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Using Assessment to Trigger Transformational Learning in Leadership Development.

Abstract

The business environment is changing rapidly and in many different ways. Globalisation, information technology, the internet, issues of social responsibility are all impacting on the knowledge and skills required by today's business leaders. MBA programs are expected to assist current and aspiring business managers and leaders to respond effectively to all these challenges.

One of the electives units within the MBA program at the Brisbane Graduate School of Business, Leadership II, focuses on individual leadership development, challenging students to see themselves as the most significant factor in their own success as leaders. The unit requires critical reflection of individual characteristics and beliefs.

In Leadership II, students are required to reflect critically on this process and the impact of their discoveries on their ability to lead. The assessment items within this course play a critical role in facilitating the process. The assessment moves beyond a measurement of learning to being an integral part of the learning process.

This paper describes the processes used and the evaluation of these processes by the students, and their perception of the role of assessment within the course.

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Using Assessment to Trigger Transformational Learning in Leadership Development.

Introduction

The business environment is changing rapidly and in many different ways. Globalisation, information technology and issues of social responsibility are all impacting on the knowledge and skills required by today's business leaders. MBA programs are expected to assist current and aspiring business managers and leaders to respond effectively to all these challenges. In response to these challenges, Leadership is a core unit within the MBA at the Brisbane Graduate School of Business.

One of the electives units within the MBA program at the Brisbane Graduate School of Business, Leadership II, focuses on individual leadership development, challenging students to see themselves as the most significant factor in their own success as leaders. The unit requires critical reflection of individual characteristics and beliefs and is heuristic in its approach.

Leadership II builds on both the theory and processes addressed in the core unit, Leadership I. In Leadership 1 learners are introduced to a number of theories of leadership and are required to use one or more of these theories to analyse a real life leader. They have therefore been introduced to a cognitive understanding of leadership and have developed analytical skills. Leadership I is a prerequisite for Leadership II.

Leadership II is a 6 credit point unit, with 21 hours of class contact time. It has run 7 times with two different lecturers. Class sizes have been between 13 and 25.

This unit is designed to enable individuals to come to a better understanding of their capacities as leaders. It encourages the development of individually relevant leadership development strategies. The individual examines his/her own style and behaviour and how this impacts on his/her capacity to lead. Learners explore their ability to build visions, communicate, use power and motivate others, all skills that appear extensively in the leadership literature. (Bennis 1989, Kotter 1996, Gardner, 1990, Yukl 1998, Oakley and Krug 1991) The learners explore a range of alternative strategies that build on and extend their existing leadership skills. The focus is very directly on development of self-awareness and the improvement of the individual's capacity to understand, communicate with, and influence others.
[1]

Self-management, personal mastery and self-awareness are a constant, though not often well developed, theme in the leadership literature (Bennis 1989, Senge 1990, Bird, 1989, Napolitano & Henderson 1998, McFarland, Senn &Childress in Wren 1995, Drucker 1999). This unit operates on the basis that the self, and the self's behaviour, are legitimate and in fact critical areas of study for those who want to improve both their understanding and practice of leadership.

Assumptions underpinning the learning processes used

Jay Conger (1992) identified 4 categories of leadership training: personal growth, skill building, conceptual development and feedback. Csoka (1996) provides a simple overview of these approaches.

Conceptual Development

This has traditionally been the strength of university leadership programs and works on the premise that if you know the concept you can act on it.

Skill Building

This is perhaps the most commonly used method for leadership training because it has an intuitive appeal because of the practical approach which organisations need.

Feedback

Feedback provides observations from others on knowledge, skills and behaviour of individuals.

Personal Growth

Leadership training programs featuring personal growth emphasise the need for managers to become more aware of their inner talents, abilities and limitations. The emphasis is on giving each manager insight into their own part in the whole network. Therapeutic change then occurs as each person redefines and monitors their own behaviour rather than asking others to change their behaviour, and the total system changes without anyone having been specifically asked to change.

