Embodying Authentic Leadership Through Popular Education at Highlander Research and Education Center

A Qualitative Case Study

Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, PhD[1] and Wendy Griswold, PhD[2]

Abstract: In 2013 and 2014, workshops were held at Highlander Research and Education Center that explored the topics of authentic leadership and popular education. The participants shared their experiences through reflective writing upon completion of the workshops and approximately a year following. These reflections were developed into a case study. This article describes how the workshops influenced the participants as they recognized personal and professional changes and impacts made from the Highlander experience. Four topics informed the analysis of workshop participants' experiences: participation training, authentic leadership, popular education, and the position of Highlander as a historic place of learning for social justice. The themes found in the study were sorted into clusters that included (a) primacy of place and inspiration; (b) authentic leadership; (c) collaboration and community building through art and storytelling, humor, and trust; (d) self-discovery and transformation; and (e) direct applications and further action.

Keywords: popular education, Highlander, critical reflection, authentic leadership, lived experience

> " **WHEN WE CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THROUGH ART AND SITTING IN THE CIRCLE, IT LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD AND CAN BRIDGE DIFFERENCES BY SHARING LEADERSHIP.** "

Highlander is lore; Highlander exists. Unlike the Knights of the Round Table, participants sit in rocking chairs, but like the Knights they gathered to work for social justice. Highlander's history attracted me to the place . . . I was not disappointed; the spirit and culture was alive in the mountain view, the rocking chairs, the art work, and ghosts of heroes.

—Quote from a 2013 participant

Social justice and authentic leadership are at the core of adult education today. The discipline works alongside and in contrast to notions of professionalization, neoliberalism, and the requirement to learn for employment. Adult educators are in a position to

support all people who are learning to claim their power and their voice, working toward a more equitable and just world. Highlander Research and Education Center has been a hub for this challenging work for more than 80 years (Glen, 1996; Horton, 1998).

Since my master's degree program, I (Michelle) had dreamed of engaging with and learning from the popular education and participatory action research approaches found at Highlander. In 2009, this dream came true, and I was able to facilitate a course examining community education and sustainable foods systems at the Highlander Center set in the mountains of Tennessee. The experience was rich and joyful (Glowacki-Dudka, Dotson, Londt, & Young, 2012). I vowed to come back again with some of the same participants. So in 2013 and then again in 2014, I invited adult educators from my home institution and from around the country to participate in a Highlander experience examining what it meant to be an authentic leader. This article is based on the written reflections from the participants in the 2013 and 2014 workshops.

This qualitative research study is part of a larger project examining (a) why people attended the Highlander sessions, (b) how they perceived the experience itself, and (c) what were the short- and long-term impacts and changes from this experience. In this article, we focus on the third research question, the personal and professional changes and impacts made from the Highlander experience.

Review of the Literature

Four literature bases informed the analysis of workshop participants' experiences. We used participation training to focus on shared leadership in group settings. Authentic leadership seeks to bring what is genuine to the forefront. Popular education engages the least powerful in decision making and the position of Highlander as a historic place of learning for social justice.

Participation Training

"One of the best ways of educating people is to give them an experience that embodies what you are trying to teach" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998, p. 68). Transformation that shapes values and character can be accomplished through dynamic interaction between student and teacher (Coleman, 2007). Change can occur more rapidly and efficiently when collaborating with others who are committed to a shared cause. However, group work may not be a natural process for some, so training is the key. According to Earnest and Treff (2011), participation training includes the development and application of shared planning, shared leadership, shared decision making, shared evaluation, two-way communication, voluntary participation, and mutual trust. It is a collective process, whereby members can participate fairly and equally, while building consensus as united owners of the changes they wish to take place.

Authentic Leadership

Horton made listening seem simple. Being able to listen intently to others is one desirable characteristic in authentic leadership (Adams, 1991). Horton also looked for people to work at Highlander who cared more about others than they cared about themselves (Braden, 1991). He looked for people who could multiply and expand what he was doing, using Highlander as a yeasty culture in reaching out to others, working toward social justice and equality (Horton, 1998). Preskill and Brookfield (2009) describe authentic leadership to be a reciprocal relationship, where the leader has a sincere interest in being understandable to others, while seeking to understand those being led. Highlander has a history of developing authentic leaders.

