

Guided Reflection in Business Education: An Example from Leadership Development

Shali Wu

Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea

Introduction

Business education often employs a far broader spectrum of pedagogical techniques than other academic disciplines. In addition to conventional reliance on textbook summaries, selected research publications, and formal class discussion (sometime conducted using the Socratic method), business students also benefit from reviews of case studies, group projects, and extensive use of guest speakers. Broadly speaking, these last three components are intended to offer deeper, more concrete insights into the nature and challenges of the real business world (e.g., Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Ferreira, Keliher, & Blomfield, 2013; Kori, Mäeots, & Pedaste, 2014).

Despite the existing diversity of instructional methods, little attention typically is paid to the personal experiences of students that are not directly associated with employment in the commercial world. This is somewhat surprising, given the close connection between various business disciplines (e.g., organizational behavior, leadership, and marketing) and the field of human psychology.

Naturally, every student carries within himself/herself a vast collection of raw, experiential knowledge based on significant life events, decisions, and actions. These may be accessed and

explored in the pursuit of an enhanced understanding of one's abilities and accumulated wisdom. In the present article, we propose and explore one specific approach to exploiting this internal resource: *guided reflection*.

For the purposes at hand, we will define "guided reflection" to mean the contemplation of subjective experiences and thought processes directed by an external, pedagogically useful, prompt, which is immediately followed by written exposition of the memories, insights, and analyses generated by this process. We believe that, through guided reflection, students can draw important lessons from their reservoir of personal experiences (Freeman et al., 2014). This is accomplished by first exploring the nature of past decisions and actions, as well as previous (albeit) informal assessments of those activities, and subsequently reassessing the prior decisions and actions in an effort to understand the assessment process itself. In this way, students are able to synthesize new insights and knowledge for future personal benefit, as well as for sharing with fellow students and colleagues (Kang, 2016; Prince, 2004).

Reflection Exercises

During the period from September to December 2021, the author participated in an online leadership course taught by Prof. Linda Ginzel from Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago. Although not specifically described as such, guided reflection constituted a central component of the course's pedagogical approach (Cerni, 2015). Participation in this class not only afforded the opportunity to observe the benefits of guided reflection, but also to access raw material for evaluating which aspects of the technique are easily implemented, and which require more attention and planning.

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Corresponding author: Shali Wu

School of Business, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyunghedaero, Dongdaemungu, Seoul 02447, Korea

Tel: +82-10-2528-4661, E-mail: Shali.wu@khu.ac.kr

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Over a series of 12 weeks, students were asked to reflect on a number of prompts, briefly summarized by the following questions:

- What is your earliest recollection of a personal leadership experience?
- What is your most recent leadership experience?
- What is the significance of your “top-three” character strengths (as identified by the VIA character-assessment instrument)?
- What are the important differences between your earliest and most recent leadership experiences?
- What events in your life have had the greatest impact on your personal development?
- What is your most important core belief?
- How would you define “leadership”?
- What is the best advice you ever have received?
- What is your definition of “success”?

This paper offers excerpts of short essays written by the author in response to the above nine questions in the Appendix. This material provides both general context and specific illustrations for the subsequent discussion section.

Discussion

Based on participation in the online leadership course described in previous section, we believe that guided reflection, as a formal educational tool, offers tremendous potential for enhancing the classroom experience, including business practice and education. To encourage further understanding, discussion, and ultimately wider adoption of this technique, we will make a few observations regarding its successful implementation.

On the whole, the technique of “guided reflection” appears most popular in two academic fields: (1) education (to assist learning by deepening understanding and reinforcing complex ideas in the classroom); and (2) clinical medical practice (for helping health professionals plan and evaluate complex interventions). Adding this method to business education is not only legitimate but also will prove to be beneficial (Rogers, 2001; Wagner, 2016).

Thejll-Madsen (2018) provided an overview of reflection being used in multiple professional and educational settings ranging from nursing, medicine, engineering, social sciences, and sport sciences to teaching. Within all of these fields people report benefits from reflection (Chretien, Chheda, Torre, & Papp, 2012; Cunningham & Moore, 2014; Ferreira et al., 2013; Roberts & Faull 2013). People find they realise why they work in that particular field, find ways of improving practice, increase job satisfaction, learn from mistakes as well as being less afraid

of making them. The literature on reflection is growing and there are many reported benefits.

