

# Capacity Building To Leadership Development: An Experiential Journey

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article, the researchers discuss how they utilised experiential learning techniques to transform a tutor training program into a leadership development opportunity. Through active research and narrative analysis, the researchers were able to reflect on how the tutor training program they initially developed from an operational need evolved into a leadership development program aimed at encouraging participants to reflect on their own teaching practice and develop an individual teaching philosophy that has its foundations in constructivist learning and experiential learning. The particular leadership skills that the participants developed during the training include planning and strategic thinking, organisational skills, collaboration and team work, effective communication and listening skills, emotional intelligence, and the appropriate display of emotional labour cues while facilitating tutorials. True leadership requires that the leader sets an example to followers. A follower will buy into an idea if the leader can inspire the follower to believe what he believes.*

**Keywords:** Tutor Training; Leadership Development; Constructivist Learning; Experiential Learning; Reflective Thinking

## INTRODUCTION

*He who wants to teach a truth should place us in the position to discover it ourselves.* (Ortega y Gasset, 1961, p. 67)

Peer tutoring has been a practice in large educational institutions across the world for some time. In fact, the idea of peer tutoring dates back to Ancient Greek and Roman times (Moust & Schmidt, 1994, p. 471). Tutoring is considered to be a critical method for the academic development of students (Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad & Hirst, 1990). Effective peer tutoring is highly dependent on the facilitation skills of the tutor in question. Good education often depends on the educator's ability to extract knowledge from their learners. Tutors are educators tasked with the role of facilitating the learning of others by encouraging active participation and reflection. To be an effective facilitator, the tutor needs to develop a philosophy on education and an understanding of the purpose of their role.

In this article, the researchers reflect on how tutor training becomes a leadership development opportunity aimed at encouraging deep reflection and the development of a personal philosophy on education. The tutor training program that this article is based on originated from an operational need for teaching support at a growing higher education institution in South Africa with a deliberate teaching and tutoring educational model. Increases in student numbers meant that the researchers did not have sufficient capacity to successfully facilitate the educational model that required contact time with students both in the format of lectures and tutorials. However, as the program itself evolved, the researchers questioned their philosophy behind the need for the training program and sought to clarify the purpose of the training. The tutor training program focuses on the development of generic, yet essential, skills in order to successfully facilitate tutorial sessions. However, the researchers realised that participants to the training needed to be inspired to become true educators; i.e., reflective practitioners who reflect on their own educational practice and who teach or facilitate with a particular aim in mind. Through narrative analysis, the researchers questioned their own philosophy on teaching and aspired to translate this philosophy into tangible ideas that could be transferred during the training process. Participants were encouraged to discover this "truth" for themselves and to reflect on how they would implement this philosophy in their own classrooms.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researchers applied a mixed methods approach utilising action research and narrative analysis to develop the tutor training program. Group feedback was also sought from participants at the end of each training program through group-administered questionnaires. The group feedback enabled researchers to reflect on the factors that needed to change after each cycle of the training program and assisted in a more holistic evaluation of the effectiveness of the training program in developing the necessary leadership skills required for successful facilitation of actual tutorials.

Research that requires close collaboration with the research object or solving practical problems during the research process is termed *action research*. Action research is most suitable for describing *the process as it unfolds or series of actions* taking place over time in a certain group (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 193). In action research, the researchers and the researched group are not separate, even if they have clear differences. The researchers become both the facilitators and the instruments of data collection (Cresswell et al., 2007, p. 257). The researchers reflect on the changes that are taking place (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 194) and as active participants in the process, the researchers rely on *narrative analysis* to try and make sense of their experiences and of the entire process (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002).

The research in this study involved the implementation of a tutor training program aimed at developing the essential skills necessary to teach others. The tutor training program further represents the first step in a leadership development process. The learning setting was *interactive and informal, providing a space for the participants to share ideas and to learn from each other. Reflective sessions* enabled the participants to develop best practices based on their own knowledge and past experiences as students (Beukes & Maree, 2011, p. 33). This meant that both the facilitators of the training (i.e., the researchers) and the participants had opportunity to reflect on the process at different times. The researchers reflected on their own observations of the process. They documented the participants' personal growth and skills development and the changes they observed as the participants grew in awareness.