Popular Education

Popular education is related to the idea of "education for all" (Braster, 2011, p. 1). Popular education is devoid of traditional teaching methods, but instead manifests through a rich learning environment and co-constructed knowledge (Burke & Dudek, 2010). Students of popular education may be marginalized by social injustices, but they learn to challenge the world around them politically, economically, and socially (Choules, 2007). This type of education reaches out to the masses, educating and inspiring them to work toward equality (Ball, 2013). Popular education creates safe spaces that encourage debate and dissent, resulting in more democratic dialogue (Crowther, 2013).

Outcomes From Highlander Workshops

Adult education has traditionally held a focus on lifelong learning (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013). This

quest for lifelong learning, as well as a desire for social justice, is conceivably what draws participants to attend workshops like those held at Highlander. The sessions allow us to learn about ourselves and others (Guy, 2007). Reasons for attending may extend to learning about and addressing issues such as race, class, and gender. In particular, the 2013 and 2014 sessions at Highlander were designed around the principles of authentic leadership. In analyzing the data collected from these workshops, we sought to understand participant perceptions of the experience, immediately following and then up to a year after. The primary goal was to learn what impact the workshops had on their lives and how each implemented what they had learned.

Overview of Highlander

In the early 1930s, founder Myles Horton envisioned Highlander as an institution that modeled people supporting each another in common efforts toward a vision of democracy and social justice (Braden, 1991). Much of Highlander's cultural heritage is linked through song and poetry (Carawan & Carawan, 1991). For decades, people at Highlander have learned to work together using dialogue, along with artistic and cultural underpinnings, supporting a tradition and methodology that continues today. Since its inception in 1932, its educational programs have focused on people learning to negotiate, manage, and resist dominant systems and institutions that marginalize them (Clark & Greer, 1991). Highlander's educational programs are focused on nurturing local leaders who are capable of building sustainable groups in their communities after their experience at Highlander.

The context and setting add a unique environment to Highlander as it is set in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee close to Knoxville. As it is rather isolated, participants often stay on-site for the duration of the workshop. The residential workshop center includes lodging and chef-prepared, organic, and local food, as well as a fire pit, a farm with animals and a community garden, acres of certified organic apple and peach orchard, Horton's house, and an outdoor pavilion.

Overview of the 2013 and 2014 Experiences

In 2013 and 2014, workshops sponsored by Ball State University were held during the second week of May. About 12 participants attended each workshop. The weather was pleasant, and the views were lovely. We began each day singing with Highlander staff. Susan Williams, coordinator of the Highlander Library/Resource Center and co-coordinator of the Education Team, introduced us to the methods and history of Highlander. Dr. Marje Treff and Dr. Stephen Earnest used aspects of participation training and adult development to facilitate part of the overall program. As popular education embraces the arts, music, and theater, we incorporated these aspects into each workshop, encouraging learners to work individually or in teams to create something that would demonstrate their own authentic leadership. We also used the social time to continue the creative process through dance, song, playing charades, and telling stories by the campfire, while getting to know each other better. Each workshop ended by developing action items and ideas to take back to our own workplaces or homes to perpetuate the Highlander experience.

Differences Between the Workshops 2013 and 2014

Each year, the workshops were planned and marketed to the adult education community with slightly different purposes. Both workshops centered on notions of authentic leadership, its definition, and how to become a more authentic leader within each learner's context. The formal 2013 workshop purposes included the examination of leadership qualities through a popular education and action-centered lens; sharing stories of women in leadership positions; and using popular education and arts to embody leadership themes and stories. In 2013, the participants were mostly women. We spent time together telling stories of successes and challenges to our leadership practices.

Participants from 2013 collectively developed the learning goals for 2014, which were used to market the program. They included defining and recognizing authentic leadership; understanding the history of Highlander; engaging in community dialogue; establishing a new community of leaders; generating new perceptions of group leadership; developing a diverse framework for personal leadership styles; and creating an open, diverse, and nurturing environment. These goals were somewhat more academic than in

2013, attracting a different mix of people, who came from three countries (United States, Ireland, and Canada). The participants were more diverse geographically, by age and by gender. Each also had his or her own expectations, motives, and intended personal outcomes for this experience. The workshop was somewhat more structured in 2014 with participation training as a key component of the learning, alongside an introduction to Highlander, and a creative time of using the arts to demonstrate their overall learning.

