

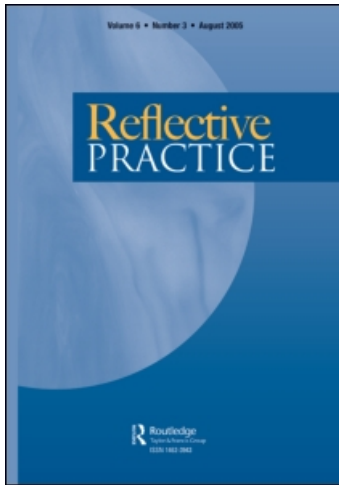
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Thoughtpiece: Measuring self-esteem through reflective writing: essential factors in workforce development for inner-city adults

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This paper analyzes the influence of self-esteem on the professional success of inner-city adults in the workplace. The study used processes of reflective learning, particularly mentoring and reflective writing or journaling, as the research method to assess levels of self-esteem in students attending a workforce certification program at Columbia University, USA. These narratives focus on how students balance their personal and professional lives in an intensive technology training program which leads to subsequent employment in large corporations. The model used to measure self-esteem was the Inner-City Workplace Literacy Arc, a rubric researchers use to chart program participants' progress through assessments of their journal narratives. Specifically, this paper addresses one participant's trajectory on the Arc over 16 months, demonstrating how it charts students' cognitive growth necessary for workforce success. Daniel, the male student discussed in this paper, started the workforce certification program at great socio-economic deficit and with very low self-esteem. During the course of the program he cultivated a positive self-concept through writing his thoughts and experiences, sharing them with mentors and receiving their consistent social support. He went on to achieve success in an information technology job at a large company. Daniel's experience is representative of that of other students in the program as well, who demonstrate that inner city adults who cultivate self-esteem through self-reflection and reliance on mentors are found to have high levels of workforce success, regardless of academic scores. The results of the study suggest that inner-city young adults' self-esteem should be monitored and fostered, through close mentoring relationships and through reflective writing, to improve their chances of professional success. The Inner-City Workplace Literacy Arc facilitates this process by tracking students' development in these areas.

Keywords: workforce development; self-esteem; reflective writing

Researching self views and personal development

The Reflective Writing and Mentoring study responds to Swann, Chang-Schneider, and McClarty's (2007) suggestion that research systematically detail how individuals' improved self-views can be 'meaningfully related to socially significant outcomes' (p. 90) by finding that as urban young adults learn Information Technology in an environment where mentors consistently encourage them for successes in classroom projects, employment settings, group discussions and reflection through weekly journaling, students can increase their self-efficacy and self-esteem. As Dewey (1933) and

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Hullfish and Smith (1978) contend, the use of reflection supports an implied purpose, where individuals reflect with a future orientation in order to improve their learning behaviors.

This study was conducted in a community outreach program at Columbia University called Service Learning in a Community Environment (SLICE), from September 2004 to January 2006. This program selected inner-city young adults from surrounding low-income communities to participate in a four-semester technology certification course. Students who showed aptitude and dedication were employed as part-time IT specialists at local companies. Upon graduation, they became eligible for full-time employment.

Students' reflective journals were plotted along The Inner-City Workplace Literacy Arc. The Arc is a developmental model based on Heath's (1968) work, and derived from the work of Langer and Knefelkamp (2001). Designed to assess individual development in six sectors of workplace literacy, each in relation to five developmental stages of labor market culture, it identifies students' abilities to move through progressive stages in the assimilated uses of workplace literacy (see Knefelkamp, 1999; Langer, 2003).

The 'Self-esteem' sector of the Arc measures the student's belief that he can succeed personally and professionally. This belief includes a devotion to learning and self-improvement, self-evaluation, resilience when faced with personal and professional challenges, and the ability to confirm one's business disposition independently of others' evaluations (Langer, 2003.)

