Digital Memory Box as a Tool for Reflexivity in Researching Leadership Practice

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Abstract

Competent leadership plays a significant role in organisational effectiveness. While this is known, there seems to be a dearth of scholarship on how leadership is researched. Literature suggests there is a paucity of reflexive studies that examine the self as leader. Given this, the focus of this article is on the use of the digital memory box as a tool for reflexivity in researching one’s leadership practice. The article draws on personal history self-study research in which digital memory boxes were used to generate reflexive data about my leadership practice. Using a narrative approach, I make visible the processes involved in the construction of my digital memory boxes, the manner in which they were used to prompt reflexivity of my leadership practice, and the evidence they produced with regard to my leadership practice. The findings point to the generation of complex notions of reflexivity involving researcher, participants, a dialogical partner, and critical friends (Samaras, 2011) in the co-construction of meanings and interpretations of leadership practice. A digital memory box can therefore be a useful tool for reflexivity in researching leadership practice.

Keywords: digital memory box, leadership, leadership practice, reflexivity, self-study

Introduction

There is a significant corpus of scholarship that addresses a positive correlation between competent leadership and effective organisations (Bush, 2010a). There is even a proliferation of literature on leadership theories and styles (Moos, 2011). However, a survey of the leadership literature reveals a dearth of scholarship on how leadership is researched and written about in academia, and its relevance for leadership practice (Warwick, 2011). The sparse body of literature that does interrogate how leadership is researched seems to indicate a heavy reliance on methodologies such as surveys or case studies in leadership research (Muijs, 2011). Reflexive studies that examine the self as leadership practitioner with the aim of both improving one’s practice and simultaneously offering valuable insights for others are few,
and far between. Socrates put reflexivity in perspective when he declared that the “unexamined life is not worth living” (as cited in Brickhouse & Smith, 1994, p. 201). He consequently advised that we must constantly and vigilantly examine all aspects of life, using the powers of reason that we have available to us. Inferring from Socrates, there is therefore a need for leaders to examine their practice. They need to engage in deep reflexivity to excavate multiple layers of the self in order to reveal the complexities and nuances that characterise their practice and, at the same time, to serve as a springboard for transformed practice.

Given this, could a digital memory box be a key to triggering reflexivity when studying one’s leadership practice? This article explores the use of digital memory boxes as tools for reflexivity in personal history self-study research into my leadership practice. In so doing I make visible the processes involved in the construction of digital memory boxes, the manner in which they were used to prompt reflexivity of my leadership practice, and the evidence they produced with regard to my leadership practice. The article also highlights the role played by my research mentor, Inba Naicker, as dialogical partner in the self-study of my leadership practice.

The article commences by unpacking what is meant by leadership and leadership practice. It goes on to explain what constitutes a digital memory box and thereafter, I interrogate different notions of reflexivity. Next, a brief description of the methodology is presented. This is followed by narrative accounts of the construction of the digital memory boxes, how the digital memory boxes were used to evoke reflexivity, and the insights the digital memory boxes provided into my leadership practice. The aim of these narrative accounts is to offer “more than the telling of stories . . . [by also considering] . . . the way we create and recreate our realities and ourselves” (Giovannoli, 2013, p. 2). I conclude the article by looking at the implications of digital memory boxes as tools for reflexivity in researching leadership practice.

Leadership and Leadership Practice

Leadership is a contested concept and is used differently in different countries by different people (Grant, 2009). This is not surprising because leadership is contextual, that is, structurally and culturally specific (Muijs, 2011). This notwithstanding, I draw on Jwan and Ong’ondo (2011) who referred to leadership as a higher set of tasks encompassing goal setting, visioning, and motivating. Leadership, however, cannot be fully understood without reference to management. The two processes complement each other and both are needed for an organisation to prosper (Grant, 2009). To illustrate the close relationship between leadership and management, Schley and Schratz (2011) drew on the yin-yang symbol as metaphor to emphasise how the two terms are intertwined. Management was viewed as an aspect of leadership concerned with the maintenance of performance through planning, organising, co-ordinating, and controlling (Jwan & Ong’ondo, 2011). Thus, in this article whenever the term leadership is used, management is subsumed in the discourse.