One central challenge in using guided reflection is the selection and sequencing of pedagogical prompts to facilitate effective thinking and written exposition on the part of students. Given the experience of responding to the prompts of Reflection Exercise section, we have concluded that the specific content and phrasing of prompts is less important in generating effective responses than might be expected. This is primarily because these prompts are, by their very nature, broad statements intended to apply to a large number of students with disparate personal histories, each of whom is likely to interpret the topic somewhat differently. Instead, what is most important is the sequencing of subject matter to guide students through four fundamental steps in the learning process:

- (1) Event/Action/Decision Recall (ER) – Recollection of prior factual events and related decisions and actions.
- (2) Assessment Recall (AR) – Recollection of previous assessments of the decisions and actions associated with item (1).
- (3) Current Reassessment (CR) – Present-day assessment of the decisions and actions of item (1) in light of subsequent events and learning.
- (4) Examination of Updating (EU) – Present-day analysis of the assessment-updating process implied by differences between the assessments of item (2) and (3), respectively.

The following Table 1 provides the author’s subjective assignment of each prompt from the online leadership course to one or more of the indicated categories. Although the table shows that the topics selected in the online leadership course proceeded in a manner progressing naturally through the four steps above, it is fairly clear that more reflections could have been allocated to the final – and arguably most important – step: an analysis of the assessment-updating process.

Conclusion

In the present article, we have addressed the use of guided reflection – the contemplation of subjective experiences and thought processes directed by an external prompt, followed by written exposition – in business education, using leadership-development as an example. In particular, the author draws from her participation as a student in an online leadership course to explore the range of potential approaches and benefits offered by guided reflection as a pedagogical technique, offering excerpts from her own writing to provide both context and illustrations.

From the guided-reflection exercises presented in reflection

Table 1. Subjective assignment of each prompt from the online leadership course to four categories of fundamental steps in the learning process

Prompt	ER	AR	CR	EU
Earliest recollection of leadership	O	O		
Most recent leadership experience	O	O		
Top-three character strengths		O	O	
Differences between earliest and recent leadership experiences		O	O	
Life story	O	O	O	
A core belief		O	O	
Definition of leadership		O	O	
Best advice received	O	O	O	O
Definition of success		O	O	O

Note. ER, event/action/decision recall; AR, assessment recall; CR, current reassessment; EU, examination of updating.

exercises section, it can be seen that the selection and phrasing of specific external prompts is less important than arranging stimuli to guide students through four fundamental steps in the learning process: recall of prior factual events and related decisions and actions; recall of previous assessments of such decisions and actions; reassessment of prior decisions and actions in light of current knowledge; and examination of the assessment-updating process (Hammer & Berland 2014).

On the whole, we believe that business students possess a wealth of raw experiential knowledge, both from prior decisions and actions and previous assessments of such activities. Through guided reflection, students can access, refine, and apply this knowledge, ultimately sharing it with their fellow students and colleagues.

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Appendix

Excerpt 1. Sample for earliest recollection of leadership

My earliest leadership took place while I was in primary school. I was fairly good at studying, and so was appointed the student representative for learning, a major student-leader role in China. I took this job seriously, and asked the students who were not so good at learning to study harder and do better. In this way, I thought I was doing a good job.

By the end of the year, the school had to elect the best student representative, and the teachers wanted to appoint me. To my surprise, however, some students stood up and said I was mean to them. I was very upset and frustrated, thinking their comments were unfair. I did try to help others in the class to be better, but they did not appreciate it. As a result, I remember thinking that being a leader is a waste of time.

In retrospect, I did not realize that to be a good leader, one has to inspire and encourage others to do their best. Without this understanding, I subsequently turned down several student-leadership roles over the years.

Excerpt 2. Sample for most recent leadership experience

I am a professor with two current Ph.D. students, two master's students, and an office assistant in a research university in Seoul, South Korea. I teach large classes (with approximately 50–60 students in each course), and have thought about my academic leadership role from time to time. As a female professor in Korea, where the society is highly male-dominant, I find my role quite challenging. Many of my students told me that my male counterparts can be extremely strict and demanding, which makes me wonder whether I should take the same approach to get the students to develop their potential.