Method

The research team included workshop participants from at least one of the Highlander workshops. For our research, we utilized an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) to provide insight into the experiences and outcomes of the workshops. The two sessions are considered one bounded case study as the topic, and much of the experience was the same for both 2013 and 2014 (Merriam, 2009). Participants in the workshops were invited to provide written reflections about their experience, focusing on their intentions and expectations in attending, the experience itself, their personal outcomes and plans, and their long-range plans or activities. They wrote on these topics immediately following and again at least 6 months after the workshops. In March 2015, seven workshop participants met to engage in a 90-min focus group to again reflect on their current uses of and impact from the Highlander workshops. The Institutional Review Board approved this study as exempt and approved the data collection and analysis methods used.

The 26 written reflections (with names removed) were divided into sets of four reflections. Each set of reflections was reviewed, coded, and analyzed by at least two members from the research team, all of whom were workshop participants. Researchers coded data from the opposite year from when they participated. Partnered pairs next compared their coding results to ensure trustworthiness and consistency of the research. Although the partnered pairs of the research team analyzed in depth one set of four written reflections, they also had access to all the reflections to add any supplementary themes, and to support the findings of the other members.

The research process served as an extension of the workshop, providing a way for participants to revisit the experience and further engage in individual and group meaning making. An Excel worksheet was provided where each research question was listed to organize the data. The research team members read the reflections, found meaningful quotes, and shared their own interpretive themes of the reflections, as well as any further in-depth analysis of the assigned reflections.

As a final process for consistency and trustworthiness, the full research team then reassembled for a second session to discuss the data and findings, ultimately reaching a final consensus. Keywords were assigned to the themes and conclusions drawn through dialogue while discussing the data. Self-selected workshop participants who chose to continue collaboration as a part of the research team included Crissy Vetor-Suits, Susan Londt, Lenen Nicola, Julee Rosser, Julia Dotson, and Amy Ward.

Findings

This section presents the study's findings organized by themes related to what impact the workshops had on their lives and how participants implemented what they had learned personally, academically, or professionally. The themes are sorted into clusters that include (a) primacy of place and inspiration; (b) authentic leadership; (c) collaboration and community building through art and storytelling, humor, and trust; (d) self-discovery and transformation; and (e) direct applications and further action.

Primacy of Place and Inspiration

Highlander Research and Education Center is set on top of a mountain in New Market, Tennessee. It is an inspiring and beautiful place isolated from larger communities that helps create an environment of trust and safety for people to connect with each other alongside the beauty of the place, the history embodied in the buildings, rocking chairs, and scenic views as they develop new relationships toward a common goal (Horton, 1998).

When asked about the location and space, participants described "an overwhelming peace and awe at the beauty of our surroundings." They also shared, "The excitement I felt over being in the room

with the rocking chairs. I have seen pictures of others sitting in these chairs; now it was my turn!"

The physical workspace, "setup with examples or demonstrations on the smart board and the large dry erase board is setup with columns . . . focus[ed] on tasks, objectives and action steps," provided opportunities to "collaborate and brainstorm to reach the best possible answer to our topic question or statement."

A few of the participants attended multiple workshops at Highlander and said that it "felt like I was returning home." One participant explained,

> The lessons I took away from a second encounter in New Market is that the place is not necessarily magical, but that the staff are wizards at taking the amenities that they have and using them to help people relax enough to share and problem solve together, even an entire room full of leaders.

Many participants shared this sentiment: "I would love to come back and explore more of the library and archives that we were briefly exposed to us. The rich history of Highlander cannot be easily assimilated in a few days."

Authentic Leadership

Both workshops had the theme of authentic leadership, and as we progressed through workshop days, we developed a collective definition. The definition included actions such as taking responsibility, building community capacity, involving group members in shaping discussions and meeting agendas, seeking to grow through involving others, expanding, allowing others to grow, trusting in the wisdom of others, having courage, conveying safety, being comfortable with ambiguity, and healing wounds. Other aspects of authentic leadership are not holding a grudge, not reacting in fear, and not building empires (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009).

At times, the workshop participants noticed where others were not demonstrating authentic leadership, such as when someone "told a story that included strong triggers" and when others were "not aware of the power dynamics at play within the group." They realized that authentic leadership often comes through

awareness, reflection, and deep listening. "Listening not for fixing but hearing people . . . listening long enough, well enough, being trusting and asking not judging."

As one develops these skills, they also "find how you can incorporate your authenticity in a storm of chaos," especially when transferring this learning to other settings. In other settings, creating the environment is important before a group can take on aspects of authentic leadership. "Transparency is the first step in creating productive liaisons." It is essential to "find out what people expect and work toward those expectations" through "formulating a vision and mission statement with detailed goals to move the message forward." It allows and welcomes input from others to keep the group on track and projects moving forward.