The central building blocks in educational leadership and management are, “policy, research, practice, and theory” (Bush, 2010b, p. 266). In this article, I foreground two of the building blocks namely, leadership practice and research. Leadership is a practical activity that takes place in institutions all over the world. It is part of the social world of the institution and is intrinsically linked to the everyday interactions that take place there. In this article, leadership practice refers to the particular instances of leadership as they unfold in the moment-by-moment interactions in a particular place and time (Harris, Moos, Moller, Robertson, & Spillane, 2007). It has to do with what leaders do and the moves they make as they execute tasks in their day-to-day work (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Thus, a school principal encouraging a group of teachers at a staff meeting to improve learner performance is considered an example of leadership practice. Research, on the other hand, is often used to understand or to interrogate practice so that it can be disseminated. Research reports are intended to make good leadership practice available to a wider audience thereby providing the potential for systemic improvement (Bush, 2010b).
Digital Memory Box

A memory box is a physical box created to store letters, photographs, tapes, or any object relating to what is of significance to the box maker (Ebersöhn, Eloff, & Swanepoel-Opper, 2010). The box, in essence, contains the story of the box maker. Everything the box maker puts into the box serves as prompts for memory. Artefacts such as music, photographs, sounds, narratives, colours, and smells may help to invoke memories and the remembering process (O’Reilly-Scanlon, 2002). Visual materials such as photographs help to stimulate memories and serve as triggers to others (participants and/or critical friends) to understand, and experience the moment (Roberts, 2011). A memory box can thus be used as a tool in the study of one’s leadership practice because it provides cues or triggers for the self and others (participants and/or critical friends) to recall key moments of one’s practice. As Manke and Allender (2006, p. 249) put it, this can contribute to the “revealing nature of the self” and “[open] evocative methodological paths”. However, with the advent of technology, the memory box has evolved to embrace innovation. Consequently, Manohar and Rogers (2010) advocated for a digital memory box because it allows users to browse through images, audio, and video data with ease. It has the added benefit of plentiful and cheap storage that encourages more memories to be captured for “personal reflection and analysis” (Czerwinski et al., 2006, p. 47).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be described as an exploration of the “ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, act[s] upon and informs such research” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228); it is the practice of being cognisant of one’s views, values, and social position, and of the effect that these may have on the research process and on those being researched. This consequently calls on researchers to reflect on their individual histories and theoretical stances, and on the way in which these influence their research (McCabe & Hommes, 2009; Vickers, 2010). Reflexive thinking provides researchers with the tools to open up spaces for alternative views thereby allowing them to find the voice of others; it is the recognition of the value of a plurality of views, perspectives, and responses (Vickers, 2010). Heidegger suggested that reflexivity is concerned with understanding the grounds of our thinking by opening ourselves to the hidden nature of truth (as cited in Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). For Heidegger this means emptying ourselves of acceptable ways of thinking and opening ourselves to other possibilities (as cited in Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). In particular, it means engaging in the reflexive act of questioning the basis of our thinking, surfacing the taken-for-granted rules underlying our decision-making, and examining critically our own practices and ways of relating with others (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

Researching one’s leadership practice calls for conscious self-reflexivity wherein we examine our values and ourselves by exercising critical consciousness. The reflexive process includes a continuous consideration of the spaces in which one locates oneself, as well as the positions one is placed in by others, through constant enquiry, “listening [to,] and [acknowledgement] of inner voices, doubts and concerns as well as pleasures and pride” (Kirk, 2005, p. 233). Engaging in reflexivity of researching one’s leadership practice goes deeper than reflecting on an event or a situation; it is a dialogue with the self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting. In this dialogue, we question our core beliefs and our understanding of particular events (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). In his role as a dialogical partner, Inba consistently made me aware of this. He often questioned my beliefs and values and the extent to which I brought my beliefs and values into play in researching my leadership practice. This excerpt of a conversation that we had, illustrates the reflexive process that we engaged in:

Inba: Tell me, how did you select the artefacts for the digital memory boxes?