Whatever the challenge, I often think about how to become a better professor/leader for my students. One of the things mentioned in the first class of [this] course was changing our behavior. That reminded me of a time while I was a graduate student at Chicago and my advisor invited some of us to his house for a gathering, making us feel like a family or team. In Korea, I have not done anything like that with my students because, although Asian culture emphasizes interdependency and group identity, it also is very hierarchical. Since professors enjoy particularly high social status, it is very rare for them to invite students into their homes.

Upon reflection, I decided to challenge this behavior because, from the perspective of the students – many of whom have not been able to see their family for a long time during the pandemic – a family-like gathering could bring us together and develop camaraderie. In short, I now am planning to make some changes and have scheduled a Thanksgiving dinner at my home for the graduate students.

This is my “most recent” leadership experience. I am excited that I gathered the courage to take this step, and believe it reflects my desire to become a more effective leader. Overall, I think it is more important for leaders to inspire than to direct. Great leaders do not simply want compliance, they want to elicit genuine enthusiasm, complete trust, and true dedication. I hope my efforts to create this home-gathering platform for my students to share, integrate, and communicate will help them develop a greater passion for research and academic life.

Excerpt 3. Sample for top-three character strengths

According to the VIA character assessment, my top-three character strengths are: perseverance, hope, and perspective. I am not sure I would like to rely too much on perseverance alone because it is a skill that requires both careful balance and judicious application. In particular, it is necessary to ask: When, and for how long, should I persist toward a certain objective?

Since perspective is another of my top-three strengths – and creativity one of my top five – I think the best approach is to combine these skills with perseverance, carefully considering which challenges are most worthwhile and how persistence can be deployed most effectively to overcome them. Like other resources, the time and emotional/creative energy needed to sustain long-term commitment are limited.

With regard to hope, I plan to write down my personal and professional plans more frequently, specifically identifying those items (e.g., personal-improvement tasks) that can benefit from a hopeful attitude. Like perspective and creativity, the presence of hope offers effective and sustaining support to perseverance. Therefore, it is important to employ these strengths simultaneously.

In terms of applications, I am now exploring specific ways to make better use of my strengths in both leadership roles and interpersonal relationships. Since I find personal relationships (with close friends, family members, and other loved ones) the most challenging, I suspect they will provide the greatest opportunity for improvements.

Excerpt 4. Sample for differences between earliest and recent leadership experiences

I found this question very incisive, and generated much thoughtful reflection on my part. In the past, I tended to believe leadership positions are appropriate only for those who seek power and influence. Now I see things differently, and believe the enduring value that emboldens me to step up and become a leader is the desire to promote and improve my “community”: at home, in the office, within my city and country, ... and even the world at large.

While pondering this week’s assignment, I read the terrible news about a deadly shooting near the University of Chicago campus. I was particularly unsettled by the number of communities I shared with the victim: enrollment at the University of Chicago, a connection with University of Hong Kong (HKU), the study of Statistics, and Chinese nationality. Although I immediately felt an obligation to say something to express my feelings – and perhaps even to demonstrate a form of leadership within one or more of the relevant communities – I was frustrated by having little more than my own sadness to share.

As much as I would like to support these communities, I feel limited by my inability to do anything about the problem of growing violence, and was reminded of the admonition (from our leadership book) that “bringing a problem without a solution is a complaint”. As a result, I chose to be silent for the moment, thinking “there’s a time for daring and there’s a time for caution”. Nevertheless, I have been thinking actively about ways to help my communities, especially those associated with the University of Chicago, to rebuild and regain confidence.

Returning to my more recent leadership experience (involving my role as a professor), I have concluded that the decision to do things somewhat differently this year (by inviting students to my home for Thanksgiving) was attributable to the enduring value of trying to promote and improve my university community. Since we often make such leadership decisions without much analysis or introspection, I believe a deeper awareness of our values and perspectives will make us even better leaders.

Excerpt 5. Sample for life story

From the ages of 2 to 6, I attended an elite boarding daycare school in Changsha, the Capital of China’s Hunan Province. At that school, I learned to be both intellectually and emotionally independent.