Leadership II focuses on personal growth and feedback as the primary tools for learning. The unit builds on the conceptual development undertaken in leadership 1 and attempts to extend the learner's ability to use the concepts and academic processes learned. Whilst leadership skills are explored, there is little opportunity to develop these skills in the time frame available, rather the focus is on self awareness and providing the learners with the opportunity to plan for any skill development they recognise as being necessary.

Much of the learning concerning self-development, and the feedback given is focused around the assessment items. Class input and discussion revolves around models of understanding leadership behaviour and skills.

There are 2 assessment items, a personal analysis of leadership potential in week 4 and a leadership development plan in week 7. Both require self-reflection, with individual behaviour and development as the subject. For learners to do well in the first assessment item they have to demonstrate an understanding of the personal typology theory and how it can assist in self analysis by using it to assess a selected range of knowledge, attitudes and skills. They also have to demonstrate how their

personality, personal attitudes and behaviour impact on their ability to be an effective leader.

The second assessment item requires a substantiated list of leadership skills that the individual needs to develop and a development plan identifying the strategies to be used to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes selected.

The assumptions behind the design and implementation of these assessment items lie in theories of adult learning, particularly the work of Friere, Mezirow, Knowles and Argyris. These commentators on adult learning come from very different perspectives but they offer a number of ideas that have particular meaning for MBA participants learning to be leaders.

The Knowles (1990) provides a synopsis of the development of adult learning theory. The androgogical model of learning includes a number of assumptions:

1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it.

2. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Many adults have a memory of learning that is in conflict with this self-concept . They expect to be told what to do in class. It is important to assist adult learners to make the transition to more self-directed learning, show them how to use the same skills in the classroom that they use in everyday life.

3. Adults become ready to learn those things that they need to know and be able to do in their real life situations - or in situations they want or expect to happen e.g. seeking promotion.

4. Adults tend to be task centred or problem centred rather than content centred.

5. While adults are motivated by external motivators like promotion, higher salaries etc, they are also motivated by internal pressures such as quality of life, increased job satisfaction.

6. Adults bring to learning a wealth of experience from life. This provides an extraordinary resource for learning. However, there are also some potentially negative effects from previous experience. There may have developed mental habits, biases and assumptions that close adult minds to new ideas and new ways of looking at things.

A number of strategies have been developed around the world, over a long period of time, which assist adult learning. These include:

Active inquiry. Adults need to be actively engaged in discovering knowledge rather than being the passive recipients of transmitted content.

Case method which involves problem solving and which has been used in traditions as diverse as Chinese and Hebrew.

Socratic Dialogue where a question or dilemma is addressed by group members pooling their thinking and experience in seeking an answer

Debates, where individuals state and defend particular positions, have been used since Roman times.

With all these methods the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning – not a transmitter of knowledge.

Hughes, Ginnet and Curphy (1999) discuss leadership development and the importance of an action-observation- reflection model of learning. This model is very important for learning from experience, rather than just experiencing. This is one of the processes suggested for the individual leadership profile and the reflective journal part of the leadership development plan.

It is difficult to learn, and particularly to learn about yourself, without reflection. Most people interact with others and the environment based on a belief system that they have developed to deal with the world. This belief system, according to Argyris (1976, 1992), Dick and Dalmau (1991) tends to create defensive interpersonal relationships and limits risk taking. It also leads to what is called single loop learning, which really means that we seek from our environment and events those things which reinforce what we already know and believe. Little feedback is allowed that may confront fundamental ideas of actions. This leads to a self-fulfilling belief system and considerable constraint on the capacity to learn.

Double loop learning involves a willingness to confront personal views and to truly listen to other views. Mastering double loop learning can be thought of learning how to learn, how to identify blind spots, question and clarify assumptions.

Paulo Friere (1972) believed that critical consciousness was something required by the oppressed. This concept can have much wider application. Those who are potentially in a position to make decisions that could impact on wide variety of people and environments need to be aware of themselves and their inter-relatedness with others.