Sagie: I looked at the documents, photographs, and newspaper clippings and selected what I thought was relevant for each nodal experience.

Inba: Were there any other considerations?
Sagie: I also chose artefacts that I thought the research participants could relate to and included those in which they were depicted.

Inba: How would you respond, if I said that you were engineering the process so that the participants recalled what you wanted them to remember about your leadership practice?

Sagie: I didn’t see it in this way. . . . You have a point, the participants’ recollection of events could be influenced.

Inba: How would you accommodate for this limitation?

Sagie: Perhaps I could ask open-ended questions to get the participants to speak about events, experiences, or memories that I did not include in the memory box.

Methodology
The personal history self-study research on which this article draws was qualitative and aligned with the interpretive research tradition. Qualitative approaches, according to White and Raman (1999), are preferable where the goal is to seek an understanding of a process and/or phenomenon. This was congruent with my aim to understand how a digital memory box can be used as a tool for reflexivity in researching my leadership practice. With regard to data, the article draws on the work in progress of my research into my leadership practice, which was granted ethical approval by the university where the project was registered. I engaged in a personal history self-study of my leadership practice and used digital memory boxes as tools to generate data. As part of the self-study, I presented the digital memory boxes to two purposively selected participants and asked for their responses. The participants were Gill Bruyns, a former school principal with whom I had worked as a superintendent of education management, and Bowie Pillay who served as an executive member of the South African Institute of Sathya Sai Education when I was the director. After viewing the digital memory box, the participants were asked to respond to a set of open-ended questions that related to my leadership practice. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of my self-study, I presented the digital memory box to my dialogical partner, Inba, and a group of critical friends for comment and improvement prior to the data generation phase. The critical friends are students and academic staff members who belong to the Transformative Education/ al Studies group, which supports and promotes reflexive studies. At different stages of my research I presented my work and was questioned about my assumptions, beliefs, and values that influenced the research. I used the new insights and different perspectives to reconsider my study.

In this article, the real names of the research participants and the organisations involved are used. Permission was granted (in writing) from the research participants, and the identities of the organisations are in the public domain, namely newspaper articles that relate to the issues discussed.

Construction of the Digital Memory Box
I used memory work as a self-study method to recall, reconstruct, and review nodal experiences of the past that have contributed to the formation of my personal and professional self. The decision to select memory work as a research method from a bouquet of self-study methods was not an easy one. I had to engage in a process of “fit for purpose”. At times, I had to immerse myself in an “internal dialogue” in order to ensure that I was making the correct choice with regard to the self-study method (Bolton, 2010, p. 14). Drawing on Samaras (2011, p. 88), I had to ask myself “would using memory work by searching through artefacts of my past enlighten my understanding” of my personal and professional self? Still unsure of my choice of method, I consulted my dialogical partner in order “to open up spaces for alternative views” regarding my choice of method (Vickers, 2010, p. 275).
I used artefacts such as photographs, newspaper clippings, documents, e-mails, video clips, and audio clips that were representative of my personal and professional self to act as memory prompts to remember events, and evoke memory and emotion. Selecting what I deemed to be appropriate and relevant proved to be a challenge because I had to make decisions on what I included and what I excluded. Being mindful of Wolcott’s (2001, p. 92) assertion that you “need to be assured that you are secure in the position from which you do your viewing and that your selection of a position is a reasonable and reasoned one”, I became cognisant through conversations with my dialogical partner of how my selections of the artefacts could influence the participants’ memory of my leadership practice. From the array of artefacts I had at my disposal, I selected those that I thought would serve “as a tool for reflection” (Pithouse-Morgan & Van Laren, 2012, p. 419) for me and my participants and reveal implicit dimensions of my leadership practice that were hidden from me (Samaras, Hicks, & Berger, 2007).

