

# BLOGGING AS A REFLECTIVE TOOL FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF A LEADERSHIP PRACTICUM GROUNDED IN THE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL

Deana Raffo

## Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of this research is to examine blogging as an instructional technique to develop an understanding of relational leadership through the lens of a leadership practicum. This research contributes to the literature in leadership education, specifically to experiential learning and reflective thinking in an online environment. **Background:** It is grounded in Komives, Lucas, and McMahon's (1998) Relational Leadership Model (RLM) which is a framework for college students to understand leadership as a process of understanding self and others. **Method:** Blogs from 74 students enrolled in a leadership practicum at a large, comprehensive, southeastern university were analyzed using a holistic rubric to determine students' capacity to understand the elements of the RLM. **Results:** Results revealed that students were able to analyze all five elements on a competent level. **Conclusion:** Blogging was found to be a useful, reflective thinking tool. **Application:** Recommendations are made to enhance the self-reflection process in leadership education.

This exploratory study adds to the literature in leadership education as it relates to experiential learning and reflective thinking in an online environment. While leadership practicums, and especially more broadly experiential learning, and reflective exercises are common in the leadership literature, no studies exist that examine the intersection of these pedagogical approaches. Grounded in Komives, Lucas, and McMahon's (1998) Relational Leadership Model (RLM), the focus of this study is to evaluate blogging as an instructional technique to develop student leadership development through the lens of a leadership practicum experience. Specifically, it examines whether blogging is an effective tool to develop student understanding of relational leadership.

Reflection is an instructional tool that can be used to enhance self-awareness in the leadership development process. Meanwhile, practicum is a pedagogical approach that encourages the application of academic knowledge to a field experience. Practicum is an out-of-class learning experience that provides hands-on experience and research suggests such experiences positively impact student leadership development (Shertzer, & Doyle, 2006). Just as there are many

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Dr. Deana Raffo is an assistant professor of Leadership Studies at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN. Dr. Raffo can be contacted at [deana.raffo@mtsu.edu](mailto:deana.raffo@mtsu.edu).

varieties of experiential education, there are several forms of reflective learning (e.g., journaling, autobiographies, diaries). This research analyzes blogging as a self-reflective tool in leadership education.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Leadership and Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning activities contribute to student growth and positively impact student leadership development (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). Kolb's (1984) well-known model for experiential learning supports the idea that we learn best through engagement in a concrete experience followed with reflection to process or construct knowledge. Experiential learning activities are often unparalleled in the manner that they can deepen self-understanding and foster student leadership development (Magarrell & Laney, 2003; Shertzer & Doyle, 2006). Furthermore, when experiential learning is structured, it provides opportunities for critical reflection which allows for self-assessment and learning (Casper, 2004).

While both internships and practica are both pedagogical approaches that encourage the application of academic knowledge to a field experience, the difference between a practicum and an internship is that practicums are often experiences that may not be in a work environment or be career-based. Leadership practicums can be based in service-learning where students gain an increased awareness of their actions in benefiting a community, while simultaneously increasing their curriculum understanding (Magarrell & Laney, 2003). It is crucial to emphasize that credit is not earned for actual service nor leadership, but for the learning that is demonstrated with the practicum serving as the vehicle or lens through which the deepened learning is developed. "Certainly, learning occurs inside the classroom, but it is very real in the world of experience. Involvement on and off campus provides the laboratory for enriching this learning" (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007, p. 25). The practicum studied in this research is grounded in Komives, Lucas, and McMahon's (1998) RLM.

### **Relational Leadership Model**

Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998) introduced the relational leadership model in their book, *Exploring Leadership: For College Students who want to Make a Difference*. Through the use of a combination of psychological and educational principles, a framework was developed to assist college students in understanding leadership as a process of understanding self (values, beliefs, and commitments) and understanding others (groups, teams, organizations, communities) where self-awareness is central to this process. This model is intended for students to shift their perspectives about leadership from previously held beliefs of leadership as where leadership is seen as individualistic, positional, achievement-oriented, and

controlling rather than leadership as process that “values collaborative processes among authentic people in organizations” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007, p. 11). Rost (1993) identifies the latter, conventional paradigm as the *industrial* paradigm while the *postindustrial* paradigm asserts today’s leadership is reciprocal, ethical, transformative, empowering, and collaborative with global concern.