Studying and fostering Daniel's self-esteem: The Arc as interface

When Daniel, an African American man in his early twenties, started the SLICE program he struggled with low confidence and shyness. Gradually, he formed strong friendships with his classmates and began to trust his teachers and program mentors. Daniel's journaling demonstrates that by the program's final semester, he could recognize his need to reach out to others and express certainty about his achievements at work. Today Daniel maintains an information technology job in a large corporation and still shows confidence in his abilities to interact with diverse colleagues and to continue learning. His progress on the Arc in Figure 1 is color-coded: dark grey = semester 2, light grey = semester 3, textured grey = semester 4.

Concept recognition/self-esteem (semesters 2–4)

Early in semester two, Daniel wrote, 'I feel as though I'm going to fail ... and be kicked out of the program' while expressing in the same journal entry, 'I did do successful things professionally such as complete projects', thus recognizing his conflicted feelings about the slow process of learning. Nonetheless, he points out his own cognitive and emotional development in semester three when he writes, 'I am working on changing ... areas of my life by ... letting the teachers know ... the subject I need help on'. He then recognizes, 'I could of [sic] gotten an A [on a test] but each question had one mistake that effected [sic] the whole question'. Here Daniel reflects on his errors, in addition to acknowledging that he was close to academic success.

The Arc highlights Daniel's progress by charting when he acknowledged the role of self-esteem in his development, and by logging his journal narratives in this regard.

Self-esteem					
Community and Ethnic Solidarity					
Socio-Economic Values					
Business Culture					
Technology					
Cognition					
Stages of Workplace Norm Assimilation	Concept Recognition	Multiple Workplace Perspectives	Comprehension of Business Process	Workplace Competence	Professional Independence

Figure 1. Daniel’s Arc.

It continues to illuminate Daniel’s advancement in self-esteem by pointing to his growth during the final SLICE semester, when he is fully ensconced in his courses and his IT work at the corporation.

Multiple workplace perspectives/self-esteem and comprehension of business process/self-esteem (semester 4)

In the Multiple Workplace Perspectives stage, Daniel notes this source for his self-confidence: ‘... knowing that I will be able to do something the next day. For example, knowing that I will go to work or school. Even when I don’t want to or when I know that something I don’t want to do or bad is going to happen’. He then points out that he has achieved the maturity to ‘face the problem head on’. Daniel next takes the role of a teacher or supervisor and analyzes his own responses to problems, citing where he plans to improve according to his imagination of this external voice or judgment: ‘I wish I could tell myself that I’m going to do something and actually do it. There has been many times in which I say I’m going to do something and I stop ... I really need to try and stick to one thing’.

Later, in the Comprehension of Business Process stage, Daniel relates his memories of constant childhood anger, but then writes:

I had a very good ... past two weeks in the final term. For my work part, I will be going to a hotel for three days for a project that I’m doing. I will have to go to workshops and do other things. This is going to be great!

Here, Daniel’s newly found academic success resounds with his optimism for working on his project and attending workshops on a trip for his company.

Conclusion

The Reflective Writing and Mentoring study uses the Inner-City Workplace Literacy Arc to track and analyze inner-city adult improvements in learning IT and developing self-esteem, by drawing on their personal reflections through journaling. Daniel's case illustrates that students often bring troubled self-views to training programs, and that maximizing their chances to succeed academically and in the labor market requires fostering their self-esteem by helping them complete objective successes in IT training and business practices, through mentorship, reflective writing, and closely monitoring their progress.

Note on contributor

Dr Arthur M. Langer is the Senior Director of the Center for Technology, Innovation, and Community Engagement at Columbia University's Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science. He is on the faculties in the Department of Organization and Leadership at the Graduate School of Education (Teachers College) and Associate Director of Instruction and Curricular Development for Programs in Information Technology in the School of Continuing Education. Dr Langer is also Chairman of Workforce Outsource Services, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing scholarships and job opportunities to under-served populations.

Dr Langer is the author of *Information Technology & Organizational Learning* (2005), *Applied Ecommerce* (2002), *Analysis & Design of Information Systems* (2000), and *The Art of Analysis* (1997) and has published numerous articles and papers relating to workforce development, organizational integration, mentoring, and staff development. He consults with organizations and corporations throughout the world.

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