Discussions, activities and reflections during the training culminate in one final task that requires the participants to plan and present a formal tutorial session to their peers. The researchers and others involved in the training participate in each mini-tutorial session as students. They ask the “facilitator” questions and respond to the “facilitator’s” instructions. In effect, the participants in the training receive an opportunity to practice their newly acquired knowledge in a real-life setting and thus transform the knowledge into skill. Feedback from both the researchers and their peers enables them to reflect on their own educational practice and become aware of their respective strengths and weaknesses. The simulations provide the researchers with an opportunity to observe how the participants internalised everything that was discussed during the training. The researchers receive tangible proof of the impact of training and whether participants bought into the new mind-sets that the researchers were trying to create with them.

## **TEACHING PHILOSOPHY**

The researchers postulate a particular teaching philosophy. They believe that the role of an educator is to challenge the learner to think for him/herself. The most critical task the educator has is to create an environment that would be conducive for a learner to think and apply. This is best illustrated in Professor John Biggs's (1996; 1999) theory of constructivist learning that is built on the premise that it is not what the teacher does that matters, but rather what the student does that contributes most to learning. Biggs (1996) believes that *meaning and knowledge are created by the learner* and not imposed by reality or transmitted by direct instruction. From the constructivist perspective, *the learner is central in the creation of meaning* and not the teacher, as is the understanding from the *objectivist* perspective (Duffy, 1992). The learner learns by actively constructing their own knowledge through individual and social activities (Biggs, 1996, p. 348).

Constructivist learning adopts a systems approach to teaching. A systems approach implies that all teaching activities should be interrelated. The different components of the system interact with each other and equilibrium is reached when meaning is created (Bertalanffy, 1956; 1962; 1972). The model for constructivist learning rests on four key pillars (Biggs, 1996, pp. 360-361):

1. Educators need to clarify what they want their students to learn and what types of performance would illustrate to them that the students have mastered the learning.
2. Performance objectives that emerge from the educator’s philosophy need to be arranged hierarchically from most acceptable to barely satisfactory. This hierarchy then becomes the grading system.
3. Students need to be placed in situations that are judged likely to elicit the required learning.
4. Students are then required to provide evidence, either by self-set or teacher-set tasks, to illustrate how their learning matches the stated objectives. Their grade becomes the highest level they can match convincingly.

In this research project, the researchers wanted to find a way to communicate their teaching philosophy to participants. The researchers argued that convincing participants of the truth of the philosophy will result in them adopting the philosophy and making it their own, and hence practicing it in their own classrooms. The researchers knew that it would not help to simply tell participants about the philosophy. Rather, it was necessary to develop learning activities that would enable participants to become aware of the need to have a teaching philosophy. The essence of the teaching philosophy was communicated subliminally through posters depicting the sayings, “*Leave no person behind*” and “*What I hear I forget, what I see I remember, what I do I understand.*” These key phrases summarise the constructivist approach to teaching as one that asks of the educator to provide opportunities for all learners to engage with the material. The teacher’s most important task is to ensure that every student in his/her class is encouraged to engage with the learning material on a deeper level and not simply to master the key concepts in order to “*pass the test.*”

The researchers would know from participants’ responses to different problem-based scenarios, as well as their performance in the simulation activities whether they had adopted the teaching philosophy or not. Participants were placed in situations where they had to reflect on their own experiences and extrapolate from these experiences principles and ideas that could be applied in their new roles as tutors. In collaboration with their peers, they developed strategies for dealing with different situations. Group activities and discussions were followed by opportunities for self-reflection so that each individual participant was able to reconstruct their understanding of their tutoring role and reflect on how they would handle different situations they might face when tutoring.