In the RLM, leadership is defined as “a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (Komives et al, 2007, p. 13). The relationship leadership model provides a framework in connecting five key elements of leadership that include: purposeful, inclusive, empowering, ethical, and process-oriented (see Table 1 for descriptions). In using the model, Komives et al. (2007) discuss the importance of practicing reflection to make meaning of situations where “reflection is a key process in becoming a learning community” (p. 110). Table 1 provides a brief overview of each of the five key elements of the RLM.

**Table 1**  
***Relational Leadership Model***

<b>Element</b>	<b>Description</b>
Purposeful	Having a commitment to a goal or activity
Inclusive	Understanding, valuing, and actively engaging diversity in views, approaches, styles, and aspects of individuality
Empowerment	Having a sense of self that claims ownership, claims a place in the process, and expects to be involved and a set of environmental conditions (in the group or organization) that promote the full involvement of participants by reducing the barriers that block the development of individual talent and involvement
Ethical	Being driven by values and standards and believing that leadership that is good (moral) in nature
Process-oriented	Understanding that individuals interact with others and that leaders and other participants work together to accomplish change which creates energy, synergy, and momentum

Note. Adapted from “Exploring Leadership: For College Students who want to Make a Difference” (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), by S. Komives, N. Lucas, & T. R. McMahon, T. R., 2007, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

While this model and textbook are popular in leadership courses, Dugan (2006) argues there is a gap between research on college student development and leadership models. He claims “researchers’ use of general measures of leadership development rather than those tied to existing models has contributed to a scarcity of empirical studies grounded in the theory that informs leadership practice” (p. 335). Indeed, there are some studies on the leadership identity development model, based on the RLM (e.g. Dugan, 2006, Gehrke, 2008; Renn & Bilodeau, 2004; Seemiller, 2006). Again, with the use of any leadership model, the importance of reflection for making meaning cannot be underemphasized (Komives et al., 2007).

## Reflective Learning

The purpose of reflective thinking is to internalize information and develop a deeper understanding of what happened—to transform an experience into learning, to make meaning of new information, and advance from surface to deep thinking and learning (Bourner, 2003; Hiemstra, 2001; Roebuck, Sigler, & Tyran, 2006; Xie, Ke, & Sharma, 2007). Bourner (2003) posits that “developing students’ capacity for reflective learning is part of developing their capacity to learn how to learn” (p. 267). Critical reflection provides tremendous benefits in learning because it promotes intellectual and personal growth and development where integrating new knowledge, problem solving, interpreting, challenging assumptions, or finding meaning in course concepts that makes paradigm shifts in learning possible. Reflection serves as a skill that is important in student development and growth that goes beyond the college experience. This pedagogy develops critical thinking skills and provides insights that enhance students’ abilities to function successfully beyond the classroom (Roebuck, Sigler, & Tyran, 2006).

Reflection also allows for learning from mistakes and failures. Hammer and Stanton (1997) argue that organizational failure has one underlying cause—the failure to reflect. Organizations devote so much of their time to daily functions that they rarely stop to objectively think about themselves and their business and even say that reflection “must be institutionalized as a business process” (Hammer & Stanton, 1997, p. 291). Because reflective thinking skills are essential in organizational success, it is included as a general skill in the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) standards that were developed to ensure quality and continuous improvement in collegiate business education (AACSB International, n.d.).

Critical reflection is an often overlooked pedagogy as a means to optimize learning. To be successful, it should be purposeful with special attention paid to explaining to students about the importance and purpose of reflection, how reflective exercises will enhance their learning, and that information will be kept confidential (Roebuck et al., 2006; Xie, Fengfeng, & Sharma, 2008).

Several pedagogical methods are used to encourage and enhance reflective learning. Assignments should be mostly unstructured, free flowing vehicles to encourage individuals to think, write, or talk and include methods such as paired or group discussion, learning logs (recordings of insights), self-reflective papers, autobiographies, diaries, critical incident citing, journals (the most common technique), and electronic journaling (including blogging) (Roebuck et al, 2006; Hiemstra, 2001). Journaling is one of the most popular reflective learning tools intended to record personal thoughts, experiences, and insights that aids the learner in personal growth, synthesis, and reflection while promoting critical thinking. Journaling can include “systematic observations of insights, events, and changes in personal perspectives during the course” (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 21).