The unit therefore is based on these assumptions: that these learners are adult learners who need to understand the relevance of what they are learning and take an active part in the learning process. It also assumes a willingness to reflect upon their own behaviour and the impact this has on others and on their effectiveness as leaders.

Student Evaluation of Unit Results.

It is one thing to have a theoretical base for the design of learning processes, but it is another to have learners aware and appreciative of the assessment items. One of the reasons for my interest in this unit and its methods has been generated from the consistently positive student feedback. How do the various factors that contribute to the design and delivery of a unit impact on this feedback and how might these be incorporated into other units. Whilst accepting the limitations of a single form of

feedback such as Student Evaluation of Unit (SEU), an analysis of the assessment related questions in 4 SEU's reveals the following.

(maximum score of 5 is possible)	Evaluation of Unit			
	1	2	3	4
Q.5. The assessment methods and feedback in this unit help my learning.	4.4	4.7	4.8	4.8
Q.7. Teaching and assessment methods are compatible with unit objectives.	4.9	4.8	4.6	4.6
Q.9. The assessment methods used in this unit are useful learning experiences.	4.5	4.6	4.8	4.8
Q.12. The assessment system in this unit helped me to learn.	4.6	NA	4.9	NA
Q.10. Overall, how would you rate this unit?	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0

(NA – this question did not appear on these SEUs)

Some learners incorporated comments about assessment on their SEUs. These included the following:

"Assessment is excellent as we can use it."

"The assignments were very relevant and particularly useful for my development at this point in my career"

"Leadership development plan was effective in assisting learning."

Transformative Learning.

One of the objectives of Leadership 11 is to assist learners to become more reflective in posing and solving problems, to become more critically self-reflective and to move developmentally towards more reliable perspectives that assist the capacity to lead in an effective and socially responsible way. This requires a transformative process rather than one dependent on new content.

Mezirow (1991) identifies transformative learning as enabling learners to do the following:

"

- Decontextualize
- Become more aware of history, contexts (norms, codes, reaction patterns, perceptual filters), and consequences of their beliefs

- Become more reflective and critical of their assessment both the content and the process of problem solving and of their own ways of participating in this process
- "Bracket" preconceived ideas and openly examine evidence and assess arguments
- Make better inferences, more appropriate generalisations, and more logically coherent arguments
- Be more open to the perspectives of others
- Rely less on psychological defence mechanisms and be more willing to accept the authority of provisional consensual validation of expressed ideas.

Transformative or emancipatory learning involves all this, but in addition it focuses upon a critique of premises that need reassessment in order to correct inadequately developed or distorted epistemic, socilio-linguistic, or psychological preconceptions. It opens language to both redefinition through reflection and the accretion of new layers of meaning continuously as we seek to be understood and to understand others in dialogue." (Page 215).

The SEU feedback occurs toward the end of the unit. Learners are still engaged with the process. One of the questions that appears important given the aims of the unit is to identify whether the unit does in fact have a long term impact. Has there been a transformational effect?

Methodology

To see whether learners who had completed the unit had been 'transformed' by their experience, all those who had completed Leadership 11, 112 people in all, were asked to complete an on-line questionnaire. This questionnaire addressed a range of issues including the extent to which the unit had met its objectives in enabling them to develop knowledge and skills described in the unit outline and asked questions related to Mezirow's indicators of transformative learning. Participants were also asked to comment on the effectiveness of the various 'teaching' strategies used, particularly the assessment items.

The response rate was quite low, only 17 (15%) respondents completed the questionnaire. These respondents were made up of 8 women and 9 men, the work experience extended from 7 to 33 years and they cut across a range of industries including utilities, not for profit sector, government, building, information technology, retail, mining, finance and other service industries.

There are a number of possible reasons for the low response:

- The unit was over, and learners had had an opportunity of giving feedback at the time they completed the unit.
- The time taken to complete a questionnaire with 39 questions.
- The use of the new technology. The age range of respondents was 30-50. Perhaps accessing a web-site to complete the questionnaire on line was too much of a challenge. A couple had difficulties and e-mailed asking for further instructions. Some may not have bothered.

