don't necessarily have. ...so he takes the leadership on those things and so together as a team everything is running really smoothly. Sometimes I have to give him a bit on an elbow, but that's ok. And that is the same in a work environment".*

## Reflection

My reflective notes and feedback data from both leadership programmes constantly refer to the learner's perspectives and what they observe of the people in these roles. Reflective data suggests this is a challenging and daunting responsibility to have for facilitators. It always astounds me how facilitators, instructors, and guides are observed by learners. Even when not fully engaged with the learners, and facilitators are in the background. Like a celebrity without the monetary wealth, fame, or ego the facilitator must remain humble and grounded, to understand themselves, be self-aware and have a good understanding of their values. It is important to be able to demonstrate these on a daily basis. The level of emotional intelligence a facilitator must have, and role modelling is ongoing.

It has been my observations that as time progresses and leadership training becomes a memory, graduates experience recall filtered on how they perceive role models. Specific detailed encountered learning's, reflections and particularly emotional reactions evolve, and they tend to remember either the best or worst bits, which have been a significant part of that training. Also, there are particular times that resonate with whom they see as their role models more than others. Just when these occasions occur tend to depend on what state of mind, and what emotional triggers or memory hooks that are at play at the time (Beard & Wilson, 2006). For example, often the time spent away allows people to get to know each other better. When waking up in the morning, there is a rawness about sharing a living space with your peers or colleagues that day programmes cannot provide. This intense living can show the true colours of role models and how they truly live their values.

From my observations, having being involved in outdoor education since 1988 as either a learner, facilitator/ instructor or guide role, these complex interactions require conscious effort from both sides – after all, it is about 'relationships'! Understanding the power plays between teacher–learner is critical for a facilitator. I have experienced this variation on many occasions. The spectrum from feeling safe to feeling very guarded in being able to express opinions and thoughts that would or would not contribute, and would or would not help to learn development. This power differential can go either way. For example, an abseil session, and encouraging a person over the edge, when they are terrified. This relationship steps into a 'grey zone' where it can go extremely well or significantly poor. Another example is in kayaking when a person is terrified about capsizing. In my reflection, I had had clients commenting on bad experiences they had at school, where they were not given appropriate progressions and felt trapped when they went upside down.

### CASE STUDY 3

In this third case study we present a section from the practitioner thesis that considers the role of challenge and Building Psychological Resilience.

Katrina observed from her learning's,

*"you pushed us in a way that forced us, like not forced us, but guided us to maybe challenge ourselves ...."*

It is evident that the power of the instructor/facilitator or guide plays a significant role to affect the learner's direct long-term outcome. Moreover, the ability to keep facilitation at level with the learner is important for a learner's development. The following comment from Fred emphasises how important the relationship between teacher – learner is to learners,

*"Reading learner' needs [is] really good understanding of how to read people and what works for them. Uh so I think that, I think that they are all really good at [it] and the same for yourself".*

To allow learners to flourish and feel like they can explore new boundaries the data from interviews indicates the importance of creating a safe culture. The importance of an open, respectful, honest relationship was key for Fred as he said,

*"I think the facilitation was very respectful, very open and very encouraging and very comfortable so I felt safe. ... Feeling secure and safe is actually an important part of any facilitation".*

Fred also goes on to comment that,

*"...what it helped me to do was actually be open in front of a bunch of people who would then respond and say no actually you're full of shit." "... It was very open and everyone was free to speak..."*

However, when the facilitator(s) are not working so well this also can have a negative impact on the learner: Katrina notes that,

*"I think that there was a little bit disconnect ... I can't 100% explain how or what was that but there was a little bit disconnect..."*

The relationships importance is emphasized from Sierra's comment, "I think by not having a friendship with the instructor, could put a barrier up...". Moreover, John points out that the relationships between people on the training programme play an important part on learning by saying, "it was the people that I met, it was the group of people that I was with for sure, that had the biggest impact".