Daudelin and Hall (1997) outlined three stages in reflection that leverage learning: wander, capture, and share. Wandering promotes the free-flowing thought process

where ideas, questions, and concepts are explored. Capturing gives form to the thought process where ideas are “recorded,” often in writing but can also include oral expression. Finally, in the sharing stage, insights are reported to others - the instructor, classmates, or even a broader audience. While reflection can foster the learning process, Bourner (2003) identified problems in assessing reflective learning, largely due to its subjective nature (i.e., clear expectations are needed so students do not flounder in uncertainty). Only the learner can determine whether the learning that occurred is significant; however, instructors can distinguish between a descriptive account of an experience and an account that internalizes, or transforms, the experience into a deepened understanding of class concepts. Despite this difficulty, students need feedback on their learning, or ability to “capture” the learning gained from the experience, and blogging allows for that feedback, not just from the instructor but from peers (Nackerud & Scaletta, 2008).

### **Blogging**

As a recent pedagogical tool, the use of web blogs (blogs) has become increasingly popular as a means to engage students in enhancing learning, facilitating reflective thinking, collaborative learning, and knowledge construction to contextualize real-world experiences (e.g. Davi, Frydenberg, & Gulati, 2007; Glogoff, 2005; Nackerud & Scaletta, 2008; Wang, Bock, & Chuang, 2004; Xie et al., 2008). Blogs are a form of online journaling that offers reflections on a particular subject. They may be personal in nature and take the form of an online diary (Paloff & Pratt, 2007). Unlike online discussions or wikis, blogs are intended to be an individual publication to which others may comment but do not contribute and much more closely resembles journaling where students develop their own voice in the learning process (Reynard, 2008). Journaling through blogs can “demonstrate how learners are integrating and applying their thinking around course concepts” (Palloff & Pratt, 2009, p. 45) and the application process is key when integrating blogging with experiential learning.

The added benefit of blogs is that it fosters a sense of community where students can learn from each other while engaging in discussion, exploration, and discovery (Glogoff, 2005). Blogs provide a forum to hone writing and communication skills, critical thinking and research skills, and competency in technology, while promoting a student-centered and self-directed learning environment. Blogging is one way to process information to make course content more relevant on a personal level while also gaining different perspectives (Davi et al., 2007; Kerawella, Mincha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2008; Xie et al., 2008).

While leadership-oriented classes are using blogs (Nackerud & Scaletta, 2008), problems with blogging can include haphazard contribution, minimum communication between students, or substandard quality where students only strive to meet a minimal level to meet assessment criteria. Additionally, students may be hesitant to share personal information given the public nature of blogs. Students may also be less than professional in sharing information that is

inappropriate for public disclosure (Kerawalla et al., 2008). However, as students continue to blog, reflective skills increase. Students essentially become more skilled reflective thinkers and learning experiences are strengthened through their blogging experiences (Xie et al., 2008).

## Method

1. Is blogging an effective instructional tool in fostering student understanding of the five elements of Komives, Lucas, and McMahon's (1998) RLM?
2. Do students like blogging as a means to interact with and learn from other students?

## Practicum Description

Both leadership minors and student leaders across campus who are affiliated with a variety of student organizations and offices are enrolled in the practicum. The practicum course is designed to provide students with the opportunity to enrich their classroom experiences by taking part in projects and programs that promote leadership, service, self-awareness, and discovery learning. By taking on leadership roles provided through campus or community initiatives, students have the opportunity to immerse themselves in leadership experiences and challenges while engaging in the experiential learning process. Examples of campus-based projects include leadership roles with student government and other student organizations as well as working with programs affiliated with offices in student affairs. Community-based projects have ranged from working with a local food bank to involvement in youth and other community and faith-based programs.

The leadership practicum has always required students keep a log of their activities, keep a journal, and produce a self-reflective essay. Blogging as a means to share one's learning with classmates began in fall 2009. The practicum has been grounded in the RLM since its inception. However, before blogging was introduced in the course, students lacked a shared experience that promoted collective wisdom that could be gained by all. Blogging provides an authentic learning opportunity, in that it draws on the practicum, or real-world, experience and gives students the opportunity to reflect on that opportunity to deepen learning while sharing their experience and insights with others.

## Leadership Practicum Blogs

The blogs from a total of 74 students enrolled in the leadership studies practicum from 2008 fall to 2010 fall were examined. Because the study involved the collection of existing data, it was found to be exempt from the Institutional Review Board and approved by the research compliance officer. The blogs were facilitated and completed through the university's online learning management system (LMS).