## **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

According to Biggs (1999, p. 60), learning is a way to interact with the world. As we learn new things, our perception and conception of phenomena change and we see and understand the world differently. The acquisition of information itself does not result in change. Rather, it is how we reconstruct the world as we gain more understanding by thinking about what we learn or using what we have learnt in a practical way. Thus, true education is about *conceptual change* and not just the acquisition of information.

For this reason, Biggs (1999, p. 61) believes that good teaching is finding a way to communicate a need that students are lacking in such a way that students feel the need to acquire the requisite knowledge. Motivation then becomes a by-product of good teaching instead of a prerequisite for learning. Ill-conceived assessments will not create a felt need to learn and will result in students focusing on “*dealing with the test*” instead of engaging with the learning material on a deep level. Experiential learning is a teaching approach that encourages students to engage with learning material on a deeper level and to learn for the sake of learning. The essence of experiential learning is most accurately summarised by the saying of Confucius - “*What I hear, I forget. What I see, I remember. What I do, I understand*” (Bennett, 2007). Therefore, the best way to help a learner understand something is to provide an opportunity for them to apply theoretical concepts in the real world (Bangs, 2011, p. 29).

Experiential learning is an interdisciplinary pedagogical tool based on management, education and psychology (Bevan & Kipka, 2012, p. 193). It is used to provide students with “*real life*” or “*hands-on*” experiences to inform their understanding (Montgomery & Millenbah, 2011, p. 45). Experiential learning encourages holistic learning based on action and reflection (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In 1938, Dewey coined the term “*theory of experience.*” Dewey’s original theory was expanded by Kolb in 1984 by postulating that knowledge generation occurs by way of transformation of an experience. According to Bangs (2011, p. 29), the best definition of experiential learning comes from Hoover and Whitehead (1975, as quoted by Gentry, 1990, p. 10):

*Experiential learning skills exist when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively and behaviourally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement.*

One of the key presuppositions of experiential learning is that experiences framed within reflection will lead to better learning (Schön, 1983). One of the greatest benefits of experiential learning is that knowledge retention rates are higher (Kendrick, 1996; Specht & Sandlin, 1991; Van Eynde & Spencer, 1988). Student understanding is not only shaped by what the learners actively do, but also by their own existing personal knowledge and experiences that they bring to the learning context (Bangs, 2011, p. 29). The tutor training relied on this presupposition and encouraged participants to share their own experiences and reflect on these experiences in order to find solutions for challenging scenarios sketched for them.

Furthermore, by experiencing the constructivist approach to learning themselves, participants buy into the idea. The researchers provided participants in the training with the same learning opportunities they are encouraging the participants to create when they facilitate their own tutorials. It is through the experience itself that the participants formulate an understanding of how constructive learning works in practice. It is also through the powerful impact of the learning/training opportunity itself, that participants are made aware of the value of constructivist learning and the value of experiential learning activities for enhanced understanding.

Furman and Siphthorp (2013) explain that experiential learning comprises of various techniques. Some specific examples of these techniques or methods include:

1. Problem-based learning: Students are faced with addressing a particular problem by developing specific courses of action to resolve the problem (Haas & Furman, 2008).
2. Project-based learning creates a project around student interests and enriches it with educational content (Marienau & Reed, 2008; Thomas, 2000).
3. Cooperative learning: Students collaborate on activities and learn from each other's perspectives and past experiences (Hamm & Adams, 1992).
4. Service learning combines educational objectives with community service needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Smith, 2008). However, the objectives of the service should be aligned in such a way that it benefits both students and the particular community. A typical service-learning program might include classroom sessions to prepare and situate the service experience, participation in the actual service experience and finally a reflective component to encourage the student to reflect on their experiences during the service-learning program (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013).
5. Reflective learning encourages students to make abstract connections between theory and practice, providing an opportunity to students to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom elsewhere (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013).