When describing a meeting that occurred a few months after the workshop, one participant shared that she had

> a good enough understanding of the concept [of authentic leadership] to help others on the journey and to model authentic leadership in a meaningful fashion . . . I decided to put the onus for creating the agenda on the group members. At the outset of the meeting, I gave each person the opportunity to share what they wanted to cover and discuss and after a five minute conversation, our meeting agenda was set. We proceeded to have one of the best and most productive and efficient meetings in our history.

Collaboration and Community Building Through Art and Storytelling, Humor, and Trust

Much of the Highlander experience is based on collaborating and building a learning community by using art, storytelling, and humor within an environment of trust (Horton, 1998). People were "inspired to action through the message of song," as well as using the arts in a creative and accessible way. The participants were very articulate about how this was established in the workshops.

To build a safe and productive community, trust is the first thing to establish. During the workshops, this

occurred both formally and informally. Just being part of the group and having the courage to participate in the workshops took a certain level of trust. Coming to an unfamiliar space helped equalize the group. One participant noted that "worries about fitting in with the group were quickly dispelled." The 2013 workshop was safe and collaborative, and the group wanted more instruction after dinner: "Never before has a group wanted more." The facilitators went to bed while this group stayed engaged: "Someone suggested playing charades. I must confess this would not have been my activity of choice, but I made a conscious decision to remain with the group and take this personal risk."

The 2014 workshop had more discontent and a different level of trust. This can be seen through this statement: "Discontent grows with expectancy violation and higher levels of uncertainty. To avoid it, find out what people expect and give clear plan of what to expect." As the participants reflected on the experience, they used the struggle as a learning opportunity and were able to bond through the experience. Some of the participants even thought that the conflict could have been contrived to demonstrate how to resolve issues together: "We have been able to identify strengths and weaknesses within our group and now we are working more collaboratively and cohesively."

One of the participants explained,

What I've learned from Highlander (from all three of my experiences there) is the acceptance of life experience as a legitimate form of intelligence . . . People of all walks of life met at Highlander and when they tackled a communal challenge with whatever means they possessed, the problem was solved for them and ultimately many others.

Self-Discovery and Transformation

Activities during the workshops led participants to self-discovery and transformation through the development of affirmations, critical reflection, power, and resistance. Highlander and popular education emphasize that life experience itself can be a "legitimate form of intelligence." People do not have to be scholars to bring something to the learning environment, especially when they are reflecting

critically on the experience to understand the influences of power, society, and culture in shaping the interpretations (Braster, 2011). They found ways to "compile [their] own definition about power and how to claim it rather than giving it to another or taking it away." Popular education can affect individuals or a vast group quietly "in the form of personal insights that emerged from an intense experience . . . I feel like I am learning who I really am inside."

One participant shared during the closing session at Highlander:

I used my learning to make changes and impacts amongst my family first. My relationship will benefit because after discussing the learning that evolved, [my husband] and I will continue to discuss how power and societal power affect our relationship and family dynamics. We value how our pre-established values and biases affect our son and us as a couple. We work very hard to therapeutically grow and evolve together.

Direct Applications and Further Action

Each of the participants shared lessons that they took home and used directly, as well as how they have integrated ideas, strategies, and reflections from Highlander in their professional and personal practice. Some participants anticipated personal and professional change even before the sessions started. One shared that she "came away with the motivation and excitement, or a revival of my spirit, to implement the workshop into my daily living."

Other participants used this workshop experience as a capstone in their graduate or professional development programs.

I have commenced my journey as a college instructor; this is where my experience at Highlander becomes a well from which to draw. I am finding ways to create community, build shared experiences, and light that creative spark in my students by having the prior experience that we all shared on that mountain.

When reflecting on the experiences at Highlander, another participant shared,

I don't really know if these words can do justice to what my life is becoming, mostly because of Highlander last summer. I wouldn't be the same had I not gone . . . I feel like the experience changed who I was as a person, or maybe just made me more of who I really am inside. It brought many things out of me that I had at one time been afraid to do.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Future Implications

In this article, we shared the experiences and findings from two workshops at Highlander Research and Education Center. While the setting of Highlander is an important component of the learning and experience, the popular education model and participation training tools can be used in many contexts. In this section, we present some of the key ideas to help educators who want to utilize these strategies in their own community learning settings.