It was evident from the data analysis that the relationship development between people on the programme is critical to a successful outcome. People on course were people they would work with in the future, develop potential long lasting friendships and be able to learn from in the future. John also said,

*"We got really close and they were the ones... We'd be going out on trips with and we'd be, you know, getting to know them as well as like, you guys, as our instructors, you know we were learning lot from you guys. Everything that was learning was you know filtered through you guys so for me that was a really big part, was the people that I was around...It's important to be amongst good people, because you become your environment".*

There were many references to the importance of peer/facilitator programme relationships. In fact, it could either make or break a programme, where a connected culture between peers was critical for many elements of sharing ideas thus creating an environment so learners felt safe to explore their ideas.

## Reflection

**On Pushing the Personal Edge:** The programme pushes people, and my reflective observations mirror this comment. When learners have been facilitated to push to their edge, although initially, they may struggle, complain or grizzle, if facilitated well the results can be astounding for personal growth.

**Hierarchical leadership:** In my reflections, operating and training in a group of people and being faced with making leadership decisions can be a leveller for people who may value hierarchical leadership styles or perceive leadership should be run from the front, and by one person. I have observed that leadership training that encourages self-leading teams and high performing teams, this type of training can deep end learners that value the hierarchical leadership structures. They can often flounder, get frustrated and lack the understanding of how to operate. I have observed most people eventually make a shift in their perceptions once they have the time to reflect and understand the rationale of contemporary leadership. Ultimately they also need to gain the intrinsic motivation to change their lens on leadership. On reflection, it is important for a facilitator to develop an awareness of participant's mindset on leadership as this may or may not influence the outcome of their training.

**Power:** From my observations, having being involved in outdoor education since 1988 as either a learner, facilitator/instructor or guide role, these complex interactions require conscious effort from both sides – after all, it is about 'relationships!' Understanding the power plays between teacher–learner is critical for a facilitator. I have experienced this variation on many occasions. The spectrum from feeling safe to feeling very guarded in being able to express opinions and thoughts that would or would not contribute, and would or would not help to learn development. This power differential can go either way. For example, an abseil session, and encouraging a person over the edge, when they are terrified. This relationship steps into a 'grey zone' where it can go extremely well or significantly poor. Another example is in kayaking when a person is terrified about capsizing. In my reflection, I had had clients commenting on bad experiences they had at school, where they were not given appropriate progressions and felt trapped when they went upside down.

**Teaching Styles:** Everybody who teaches in education will develop their teaching style. From observations of other educators, they had their styles that I have taken learning from and noted as styles that may resonate with me. This learning and collection of data can be subtle or pronounced.

**Professional Delivery:** I note fronting up for a programme no matter how you feel, you must deliver consistently and professionally. The power of observation from learners is strong. There are times when life gets on top of a facilitator, and it is tough to provide a front that does not show the strains of life.

**On Programme:** It is at the coal-face where the interactions occur between facilitation and learner and from my observations it is a critical time for this relationship to flourish. It can have a massive impact as to the success or level of learning for future outcomes.

As each of these case studies demonstrate, this integrated method allowed me to think about what the students said and to relate this to my own experience and practice.

## DISCUSSION

The case studies and reflection on practice were used to develop a model of Facilitator/Learner Leadership Development Model. This model is not discussed here, but it has been put into practice. These models could help future practitioners with their programme development and implementation so as to better serve learners undertaking outdoor/leadership training. Of note is that the integration of reflective material continued in the exploration of that model.

Upholding your professional time management is important in any employment situation, however, imposing that onto learners is another matter. The key though is to ask, as an educator, why am I doing this? Is this effective teaching?