These techniques are not entirely distinct from each other. They describe different perspectives developed by different schools of thought at different times. They can be used either independently or interdependently. Furman and Sibthorp (2013, p. 19) emphasise that experiential learning activities enhance depth, but not necessarily breadth, meaning that it is not always suited to courses aimed at providing an introduction to a discipline or an overview of a particular field. Content-heavy courses are therefore less suited to these learning techniques. The tutor training program does not have a lot of content per se, but rather the focus is on developing awareness about the role of a facilitator. The transformation learners are meant to go through during the learning process is built on the premise of constructivism where they learner actively builds his/her own knowledge and skills during the learning opportunity (Dewey, 1938; 1963). For this reason, experiential learning techniques are perfectly suited to the tutor training program and its contents.

Participants were in the unique position where they have had past experiences as students themselves. They were thus in the perfect position to identify tutorials that were facilitated effectively and tutorials that were not facilitated effectively. Cooperative brainstorming activities allowed them to identify the skills tutors need and the different situations tutors might face in a classroom setting. Each individual participant had an opportunity to identify anticipated problems or challenges they might face. These problems were then discussed in groups and shared with the larger group so that everyone had an opportunity to learn from each other.

Participants had time for reflection after each activity and received instructions on one final task. The final assessment task required participants to prepare and facilitate their own tutorial. The simulated tutorials provided the researchers with an opportunity to assess to what degree the participants were able to reconstruct the underlying teaching philosophy proposed during the training into a personal teaching philosophy. Furthermore, the researchers were able to assess to what extent participants incorporated things learned during the training into their own practice to deal with different situations based on the solutions they identified themselves while participating in their peer groups.

The simulations provided an experiential learning opportunity with a feedback loop as participants were able to receive feedback on their tutoring practice and the extent to which they have managed to incorporate the philosophy of constructive alignment into their own teaching practice. After conducting the simulations, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and identify the things that were most useful or helpful to their learning, the things they learnt that they can apply to other areas of their lives, and the skills or knowledge they have come to realise they lack and would like to acquire. At the end of the training, participants evoked the motivation for learning and the need for self-improvement voluntarily. The researchers had managed to motivate the participants to become self-reflective educators by awaking their own individual awareness of the importance of their role as tutors.

Klein and Riordan (2011, p. 36) argue that for educators to actively engage learners, the educators themselves must be actively involved in the process of experiential learning. In other words, the educators themselves should have an opportunity to reflect upon and learn from their experiences in the educational setting. This is why the researchers selected to actively reflect on their observations and experiences when they conducted the training. Reflecting on the process enabled their own personal learning and growth and every time the training was repeated with another group, it evolved as the facilitators evolved. Changes to the process were introduced to enhance understanding and to ensure an educational environment that would challenge the participants sufficiently but that would also simulate or create experiences that will cement their understanding.

The roots of experiential learning can be traced to the ideas of German-born educator, Kurt Hahn (Klein & Riordan, 2011, p. 37). Hahn believed that moral development should accompany academic learning. He emphasised powerful experiences that would help students develop their true capabilities whilst learning about morality and leadership (Hahn, 1965). According to Simon Sinek (2009), leadership is about inspiring others to take action. “*People do not buy what you do; they buy why you do it*” (Sinek, 2009). Thus, to create awareness with new leaders, one has to convince them of the motivation for doing something. In the context of the tutor training program, the researchers had to convince the participants of their philosophy on teaching as the philosophy encompasses the reasons why they teach. True leadership requires that the leader sets an example to followers. A follower will buy into an idea if the leader can inspire the follower to believe what he believes.