Instead of carrying my artefacts in a scrapbook and/or box, I scanned them and converted them to electronic files to make the artefacts digitally accessible and public (Hoban, 2002). I further included some background audio (music) and curated the photographs and newspaper clippings to form a video clip that could be easily played from a computer, tablet, or smart phone. A different digital memory box was developed for every participant, and these included artefacts that each could identify and relate to as within his or her realm of experience. In addition, background audio was selected to elicit emotions and “evolve autobiographical memory” (Cady, Harris, & Knappenberge, 2008, p. 157). The artefacts were presented in a chronological sequence to facilitate memory recall, interpretation, and sense making, allowing for the participant’s version of the nodal experience to emerge.

Self-study as a research genre encourages collaboration with critical friends to challenge assumptions, view ideas from multiple perspectives, and be opened to different possibilities in enacting reflexivity (Samaras, 2011). Consequently, in order to be true to the principles (methodological components) of self-study, I presented my ideas for using a digital memory box as a tool to my dialogical partner and my critical friends in order to test my thinking and to expose potential contradictions, dilemmas, and possibilities of my work in progress (Vickers, 2010). My dialogical partner was of the opinion that because I selected the artefacts, I directed my participants to remember certain experiences and that this could potentially narrow the range of data. In order to try not to limit my participants’ views or responses on my selected artefacts, I developed a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions to be used in conjunction with the memory boxes. My intention was that the open-ended questions would create the space for the participants to respond freely, share their sense of the nodal experience, and comment on aspects of my leadership practice. This was done to minimise possible limitations that could arise as a result of my selection of the artefacts, and to facilitate a co-construction of the narrative that emerged to constitute my personal history.

Further, it was brought to my attention by my critical friends that my participants might not share negative experiences or point out my weaknesses and leadership lapses in a face-to-face interview. This was indeed a valid point given the power disparity within social relations such as that of the researcher and participants (McCabe & Holmes, 2009). However, I did not think that the participants, who have known me for a long time, would feel that I was exercising power over them, but rather with and through them (Smeed, Kimber, Millwater, & Ehrich, 2009). I was mindful of my dialogical partner’s and critical friends’ concern as I read more carefully into the data and looked out for awkwardness and silence that provided clues when my participants were holding back (Weber & Mitchell, 2002). With this insight, I adopted a heightened critical stance as I examined the data to surface insights about my leadership practice even when they were hurtful, unpleasant, and inconvenient. I further enhanced trustworthiness by sharing my digital memory boxes, interview schedules, interview transcripts, and my personal history narrative with the participants as a form of member check, and received feedback by email (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Video 1 and Video 2 are the digital memory boxes I constructed and used as tools to generate data of my leadership practice. Because some of the photographs in the memory boxes were old, and I did not recognise some individuals in group shots, I was in a quandary whether to use them in the digital memory boxes because I was not able to obtain consent. The alternatives of increasing the pixilation to blur the faces or masking the eyes was not appealing because the research participants knew some of the individuals and I felt that this would also distract from an authentic experience and hinder memory recall. I discussed my dilemma with my critical friends and eventually resolved to uphold the dignity and worth of all the individuals and cautiously use the photographs in a respectful, sensitive, and caring manner. My research participants who feature in some of the photographs have given me written consent to use their photographs and the organisations referred to are in the public domain via newspaper clippings and YouTube.

Using the Digital Memory Box to Stimulate Reflexivity

The research participants and I were in agreement that the digital memory box triggered memories and aroused emotions as we reminisced over past experiences. More than simply recollecting the past, the participants also shared their interpretations and perspectives and gave me another viewpoint of the nodal experience, which I incorporated in my personal history narrative for my self-study. It allowed for “an awareness of the way I am experienced and perceived by others” (Bolton, 2010, p. 14). It brought to the surface hidden memories and together we made meaning of what the experience evoked. To paraphrase Talucci (2012), these were deep reflexive moments where we collaboratively engaged in joint sense making and interpretation of our experiences of my leadership practice. The digital memory boxes served as tools to remember the past and augment the memory lapses I experienced as the participants wove in their recollections to form a more complete picture. Embracing the interpretations of my participants was not an easy task for me. It meant that I had to make radical shifts in my thinking and open myself up to the possibilities offered by the participants (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). In our co-construction of meanings, my participants and I journeyed from “living [and] telling” to “retelling [and] reliving stories of experience” as we explored my leadership practice (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 574).