During my MProfPrac journey, I developed the ability to demand a high level of punctuality from my learners, albeit blended with more empathy. Blending an empathetic ear with the intent to understand why a learner may be late to class, that is, just taking the time to listen to them, is part of a facilitator's responsibility to understanding a learner's journey. As simple as it may sound, when you are attempting to deliver a professional programme and wanting to instil high levels of time management, it is challenging to have learners arrive late. I still hear educators rave on about time management, which I now gasp at (in my mind) as to how incoherent and aggressive it sounds. It sounds angry towards learners and I believe can provoke a parent/child punitive relationship. The result is the learner turns off, only listens to what they need to and there is a degradation of genuine educational relationships between the facilitator and learner.

Learning junctures are the gold! They are the place where both learners and facilitators make adjustments to what they know, where they wrestle with conflicting interpretations, and where they draw selectively on previous experiences to deal with the uniqueness of the present situation (Brown, 2010)

In addition to practice implications, the research moved the frontier of knowledge in that it contributed knowledge and was able to be used to make recommendations for future research. Suggestions for future research include longitudinal study of learner experiences and factors associated with effective and ineffective leadership training.

In my thesis I described areas of limitations of the research - this is usual practice, to put bounds on the generalisability of the findings. These included the length and scope of the research, and my connections with the participants - that I had previously taught them on the programme in question. However, on reflection I now wonder if I was being too harsh on myself. In describing the research as being "conducted over a short term" I excluded my 30 years of experience as contributing evidence. Similarly, where I described the research as being "not a purist scientific study", rather being qualitative, I neglected the importance and validity of my own reflections. I hope that the current paper will provide an example to future MPP learners as to the value and validity of this blended approach.

This statement, from my thesis conclusion, while mentioning "considering" is unfortunately missing the critical role of learning from my own experience via reflection as informing that consideration:

*"This study was about finding out what works for learners. It was about listening to the learner's voice and considering how this may better inform the researcher to develop a facilitator framework model for leadership development".*

My thesis integrated findings from the qualitative study with my reflections in a semi-integrated fashion. As the case study examples show, results from surveys and interviews were arranged thematically with each area includes a reflective piece where I explored how those findings aligned with my experience, how they together contribute to the emerging model of practice, and in some cases how I had already changed my practice as a consequence. While this structure worked for me, it would be useful for future MPP learners to explore alternative structures - perhaps a deeper integration, or maybe parallel stories in two columns or by some hyperlinked structure.

I learnt to write down my reflections from very early on in my journey. Throughout my study, I have made personal scribbles that have sprung from these conversations with my facilitator to conversations with colleagues on programme issues and how they incorporate leadership into their professional work. Key comments that strike me are: Is outdoor educational leadership training developing leaders for a sustainable future? Alternatively, is it creating authentic leaders? Is there an emergent new leadership style forming to fashion an old style out? Through my MPP journey, I have considered these musings and I feel, as a community, we are making progress in educating learners on authentic leadership, however slowly! I see so much more room for improved education on sustainable leadership. I am more determined than ever to bring these challenging questions into my practice to challenge my learners and myself as to the deeper meaning of these questions.

The journey of my MPP was one of me becoming a reflexive practitioner. Where I might have previously carried out an activity with learners and later reflected upon it. During the process of the MPP, as modelled by the integration of the reflection into the qualitative results, I now consider that I am always reflecting. I am now aware of how the minutiae of practice going on around me is the basis for conscious opportunities for improvements in practice.

Raelin (2008) highlighted the significant potential for work-based learning programmes such as the MPP to use reflection in order to build theory in practice. Raelin suggested that reflective practice extends such learning beyond the individual to the collective, and highlights reflective practice as a key mechanism for learning and knowledge production. This is supported by Siebert and Costley (2013), who also believe that the provision of a framework that enables a learner to utilise reflective practice, helps learners to make sense of their experiences, which in turn allows them to learn from their experiences.

In conclusion, this paper has provided an example of how reflective practice aids learners in developing their knowledge and skills, enables them to build confidence, and guides them in planning and implementing their personal, academic, and professional development. The paper has offered an example of the integration of reflection with another methodology - in this case qualitative surveys and interviews - to generate a solid whole.

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