Most students (52 out of 74 or 70%) completed all five blogs and all of the students completed the final paper that provided them the opportunity to integrate each of the five elements of the RLM as well as integrate the collective wisdom gained from reading their peers' blogs. The requirements for the paper included them expressing their thoughts on using blogging as a forum for reflection, specifically addressing if reading their peers' entries deepened their understanding of the RLM and if they believed blogging was an effective tool for learning within the practicum.

Students had two weeks to complete each blog and progressed through the class on approximately the same timetable. That is, all students were required to meet bi-monthly blogging deadlines. This allowed for a balance between self-directed learning (with a two-week window to post blogs) and synchronous learning in the progression through the course content where all students were focused on the same topic for that two-week period. The practicum adhered to the view that learning is a process, as is leadership. Students responded to blogging prompts designed to help them reflect on their practicum experience while learning from others in order to deepen their understanding of relational leadership. The prompts were developed by the researcher and were intended to encourage learning through self-reflection and peers' blogs while connecting practicum experiences and observations with the RLM. The five blogs were grounded in relational leadership and students responded to prompts designed to help them apply their practicum experience to the five elements of relational leadership as described in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Blogging Prompts for the RLM*

Element	Blogging Prompts
Purposeful	Relational leadership is purposeful which means having a commitment to a goal or activity. It is also the ability to collaborate and to find common ground with others to establish a common purpose or a vision for the group. Being purposeful requires having an attitude of hope, an ability to make a commitment; it builds on a sense of personal and group empowerment. In your practicum, what is your (or your organization's) purpose? Give examples of finding common purpose or a vision for the group.
Inclusive	One of the elements of relational leadership is being inclusive which means understanding, valuing, and actively engaging diversity in views, approaches, styles, and aspects of individuality such as sex or culture that add multiple perspectives to a group's activity. Give examples of how you have been inclusive, or observed it in others, in your practicum project? How can you improve on this element of relational leadership (what are some specific things you can do to be more inclusive)?

**Table 2** (continued)  
***Blogging Prompts for the RLM***

Empowerment	Relational leadership is empowering. Where possible, leaders must be willing to share their power or authority, and participants must be willing to assume more responsibility for group outcomes. Empowering others requires a belief that each individual has something to offer. Empowering others means sharing information, bringing people into the group process, and promoting individual and team learning. In your practicum, how do you (or you observe others) empower others? What do you do well? What can you improve?
Ethical	The relational leadership model emphasizes ethical and moral leadership, meaning leadership that is driven by values and standards and leadership that is good--moral--in nature. Moral leadership is concerned with 'good' leadership, that is, leadership with good means and good ends. Furthermore, being ethical lets you go to bed at night and know you did the right thing, even if it did not accomplish your final goal--but you did not sacrifice your integrity. How do you (or those around you) experience ethical leadership in your practicum? What are your values and guiding principles and are they congruent with your organization? Or, how has ethical leadership been compromised by you or others.
Process-oriented	Being process-oriented refers to how the group goes about being a group and processes such as recruitment, involving others, decision-making, cooperation, collaboration, giving/receiving feedback, and reflection. This is often the most difficult concept to grasp because our society is very purpose--or goal--oriented. Give some examples of how you are process-oriented in your practicum. What can you do to become more process-oriented?

The five blogs were analyzed for each of the 74 students in conjunction with the elements of the RLM: purposeful, ethical, process-oriented, inclusive, and empowering. Fifty-two students completed all five blogs and twenty students completed four of the five blogs. Two students completed three blogs. Every student did not complete all five blogs.

Given the subjective nature of reflective learning, the use of a holistic rubric was employed as an assessment of student performance. This rubric was piloted in the same course in previous semesters and found to be an effective tool for evaluating students' work. Each blog was determined to be *exemplary* (3 points), *competent* (2 points), or *weak* (1 point) using the criteria as shown in Table 3. As an academic exercise, blogs were expected to be well-written using formal language appropriate for academic work, with no errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Lastly, final papers were analyzed for qualitative responses regarding students' views on blogging as a learning tool within the framework of a leadership practicum.