In primary school I often assumed – or was assigned – leading roles among my classmates. For example, I was both the student representative for studying and a lead dancer. Excelling in academic and leadership roles gave me confidence, but some of my peers felt I was excessively bossy and arrogant. (This is something I discussed previously in reflecting on my earliest leadership role.)

For middle and high school, I attended a prestigious institution whose faculty consisted of Yale University graduates. At this school, I was part of a competitive and specialized program to prepare for the Mathematics Olympiad, and this focus shaped much of my thinking and personal ambition as a teenager. When I ultimately did not win an Olympiad medal, I was greatly discouraged, and had to rebuild my confidence.

From 2000 to 2010, I studied statistics, business, and psychology at the University of Chicago. Integrating the various programs’ distinct research content and pedagogical style greatly influenced the way I think, believe, and behave. I often find this multidisciplinary perspective helpful in working with colleagues from different backgrounds.

From 2010 onward, I lived in Asia: Beijing, Seoul, and Hong Kong. The shifts from Asia to America and back led me to study cross-cultural differences in my scholarly research and to evaluate the impact of Eastern and Western cultures on my personal life and decision making.

Excerpt 6. Sample for a core belief

I believe in “balance”. As a Chinese-American in South Korea, I live in an apartment complex built by the government in 2009 to host foreign experts. As one of the longest-term residents (since 2010), I always considered our complex quiet, modern, and interesting. Oddly, I never really thought much about the community’s cultural characteristics (e.g., whether it is more Korean, Chinese, American, etc.).

Last week, when my alarm reminded me to go swimming, I rushed to the elevator and encountered a colorful advertisement selling furniture. Since the elevator bulletin boards usually are restricted to management-team notifications, I quickly dialed the phone number to save it in my phone. By the time I arrived at the swimming pool, my phone rang, and I answered it. The caller immediately introduced himself and apologized for posting the ad in the elevator, explaining that he would have needed to go through too many layers of bureaucracy to distribute the information officially. This amused me because it made me think about our community’s rules, social expectations, and overall “culture”. The caller also told me to stop by his apartment any time that was convenient, since he and his partner were leaving the country. As I returned from swimming, I noticed the furniture ad already was gone (apparently in keeping with management practices).

That evening, I visited the furniture-sellers’ apartment with my daughter, and found that the couple had lived in Korea for some years, but recently decided to leave (apparently for good). The man and woman originally were from the Netherlands, and expressed frustration at not being able to make friends in Korea. As they showed us photographs of their wonderful outings in the country, it was apparent that the absence of friendship was not for lack of effort. The Dutch couple’s comments set me thinking about cross-cultural relationships in Korean society. The country has been open to the West for many years, and has attracted many foreign residents. On the other hand, it certainly does appear difficult for foreigners to integrate with the local people. So what is the cause?

Naturally, I am aware that many foreigners would criticize my home country (China) for not welcoming outsiders; and Chinese society certainly has been inward-looking at various times in its history. Although the country now believes it can be stronger by being more open to the outside world, it also recognizes the vulnerabilities that arise from such openness – and is particularly concerned about the hostility and violence that often arises in Western nations [e.g., with regard to government efforts to combat coronavirus disease (COVID-19)].

From this perspective, I believe strongly in maintaining a balance between a country’s cultural traditions and the introduction of new, outside ideas (especially from the spheres of politics, media, and popular culture). Although such a cautious approach may not seem to connote boldness or bravery on the surface, advocating it in discussions with Westerners often requires exactly those characteristics. Perhaps China, Korea, and other Eastern societies can find a way to achieve this balance while still opening ourselves more often to intimate friendships with those from different backgrounds. With regard to my earlier reflections on how to be a better professor (or professional leader in general), I also believe that striking a balance between kindness and rigidity is likely to achieve the best outcomes in leading and motivating students.

Excerpt 7. Sample for definition of leadership

Thanksgiving has passed, and I succeeded in making a major change in my leadership role as a professor. On Friday, I held a gathering of students at my home despite the elevated number of COVID cases in South Korea (over 4000). Overall, the preparation for Friday’s event was not easy, and I felt stressed because I had not organized anything similar before. The resurgence of COVID – which was of concern to both the students and myself – made things even more challenging. In fact, when one or two students indicated a reluctance to attend the meeting, I almost decided to call it off. Nevertheless, I persisted because I believed that enhancing my relationship with the students was worth the additional precautions necessary to minimize the risk of infection.