Highlander provides a learning environment where people from all walks of life can quickly come together to experience the deep-rooted history of the past and expand the lessons learned for the future. The trust that was built in such a short time proved to be valuable for creativity to blossom. Infusing the process with art and humor supported a deeper level of collaboration. The community learned to problem solve, express and explore ideas, and become a force of confident individuals going back into the world to educate and continue the application process (Horton & Freire, 1990).

When we create an environment through art and sitting in the circle, it levels the playing field and can bridge differences by sharing leadership, so everyone has the opportunity to act as a leader. Together, we quilt our experiences. Singing, dancing, and making art together also provide another form of communication that can flatten power dynamics and bring people out who may not otherwise participate (Ball, 2013).

Popular education is an approach in which each person can develop shared leadership roles and where everyone is the expert. Collective leadership is used to construct the group process and allow each person to have a voice in the direction and outcomes of the project. Having one formal leader or expert setting the way can undermine the process (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009).

Flexibility is essential, but there also needs to be a structure that undergirds the process. The facilitator should be transparent in proposing structure ahead of time, and then provide some background related to the goals and outcomes. Tangible tasks to try out and practice put people at ease, knowing they may fail but will do so in a safe environment. For example, having some participants observe and reflect on the process of decision making provides a different perspective and practice for future situations (Earnest & Treff, 2011).

The idea of place is key. Establishing a sense of trust and safety in the environment is important for people to open up, share, and learn from each other. Certainly, this cannot be perfect and at times, conflict and struggle force a different type of learning. Being the "survivor" of a difficult experience can make a stronger bond between group members. While it is challenging to bring people together and build consensus, the circle helps include everyone in discussions and can also dissipate conflict. It is worth it.

Authors' Note

The research team includes Crissy Vetor-Suits, Susan Londt, Lenen Nicola, Julee Rosser, Julia Dotson, and Amy Ward.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Adams, F. (1991). In the company of a listener. *Social Policy*, *21*, 31-34.

Ball, J. A. (2013). Hip-hop fight club: Radical theory, education, and practice in and beyond the classroom. *Radical Teacher*, *97*, 50-61.

Braden, A. (1991). Doing the impossible. *Social Policy*, *21*, 26-30.

Braster, S. (2011). The people, the poor, and the oppressed: The concept of popular education through time. *Paedagogica Historica*, *47*, 1-14.

Burke, C., & Dudek, M. (2010). Experiences of learning within a twentieth-century radical experiment in education:

Prestolee School, 1919–1952. *Oxford Review of Education, 36*, 203-218.

Carawan, G., & Carawan, C. (1991). I'm gonna let it shine singing in Highlander. *Social Policy, 21*, 44-47.

Choules, K. (2007). Social change education: Context matters. *Adult Education Quarterly, 57*, 159-176.

Clark, M., & Greer, C. (1991). A culture of politics. *Social Policy, 21*, 53-56.

Coleman, M. A. (2007). Transforming to teach: Teaching religion to today's Black college student. *Teaching Theology & Religion, 10*, 95-100.

Crowther, J. (2013). Popular education, power, and democracy. *Adults Learning, 24*(4), 44-49.

Earnest, S. E., & Treff, M. E. (2011). *Plan, practice, participate: Strategies and skills for enhanced teamwork*. Indianapolis, IN: Earnest & Treff Consulting.

Glen, J. M. (1996). *Highlander: No ordinary school* (2nd ed.). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Glowacki-Dudka, M., Dotson, J., Londt, S., & Young, J. D. (2012). Popular education, participatory research, and local foods at Highlander Research and Education Center. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning, 21*, 73-86.

Gouthro, P., & Holloway, S. (2013). Reclaiming the radical: Using fiction to explore adult learning connected to citizenship. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 45*, 41-58.

Guy, T. C. (2007). Learning who we (and they) are: Popular culture as pedagogy. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 115*, 15-25.

Horton, M., Kohl, J., & Kohl, H. R. (1998). *The long haul: An autobiography*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Preskill, S., & Brookfield, S. (2009). *Learning as a way of leading*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Author Biographies

Michelle Glowacki-Dudka is associate professor of adult, higher, and community education, Department of Educational Studies, Ball State University. Her research interests include community and popular education, critical reflection, program planning and power, and transformative and authentic leadership.

Wendy Griswold is assistant professor of higher and adult education, Department of Leadership, College of Education, University of Memphis. Her research interests include community and popular education, sustainability adult education, participatory action research, and transformative learning.