**Table 3**  
*Rubric Criteria in Assessing Blogs*

Score	Description of Criteria
Exemplary (3 points)	Examples are detailed, accurate, and appropriately used in demonstrating sophisticated understanding of subtle nuances of RLM element; Analysis of strengths and areas for improvement are explicitly linked to examples
Competent (2 points)	Examples are detailed, accurate, and appropriately used in demonstrating understanding of obvious characteristics of RLM element; Connection between analysis of strengths and areas for improvement is implied but not explicitly linked to examples
Weak (1 point)	Examples are seriously lacking in details and/or inaccurate demonstrating a lack of understanding of obvious characteristics of RLM element; No clear connection is made between analysis of strengths and areas for improvement and examples

## Results

Analysis of student blogging about the five elements of relational leadership revealed that students were able to analyze the elements of RLM at a competent level as mean scores ranged from 2.101 (process-oriented) to 2.176 (ethical) as shown in Table 4. A paired t-test analysis between these two elements revealed no significant differences exist ( $p > .05$ ). Therefore, students did not appear to have a deeper understanding of one element than another. Furthermore, in their final papers students overall responded positively to the use of blogs as a learning tool to understand the content and also learn from each other's practicum experiences.

**Table 4**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Five Elements of Relational Leadership Blogs*

RLM Element	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Purposeful	70	2.157	.528
Inclusive	72	2.153	.643
Empowerment	65	2.138	.634
Ethical	68	2.176	.645
Process-oriented	69	2.101	.731

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This research contributes to the literature in leadership education, specifically to experiential learning and reflective thinking in an online environment. This study examines blogging as an instructional technique to develop an understanding of

relational leadership through the lens of a leadership practicum. Findings indicate blogging as an effective instructional technique to foster students' understanding of relational leadership through the lens of a leadership practicum. Mean scores for all five elements of the model fell at the competent level. Students reported that their peers' blogs heightened their understanding of the material, they appreciated reviewing other students' perspectives, they enjoyed the student interaction, and blogging helped them improve their self-awareness, see their progress, and understand their leadership abilities.

To make this process and tool effective, the following recommendations are made as lessons learned in using blogging as a reflective tool in leadership education.

1. Emphasize the importance of reflection and its role in leadership. Help students see blogging and reflection as opportunities to learn more about themselves as leaders rather than as a required assignment.
2. Encourage students to go deeper than surface or obvious responses (i.e., exemplary response rather than competent responses) to the prompts. A grading system may not be the best way to accomplish this goal because some students have more experiences, are more adept at expressing themselves, or simply have a better understanding of this way of viewing leadership. Instead, find something the student has said that is on track and ask the student to explain with more detail or ask a provocative question to prompt the student think differently or understand subtle nuances that lead to deeper learning.
3. Encourage one or two "strong" students to post early to set an example and prompt other students to think about the topic more deeply and critically. Or, post a couple of blogging reflections from previous students or yourself as exemplary examples.
4. Do not view blogging procrastination as a problem. The student who posts last may do so because he or she is spending more time formulating a more thoughtful response. Students could also not quite understand the concept fully and need to learn from other students' posts.
5. Require students to use specific examples from their practicum to relate to the leadership element. Help students connect and internalize what they are experiencing in the "real world" with the leadership concept.
6. Caution students of the inappropriate nature of sharing of unsuitable information for public forum (e.g., too personal, naming names, rants, self-indulgent). The course syllabus should outline the consequences for inappropriate posts.
7. Encourage students to comment on each others' blogs without it being a requirement (which would be an online discussion). This is not only

- a way to provide feedback or encouragement but to develop a sense of community.
8. Encourage students to talk about mistakes or what could have been done differently in the practicum as it relates to the leadership elements. There can be a tendency to give many positive examples of what they did or observed that was “right,” however true reflection involves an acknowledgement of what went wrong and recognizes how we can improve the next time.
  9. Require students to integrate the blogs as a culminating paper, blog, presentation, other assignment. This allows students to review earlier concepts, review their own and peers’ posts, and see how the elements fit with the bigger picture to take learning to a deeper level.
  10. As an academic exercise, require blogs to be well-written using formal language appropriate for academic work, with no errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar.

In conclusion, the findings from this exploratory study indicate blogging is an effective pedagogy through which a deepened understanding of relational leadership may be achieved. While this is a snapshot of a learning experience at one university, in one leadership course, the practicums were diverse, and the student comments have been overwhelmingly positive. Future studies are recommended to examine how reflecting learning through blogging influences student leadership development over time. Ultimately, blogging gives students ownership over their learning by connecting their personal experiences with class content and critical reflection. Blogging provides the benefits of a shared learning community and gives students the opportunity to become skilled reflective thinkers (and leaders) while transforming or deepening their understanding of leadership.

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