

LEADERSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN A STUDENT-DIRECTED AGRICULTURAL PUBLICATIONS PRODUCTION COURSE

Gladys Walter, Carrie Baker, Lacey Roberts, and Tracy Rutherford



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

- Experiential learning courses like these simulate a 'real-world' work environment, where students are assigned roles and tasked with designing a magazine from conception to publication as a team (Hall, Rhodes, & Agunga, 2009).
- While technical journalistic elements such as writing and design are emphasized, the experiential component of these courses consequently allow students to develop strong soft skills such as leadership and collaboration (Morgan, 2010).
- Minimal research has been done regarding the outcomes of experiential education efforts on student's success (Hall, Rhodes, & Agunga, 2009).
- Studies on student-directed publications courses are even more underrepresented. Of the studies that exist, few seek to understand the development of soft skills such as leadership.

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the self-identified leadership skills of agricultural communication students serving as editors in a capstone-level, magazine production course.

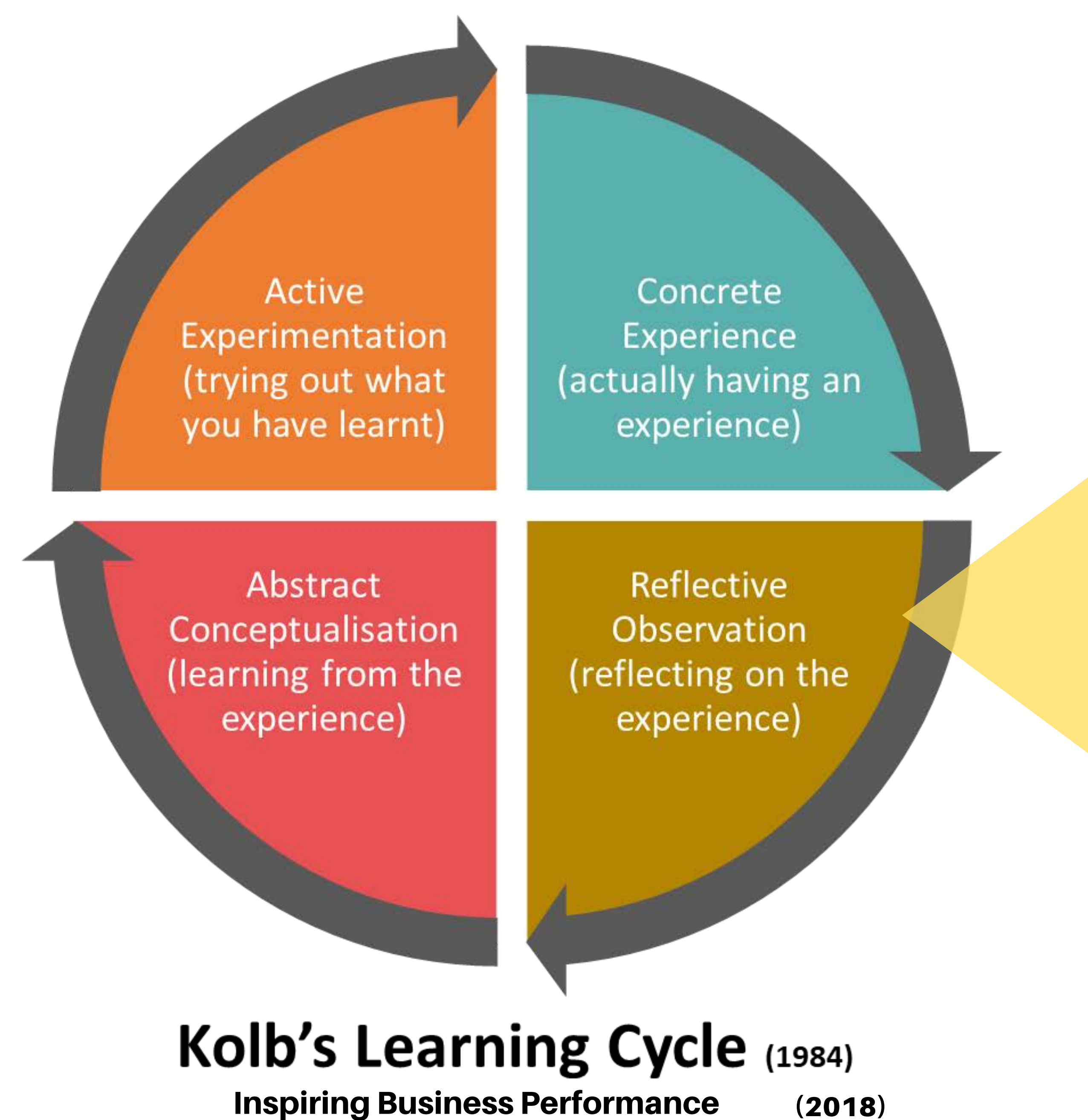
Methodology

- Our target population for this study was current and former undergraduate students who served as editors-in-chief in an agricultural publications production course.
- Editors were students in charge of overseeing the development of the magazine and managing the student staff. We used department records to obtain a census of names and contact information of persons meeting this criteria.
- Thirty-two persons were identified as meeting this criteria. Using the contact information from department records, we sent recruitment emails to the prospective participants. If willing to participate, they were asked to share their availability.
- A basic qualitative research design was used for this study. We conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with twenty-six participants in person, via phone or web conference.
- We asked participants various questions related to skills needed to be a successful editor, high impact experiences, and competencies needed in their current careers.
- Each member of the research team transcribed their interviews. We then used open and axial-coding to analyze the transcripts.

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Conceptual Framework



Findings

- The former student editors had a technical interpretation of leadership skill and readiness.
- The students believed they were adequately prepared to be an editor because they had the necessary hard skills such as writing, editing, designing, and photography.
- Many shared they struggled with interpersonal skills such as the ability to motivate a team, empathy, balancing responsibilities, and being good listeners.
- Intrapersonal skills such as self-confidence (needed to lead others), decision making, and the ability to communicate a vision were some of the personal struggles they faced.
- Students realized they did not possess the necessary soft and relational skills needed at the beginning of their editor journey. However, they improved in their soft skills with time.
- We observed that a lack of prior leadership experience was a commonality for those who struggled with soft and relational skills. For many of the interviewees, the editor role was their first formal leadership position.
- Many had not taken any leadership development courses prior to their experience.

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- The opportunity to integrate leadership training into communications courses should be recognized.
- Some interviewees believed they were qualified to serve as editors or leaders because they had the necessary hard skills to be successful. Many did not account for soft skills necessary for leading and motivating a team.
- Future publications-focused capstone courses should use a criteria comprising of both hard and soft skills when selecting editors. It may also be beneficial to have student editors enroll in a full or short-term personal leadership development course or training program.
- Former editors engaged in personal reflection/assessment on their own accord, but there was no time for formal reflective observation built into the course. It is imperative to ensure that reflection activities are built into these project-based communications courses to ensure students fully complete the Kolb's cycle by the conclusion of the course.
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- This study also holds potential for informing curriculum development for other project-based or team-oriented communications courses.

"AgriLeader helped in that it actually gave me something that was rooted in reality. It was a leadership position that I may or may not have been ready for. It gave me the opportunity to bring together a lot of different people and resources."

-Former Editor