Looking back on the gathering, I am very pleased it took place, and believe it was worth the necessary efforts. Not only did the students enjoy it, but we clearly became closer to one another as a result. In this context, it is easy to recognize the “three stages of change”: (1) unfreezing (addressed in my earlier draft describing recent leadership experiences); (2) the change itself (carried out via the Thanksgiving gathering); and (3) refreezing (continuing, and becoming more comfortable with, future gatherings).

In light of my recent activities and reflections, my current definition of leadership is: “To be bold in making positive changes, even if they appear to run counter to personal and institutional norms.”

Excerpt 8. Sample for best advice received

I have received much advice over the years that I found quite beneficial. Most recently, the dictum, “If you don’t write it down, it doesn’t exist” – from our leadership course – stands out as particularly useful. I also like another maxim I often tell my class, “Fail to plan, plan to fail”, which reminds us how critical it is to develop goals, objectives, and the specific pathways to achieve them.

If I really must identify one piece of advice as “best”, I would say it is the phrase, “From A to C”. I learned this recently from a life-long friend, Michelle, who was my roommate at the University of Chicago. Last week, she and I made the time to talk to each other, and I took the opportunity to share some of my current stresses (including preparing for this week’s assignment). When I mentioned the topic of “best advice”, she told me what immediately came to her mind was “From A to C”. Given the rather brief and cryptic nature of this advice, I asked her to elaborate.

Both Michelle and I grew up in China and met at the University of Chicago. We clearly were very good students – what some people might describe as “A students”. Michelle explained that “From A to C” does not mean “shifting from being an A student to a C student”, but rather “changing one’s focus from A grades to the C-suite” (that is, the orientation of “chief”-level executives in a professional organization).

I found this quite interesting because both Michelle and I, as students growing up in East Asia’s competitive environment, often felt it most important to be a good student. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with seeking academic excellence and accomplishments, but life extends well beyond school. If we can “think out of the box” or “move out of our comfort zone” sufficiently to appreciate and address broader C-suite-like concerns – rather than simply being smart and accurate in our tasks – then we are more likely to take the initiative and succeed in achieving our most significant dreams and ambitions.

To link this insight to my leadership reflection, I would like to use it in nourishing my students, helping them to devote their full energy and enthusiasm to something they love. Although “Fail to plan, plan to fail” remains sound advice, I believe “From A to C” imparts a more positive and ambitious perspective on life.

Excerpt 9. Sample for definition of success

I used to define success primarily in terms of winning competitions. That appears to have been helpful when I was young and motivated by competition to learn things. Indeed, I learned much and won many contests. However, this orientation had one major drawback: if there were no available competition or ranking, then I found little interest in academic study, music, dance, etc.

In fact, I remember an equally “successful” girl in college once confided to me that she wished there were fewer competitions so she could learn more without artificially imposed pressures, and my response was simply: “Are you kidding me? If there weren’t any competitions or rankings, I wouldn’t want to learn anything!” Over the years, I slowly began to realize that personal achievement, formalized by winning contests, is not the most important thing in my life. Helping others succeed – whether in formal competitions or less measurable contexts – provides higher levels of gratification.

As a professor, I enjoy seeing my students do well; and as a citizen, I want my community to do well. Although it may sound somewhat trite, I truly want a better life for everyone. Overcoming selfishness and self-centeredness can be a challenging journey. In many ways, it is non-intuitive; and an effective balance between personal success and community success is difficult to find and sustain, with social norms varying significantly by culture. Nevertheless, we are helped in developing our empathy by observing the various tragedies in the world at large: COVID, violence, injustice, etc.

Ironically, the results from last week’s Thomas Kilmann conflict mode measurement reveal that I remain high on competing and low on collaborating. I reflected on this because it really surprised me (having thought, as discussed above, that I had become much less competitive). Obviously, this outcome provides evidence that I have more work to do in reorienting myself toward the needs of others, ... at least intellectually and/or emotionally, if not in actual practice.