## **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

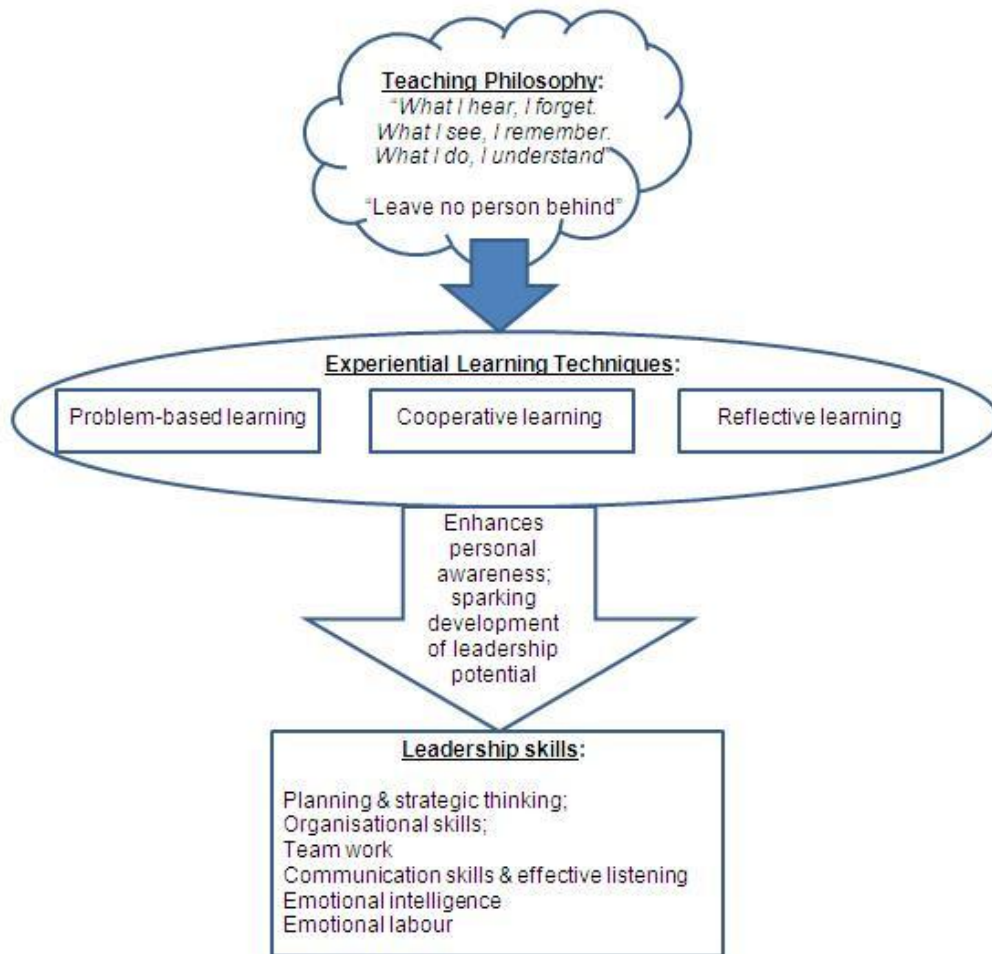
Although this training program was initially developed from an operational need, the researchers soon realised that this training program also provided an opportunity for leadership development. The terms *leadership education* and *leadership development* are often used interchangeably (Burke & Collins, 2005, p. 976). However, these terms mean different things. Leadership education refers to structured university or college-based programs that equip leaders with the necessary academic knowledge. Leadership development, on the other hand, includes a broader spectrum of learning activities aimed at developing leadership capability. These include seminars and mentoring interventions and often involves a process where “*facilitators lead participants through a series of activities or mental exercises, encouraging them to reflect on learning experiences in order to promote transfer of knowledge and skills to work contexts*” (Burke & Collins, 2005, p. 976).

Leadership development programs do not just focus on technical job skills. Effective leadership development recognises that a leader operates and grows within a social context. For this reason, leadership requires that an individual’s personal development takes place within the context of the social systems he/she operates in. The social system would include organisational strategies, missions and goals (Olivares, 2008, p. 531; Olivares, Peterson & Hess, 2007, p. 79). As Day (2001) suggests, leadership development seeks to build an individual’s intrapersonal competence. Therefore, the focus is on enhancing self-awareness, changing participants’ attitudes,

building teams and human networks of trust and commitment and improving interpersonal interactions (Burke & Collins, 2005; Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004). This intentional forward-looking process seeks to enhance organisational members’ collective capacity through human-centred and goal-inspired relationships. Leadership development is therefore an evolutionary and social process, connoting a socio-cognitive shift where both the individual leader and the organisation are better equipped to adapt to changing circumstances (Olivares, 2008, p. 531).