It is also worth mentioning that all respondents were Australian, no international learners completed the questionnaire. This therefore represents a single cultural response.

The data provided by respondents however, can be considered indicative of the impact of the unit, and the elements of the unit that are perceived to be the most valuable to Australian adult learners.

Results

The questions required answers: not at all, somewhat, to a great extent.

Responses were as follows:

	Not at all	Somewhat	To a great extent
Did you find the unit disorienting?	14	3	
Have you become more aware of your assumptions and their consequences:	1	2	14
Are you more reflective on what is happening around you and your role in it?		4	13
Are you willing to examine your preconceived ideas?		6	11
Are you able to put together more coherent arguments, make more appropriate generalisations?	1	15	1
Are you more open to the Perspectives of others?		9	8
Are you less defensive?	2	8	7
Are you aware of what you need to do to become a better leader?		6	11
Do you feel able to take action as a result of your reflections in this unit?		7	10
Have you taken action as a result of your reflections in this unit?	1	8	8

The answers to these questions indicate that in most areas, the process has been transformational for most learners, to a greater or lesser degree. The unit does not appear to have disoriented most of the learners as Mezirow indicated was often an aspect of the transformational process. This may be because the learning was occurring within a specific context, that of leadership, with which the learners were familiar. At no stage did the unit require learners to move beyond this context. This was intentional as the aim of the unit was the development of leadership capacity, not the solving of personal problems. Whilst some learners used it for the latter, there was no requirement that they do so. The context was intended to provide a framework that would offer safety in a potentially difficult self-discovery process.

The second area where the impact has been less is that of skill development. The ability to put forward coherent arguments requires skill development as well as an increase in knowledge or change attitudes. No skill development in this area was attempted in the unit.

Where the unit appears to have had the greatest impact is in the area of attitude change, a willingness to re-look at what they had thought known.

Impact of Learning Strategies

In an attempt to identify the learning strategies that assisted most in the transformational process, the participants were asked to comment on the extent to which the different elements of the unit assisted their learning. Again three options were offered: contributed strongly, contributed somewhat and contributed strongly.

	Did not Contribute	Contributed Somewhat	Contributed Strongly
Lecturers' input	1	4	12
Class discussion	2	10	5
Class activities	3	8	6
Developing the personal profile	0	3	14
Developing the leadership development plan	0	4	13

Whilst all elements of the learning were seen to have contributed to a greater or lesser extent by most learners, it was the development of the personal profile and the leadership development plan that were seen by the learners to have made the greatest contribution to learning. Both the development of the personal profile and the

leadership development items required the learners to research and apply their learning in a very practical way and both were assessment items. Comments made about the personal profile and the leadership development plan included the following.

Comments about the profile.

"The unit was unique in first 'finding' oneself before taking the next step of building on this base."

"The compulsory completion of a personal profile is valuable because it gives reason to spend time on self, time to reflect and identify oneself. This is frequently overlooked – like a painter never getting to paint their own home. It gives one permission."

"It caused me to analyse my actions and responses to situations in a non-threatening way. It also provided an academic framework to conduct the analysis within."

"This was the first occasion I have read or worked through a process that focussed on my personality. The reading and research necessary to complete the assignment contributed very directly to some rather critical self analysis. This process was very challenging."

"I realised I needed to understand myself before I could begin to understand others and my profile helped me to want to do something about the negative aspects of the profile that I wished to change for the better."

Comments about the plan.

"The leadership development plan I prepared enabled me to focus on some issues that believe will enhance my effectiveness as a leaders and as person. Without such a plan it is unlikely that I would have taken any particular action to improve these aspects."

"The personal initiation and research and motivation to do the plan makes it more powerful than a generic seminar or other confidence building activities. The development plan is therefore highly personalised and an achievement in itself."

Unit Achievements

The questionnaire also asked respondents to identify the single most important thing learned, with the purpose of acquiring some understanding of the overall impact of the unit on the learners. Some of their comments are as follows.