On viewing the artefacts, I too found myself reminiscing as I started to rebuild connections with the past and started to reflect on the ways I have changed and grown (Allender & Manke, 2004). I felt emotions of satisfaction and joy as I reminisced over projects that were successfully completed and slipped in to despair and despondency when I recollected experiences that were painful and where I had failed. It brought to the surface thoughts, memories, and emotions that shaped my personal and professional self and explained why I hold certain assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values. The digital memory boxes not only brought back the past but were used as tools to interrogate recollections so that they could be used in a positive and productive sense (Moletsane, 2012). I was troubled with what I remembered and chose to remember. I found resonance with Bochner’s (2007, p. 198) words, “I want to be faithful to the past, but what I remember of my history is anchored by what summons me now to remember, and my memory is, in part, a
response to what inspired my recollections.” The impetus for my remembrance was my self-study, which explored my identity, my leadership practice, and possibilities for practice improvement (Samaras, 2011).

As I reviewed the artefacts I asked myself questions of why I remembered the experience in this particular way and not differently; why did I feel this way when I looked at the artefact; what did I leave out or forget about the experience and what were the “blanks and silences” (Weber & Mitchell, 2002, p. 122)? I found myself cropping certain parts as I concentrated on what I wished to see. People, thoughts, and emotions were thus filtered as I reconstructed what the self wished to see in the artefact. I interpreted the artefacts and observed how I looked then, how I have changed, how similar or dissimilar my thinking is. I asked myself, how did I do that, what if I did things differently? I fantasised about endings that are quite different from the ones that played out (Roberts, 2011). Questions of who I am, what I was, and who and what I could be, intrigued me as I looked at the artefacts. The photograph I saw in front of me was an image that mirrors reality, which is to say that I recognised myself and others and saw other elements which put the photograph into context. This is the initial description of the image, which is still to be seen, where meaning and interpretation has not yet occurred.

At times when I looked at a photograph, it was as if I had looked through an opaque screen that prevented me from seeing more in the picture as I struggled to unearth memories that were obscure and hidden as the present self protects and hides it. When I looked at other photographs, it sometimes felt as if I was looking through a window as the image opened up new possibilities and fantasies of what might be. At other times a filter of “frostiness . . . [or] . . . cloudiness” permeated and my memory was hazy and unclear (Roberts, 2011, p. 14). Sometimes I got to see bits and pieces as the memory was unclear and the complete picture was elusive—as if I looked through a veil or beaded curtain. As I looked deeply, I used a magnifying glass to enlarge parts to make sense of what I was looking at, and searched for clues that told me something about my leadership practice and myself. The mirror image, which is a simple “anticipated, unreflective truth”, gave way to a “deeper self-observation” with a “questioning or search for self” (Roberts, 2011, pp. 14–15).

Insight into Leadership Practice

As work in progress of a self-study, I make visible snapshots of my leadership practice that emerged from generating data using a digital memory box. The data that was generated was then used to write my personal history narrative. I make reference to four aspects of my leadership practice namely, vision setting, emotionally intelligent leadership, change management, and decision-making to demonstrate the reflexivity that the digital memory box evoked in researching my leadership.

Vision setting

Creating a compelling vision and getting others to share in that vision, is one of the core ingredients of leadership (Brecken, 2004). Nanus (1995, p. 186) captured the spirit and energy of visioning as he argued that “there is no more powerful engine driving an organisation toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared.” When I was appointed Superintendent of Education Management (SEM) of Richmond, a town in rural KwaZulu-Natal besieged with political violence of unparalleled levels, I realised I had to mobilise resources to improve the delivery of educational services. Rurality, political violence, and scarce resources were huge barriers to overcome and educators who were dispirited, compounded this. My digital memory box helped my participant and me to recall the vision I shared with the community of Richmond—that it will arise like the mythological phoenix from the ashes to encourage and motivate the teachers, school managers, and school governing bodies. My participant, Gill Bruyns, and I recalled the vision I had of building an education resource centre. At circuit meetings, I popularised the vision and got some of the principals excited about the project.
Gill Bruyns, a former principal in Richmond, observed that the vision I shared was a driver that provided focus and impetus for my leadership practice. She said:

*But I think your strengths were that you actually had this vision and you were not going to be deterred from it. It underpinned what you wanted to do for Richmond . . . you were absolutely determined . . . I knew that you were always there for Richmond in that respect. I was absolutely thrilled to see those children in the classrooms now utilising that resource centre which was what both of us had dreamed of. It was lovely to see the maths being taught and knowing that those science and biology laboratories were being used by the children and that expertise would ultimately enhance the community because of the children . . . really well-educated would come back and bring something back into Richmond which is I think our dream really.*

Vision crafting is predominant in most models of leadership and is often cited in academic and practitioner literature (Bush, 2007; Martini, 2008). Effective leaders are depicted as visionaries who know what their institutions and organisations should look like in the future and their vision statement is a symbol that provides direction and momentum for stakeholders (Kowalski, 2010). Leaders who exhibit visionary leadership behaviour are those who adopt challenging visions and share the ideal by communicating and persuading others to become so committed that they devote their energies and resources to achieve the vision (Nanus, 1995). The vision of Richmond rising from the ashes like the phoenix was an evocative image of hope that stood in contrast to the violence, devastation, and deprivation the schooling community was experiencing. Arising from my collaboration with Gill Bruyns, I am mindful that the resource centre became a reality because the principals and the community owned the vision. I appreciate and understand that it is not only critical to co-develop a vision with others but it is imperative that it is clearly communicated so that shared understanding emerges. In spite of this goodwill, there were difficulties and tensions because violence flared up, which resulted in the project plans being shelved for a very long time. The building costs escalated and the committee had to find alternate sources of funding to make up the shortfall. Achieving the vision of the resource centre demanded effort, commitment, resilience, and courage in the face of adversity; however, the reward of seeing the project come to fruition was very satisfying. In this instance, working collaboratively with research participants (which the digital memory box allowed me the space to do) and a dialogical partner “has allowed for heightened self-awareness of the importance of others” in researching my leadership practice (Pithouse-Morgan & van Laren, 2012, p. 425).

**Emotionally intelligent leadership**

In my personal history, I narrated my experience of leading a group of educational consultants who were commissioned to support selected schools to develop their school budget. On reviewing the artefacts in my digital memory box and writing about this experience, I noted certain aspects of my leadership practice that bothered me, and this aroused greater self-awareness. I was passionate about what I was doing and, at times, I adopted an inflexible stance when I believed a certain idea would yield the desired results. This approach sometimes created tensions and affected working relations. In my personal history narrative, I made the following observation:

*It was not always fun as we sometimes disagreed about the way things should be done. Sometimes the arguments almost got out of hand and after people took time off and reassessed the situation, we found ways to overcome our differences. My passion for excellence and attention to detail was a significant contributing factor. I could also be very obstinate and fixed about the ways things could be done.*
Bowie Pillay, one of my research participants, underscored the high expectations I have of the people I work with and my impatience when they do not perform as expected. She said:

*But I think for me, maybe just a level of impatience with stakeholders, and maybe one example would be the SGB [school governing body] or the concerned parents group because I think that took the mickey out of you [laughter]. Also when I speak of the SGB, maybe, and it’s just an observation in terms of high expectations . . . your high expectations you know . . . and therefore the assumption that everybody understands what’s expected of them . . . could have been why you were impatient with them.*