The tutor training program thus represents the starting point of the leadership development process. If the facilitators are successful in teaching participants to become reflective practitioners, the entire tutoring experience becomes a leadership development opportunity. The interaction with students, supervisors and peers represent the social context within which the intrapersonal learning and development of competencies evolves. Figure 1 illustrates how the tutor training program served as a leadership development opportunity and developed particular leadership capabilities with participants.

The researchers summarised their teaching philosophy in two key phrases: “*What I hear I forget, what I see I remember, what I do I understand*” and “*Leave no person behind.*” These key phrases were meant to illustrate the role of the tutor in facilitating student learning by developing activities that ensured all students are actively engaged with the learning material. In essence, it is not what the tutor does that matters but, rather, what the student does since it determines what he/she learns.



**Figure 1: The Translation of a Teaching Philosophy into Experiential Learning Activities for the Development of Leadership Capability**

The teaching philosophy was reflected in three experiential learning techniques: 1) problem-based learning, 2) cooperative learning, and 3) reflective learning. Through these activities, participants to the tutor training were encouraged to cooperate in identifying problems, as well as solutions, and to discuss how they would facilitate their own tutorials. Opportunities for individual reflection encouraged learners to translate the abstract activities and discussions into personal knowledge and understanding. The activities were aimed at creating awareness and at providing the participants with an opportunity to develop certain leadership skills.

By having to plan and facilitate their own tutorials, the participants developed planning and strategic thinking skills as well as organisational skills. Through brainstorming and problem-solving activities, participants learned teamwork skills. During the tutor training, the facilitators also explained to participants that by accepting a role as a tutor, they become part of a teaching team as they are there to provide teaching support to a particular lecturer on a particular subject. They have to learn how to work with their lecturer to ensure that the learning objectives of the particular subject they will be tutoring is achieved. During the simulations, participants are assessed on their ability to clearly explain difficult theories or concepts, as well as their ability to effectively respond to student questions. This develops their communication and listening skills. By discussing how they would deal with difficult situations during their simulated tutorials, participants also develop their emotional intelligence and their ability to display emotional labour when confronted with having to facilitate a tutorial.

From the individual reflections that participants submit at the end of the training, the researchers are able to determine what the participants learned and which aspects of the training had the biggest impact on them. Participants share their views on what it requires to be an effective tutor and highlight the key skills they developed during the training program. The training setting provides participants with an opportunity to facilitate their first tutorial and participants are thus able to reflect on this experience before facilitating their first tutorials with their assigned groups of students in the particular subjects they will be tutoring.

## **CONCLUSION**

The tutor training discussed in this article was birthed from an operational need. However, the researchers soon realised that the tutor training program represents a unique opportunity for leadership development. The researcher's teaching philosophy is based on the ideas of constructivist and experiential learning and the training is the platform where this philosophy can be communicated through actual activities aimed at allowing participants to experience constructivist and experiential learning first-hand. The format of the training furnishes participants with the basic principles that underlie the researchers' philosophy on teaching and gives them an opportunity to internalise this philosophy so that it becomes their "truth." Active reflection on their experience and their own practice encourages them to translate this "truth" into their own unique personal philosophy on teaching.

The tutor training thus becomes the first step on a journey of personal leadership development. With every new tutorial facilitated, the tutor has an opportunity to develop their facilitation skills and enhance the leadership skills acquired during the tutor training. It is expected that the tutors improve their teamwork skills and their ability to address challenging situations in an emotionally responsible manner, as well as apply the requisite emotional labour cues, since as their role unfolds over time, they are presented with more opportunities to reflect on their practice and improve their skill set.

The researchers gain a deeper understanding of their own teaching practice by observing how this "truth" is internalised by the participants and executed in its different forms. Every training session provides the researchers with an opportunity to learn and improve their own teaching practice, helping them stay true to the principles they are trying to inspire in those who participate in the training.

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