"Questioning old habits"

"My characteristics are not as much of a weakness as had been thought and that there were effective strategies in place to improve them."

"Not to always act habitually. Stop and consider the people and situation confronting you and try to exhibit the behaviour most appropriate to being an effective leader."

"Self awareness is critical to success and that I can change aspects of my behaviour that I don't like, if I want to badly enough."

Factors in setting up this type of assessment.

Given that the unit appears to be successful in meeting its objectives and that there is evidence that transformation has occurred, at least for some learners, and that the assessment items appear to be critical to this success, what are the issues to be considered in setting up such an assessment process.

1. **Who** could you use these methods with? These methods of assessment would seem to be appropriate where the interaction of the individual with the environment is important in the skill they are learning e.g. nursing, teaching, management; where learners are learning not only about, but how to.

2. **Self selection** (elective) Could you require learners to do this? The self-analysis would probably not be effective unless learners were willing and prepared to undertake it. Where self-analysis is concerned it would need to be an elective. Having said that, not all the learners who have undertaken this unit chose to do so. This unit is required in some corporate programs conducted. However, the process of learning through experiential activity could be appropriate in a much wider range of areas. It would be possible to have assignments/activity/projects that required reflection on activity in which they were involved using accepted models e.g. describing and then analysing, using a theoretical model, a change process in which they were involved, or a selection process. This requires them to collect information and demonstrate a clear understanding of what they have observed or participated in.

3. **Be clear what the objectives are and how you will mark**. The content is often impossible to mark in the sense that different people will choose quite different behaviours to discuss. Some learners record extraordinary experiences and events where others have much more mundane issues and experiences. What becomes critical is the ability of the learners to substantiate claims using relevant examples from their personal knowledge, as well as an understanding of the theoretical frameworks they are using. It is what they understand and learn from the experience that is important, not the experience itself. The criteria that you use must be clear. Learners feel more than usually vulnerable.

4. **Open communication** and the development of trust with facilitator/lecturer makes the process safe, if not comfortable. Self disclosure on the part of the facilitator/lecturer can assist this with the use of personal examples of unskilful behaviours and their impact. A willingness to support uncomfortable disclosure from learners and to work with those who have significant difficulty with the assessment tasks is critical. Many very able learners find the process extremely difficult and confronting.

5. Use of **accepted academic tools** e.g. the use of a theoretical model for analysis. A rigorous process prevents the 'I'm not good at anything' response. It also reduces the capacity to avoid learning, by focussing on highly selected characteristics and avoiding those that it is most critical to address. This is not a warm and fuzzy subject. The use of a model, and a requirement for analysis and synthesis also makes it possible to assess this as an academic activity.

6. Recognise the **tension between the formative (learning) and summative (assessment) roles.** Most learners do not do well in their profile (assessment in week 4) particularly if they have difficult issues to address. They are often confronted by a (moving) self perception that does not stand up to rigorous analysis. This profile provides the foundation for their final assessment item, the leadership development plan so the feedback is critical. But in addition to being a learning activity the marks contribute to their final grade. There can be a tension between addressing the critical issues for them and getting a high grade. However, without the assessment, learners may not take the assignment as seriously. The allocation of marks 'forces' learners to address the issues.

Conclusions

If as Mesirow suggests:

"Learning may be defined as the process of making new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action. What we perceive and fail to perceive and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by the habits of expectation that constitute our frame of reference, that is a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences" (Mesirow 1990)

There is evidence that the learners who undertake Leadership II are learning – about themselves, their environments and the requirements of effective leadership. The follow up study suggests that the changes are not temporary and that the learners are better equipped to undertake an effective leadership role. They appear to have access to reflective processes that will assist with their future learning and the use of power in leadership roles.

The processes explored in this paper with regard to leadership development could be used to look at a range of behaviours. This may be teaching, relating to patients, attitudes to clients (of many kinds), cross cultural interaction, anything where an awareness of the impact of individual behaviour on the environment and others is important.

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