Authentic leadership theorists advance the notion that awareness of emotion and its effect on others has implications for leadership development (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). This view is consistent with Goleman (2003) who advanced a framework of emotional intelligence, which consists of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relational management. Self-awareness is being cognisant and attentive to emotions so that they can be sensed, articulated, and reflected upon (Goleman, 2003). Emotionally intelligent leaders have a heightened sense of self-awareness, which gives them the capacity and ability to be cognisant of not only their emotions but also those of others, and this understanding curbs impulsive reaction to feelings (Ashkanasy & Dauss, 2002; Gardner et al., 2005). The data that the digital memory box produced, and which I used as a stimulus to write about my personal history, made me aware, as Vickers (2010) pointed out, of the effect my values and my corresponding actions have on other people especially those within my work place. In constructing my personal history narrative and deconstructing this narrative, I am in agreement with Samaras and Freese (2006) that reflexivity in private and public spaces may lead to heightened awareness of who I am and what I do. The greater emotional awareness that emanated from my self-study has made me conscious of how my passion, stubbornness, impatience, and critical view of underperforming individuals has got in the way of my leadership practice. In my current practice, I am aware of what I feel and this "mindfulness [which] resembles reflection-before-action" (Bolton, 2010, p. 15) has the potential of better influencing possible outcomes.

**Change management**

The South African Institute of Sathya Sai Education (SAISSE), of which I was the director, conducted a baseline survey to assess the schools under its oversight and instituted reform measures to align the schools to recently approved guidelines from the international parent body. This put SAISSE and the stakeholders on a tenuous course as educators, parents, and school managers wrestled with the changes that were implemented. Far-reaching reform measures included rationalising staff to make the schools viable, introducing new school uniforms, constituting school governing bodies, and overhauling the systems and procedures by which the schools were led and managed. The school governing body and SAISSE were subjected to resistance as micro-politics surfaced at the Sathya Sai School in Chatsworth and I found myself in unfamiliar terrain and out of my depth. All the leadership knowledge and experience I had was not sufficient to cope with the siege that engulfed the governing bodies and the Institute. In my personal history narrative, I described the confusion, anguish, and emotional roller coaster ride I experienced as follows:
I could see that implementing turnaround strategies required a great detail of sensitivity to people’s feelings and that I was so caught up in action that I failed to read contextual clues that emanated from the few people who were dissatisfied at the Sathya Sai School. I underestimated the power that a few people had to disrupt the institute and felt let down by the majority of people who chose to be silent. This self-study was born out of that anguish and has given me the space to be reflexive about my practice . . . if I look back at myself . . . I think that if I had been a little more patient with the parent body and I think that if I had to do something differently now I’d do a lot more consultation . . . more widespread and more broad-based than assuming that because people are not complaining that people are happy . . . I learned the lesson that when people are quiet that’s the time you really worry.

Much has been written about the slow speed at which schools change, the sustainability of reform measures, as well as the resistance that change generates (Starr, 2011). My reflexive take on the changes SAISSE instituted reveals that too many changes were effected too soon and that because there was insufficient buy-in by the various stakeholders, resistance was generated. Change is a complex process that elicits varying responses, views, and emotions and therefore needs careful managing (Hellman, 2012). The recollection of this incident has made me reexamine my thinking, acting, and thinking about my acting, in the same way that Warwick (2011) described. I was focused on improving the schools and was not sensitive to the opinions and feelings of what I thought to be a handful of parents. As the director of SAISSE with positional power, I exercised power over the parents who resisted the changes. A critical perspective in change management literature emphasises the role that power and discourse plays in resistance (Pieterse, Caniëls, & Homan, 2012). Unequal power relations in the form of leaders and managers using positional authority to make people do what they would otherwise not have done are associated with resistance. When there is misalignment in the discourse embodied in language and texts in formal and informal settings, resistance to change may occur because “varying interpretations prohibit the development of shared mental models” (Pieterse et al., 2012, p. 802). In discussion with my research participants, different perspectives of the change management process emerged and I became aware of the gaps in my performance. This reflexive stance has led me to critically reflect on my leadership practice, and I have become not only aware of lapses but also acquired knowledge and skills to better manage change in the future.

Decision-making

In reflecting on the artefacts in the digital memory box, Gill Bruyns made the following comments regarding the way decisions were made at meetings of the Richmond Circuit of Education:

> It was a very inclusive leadership . . . you know a description to me is like a fried egg . . . you know with the yolk in the middle and the people around. The yolk is the important part, and you were the decision maker. The white . . . you took all of us . . . you took our suggestions and you incorporated them. You did not throw out any suggestions that just did not make sense. You threw very few . . . you guided our discussions [in] the correct way . . . I don’t mean that you had decided on the end product at all. You kept us [from] going off the track. It’s the way I want to put it. So I felt that as much as you listened to us you wouldn’t let us go off the track, which was very good.

Decision-making is one of the most important duties of leaders and managers because the results have a profound influence on the organisation and its people (Gülcan, 2011). In time I realised that if I was to influence others to do what was needed to achieve mutually desired goals, it was necessary to, meaningfully, involve people in the decision-making process. I had intuitively stumbled upon the wisdom
that people usually had ideas on how to approach issues and needed a good facilitator to elicit the ideas. This became the “living theory” that I used consciously when organisational decisions had to be made (Whitehead, 2008, p. 1). However, on reevaluation this was not easy because I had to patiently guide meetings to arrive at appropriate decisions. I was aware of the sensitivity and tact that was needed at the times when I felt that some of the ideas were not viable. The self-awareness and self-regulation I demonstrated made the principals feel that their ideas were genuinely welcomed and this inspired them to participate more actively in the decision-making process. Faraci, Lock, and Wheeler (2013) attributed ownership, commitment, and teamwork to the consensual leadership style and by using this approach I was able to meaningfully involve the principals in joint decision making. Somech (2011) suggested that in addition to harnessing collective wisdom to solve problems facing schools, participative decision-making has the potential for promoting school effectiveness. In spite of the effort that consensual decision-making demands, I am convinced that the benefits it yields outweigh the difficulties it may pose. The review of my decision-making style reaffirms and validates what I intuitively came to accept as my “living theory” (Whitehead, 2008, p. 1). The examination of my beliefs and decision-making practice has shown that there is alignment and by being reflexive, it has generated a theory of my lived practice in decision-making.

Implications for researching leadership practice

This article is about one leader’s experiences of using digital memory boxes to stimulate and sustain reflexivity in the research process of leadership practice. While this may not have generalisability, it nonetheless provides leaders interested in researching their practice with an exemplar of a tool for promoting reflexivity. In constructing my personal history narrative, the digital memory boxes not only produced cues to trigger memories as my participants and I reconstructed nodal experiences, but also provided a forum for multiple voices to reflexively engage with my leadership practice (Vickers, 2010). For example, reflexivity brought to the surface issues of power as my dialogical partner questioned decisions I made in selecting the artefacts. My intentions were challenged as the digital memory boxes were constructed. Looking back, I can now see that while my research participants did engage meaningfully with the artefacts, more value could have been leveraged if I had asked them to bring their own artefacts that were relevant to the nodal experience.

The digital memory box served as a catalyst to illuminate the complexities of my leadership practice and brought to the surface hidden dimensions, especially aspects that showed me in a less flattering light. I took comfort from the fact that the critique of my past practice would serve me well because this awareness has the potential to transform my present and future leadership practice. For example, reflexively engaging with a dialogical partner, critical friends, and research participants has revealed the importance of emotional intelligence and its implications for leaders (Goleman, 2003). The recognition of my emotions and their impact on the way I respond to others may curb impulsive actions. Further, I am convinced that when visions are created they must be co-constructed and shared in a way that inspires all stakeholders (Nanus, 1995). In leading and managing change, I am mindful of the need to act with greater caution and examine power differentials to minimise resistance (Pieterse, Caniëls, & Homan, 2012). I have learnt that change is more sustainable and is less stressful when small changes are made incrementally (Lewin, Weigelt, & Emery, 2004). When making decisions, I have realised that it is good practice to meaningfully involve those who are affected in order to foster teamwork and generate commitment (Faraci, Lock, & Wheeler, 2013). Using digital memory boxes as tools to research my leadership practice has offered insights into transforming my personal and professional self as wisdom, discernment, and self-awareness dawn. I have found that a digital memory box is a useful tool to promote reflexivity of leadership practice between both the researcher and the participants.

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