

7th Developing Leadership Capacity Conference: Pluralistic perspectives of leadership and leadership development

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Can on-line learning create more reflective leaders?

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This paper explores the pedagogical opportunities that exist for greater use of on-line learning for leadership development. The co-authors will draw on their previous experience of on-line learning and teaching and how they are using this to help shape a new blended networked learning MSc in Leadership Practice and Responsibility (MSc LPR).

Our experience and previous studies by one of the co-authors suggest that on-line learning can enable a more reflective and richer dialogue to occur (e.g. Asensio et al.2000).

While online MBAs have been proliferating for several years we feel there is a latent belief within the leadership development community that leadership ideas and skills are best learnt through face to face encounters and activities. As Redpath (2012) explained there remains in general a bias amongst many management education faculty against online learning and programmes. This it appears to be despite a long held belief within the management education literature that online spaces can provide both more opportunities for collaborative group work and critical reflective learning.

As early as 1995 Leidner and Jarvenpaa commented:

In the domain of business education, decision-making skills including analytical and problem solving skills and communication skills are seen as critical. We might therefore speculate that methods requiring interaction and student involvement would be preferred over traditional methods. Thus, the informing up or transforming technologies with the corresponding collaborative or constructivist models might be ways to improve the quality of business education (Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995: 280)

While Leider and Jarvenpaa were referring to business education writers such as Borthick and Jones (2000) suggested that collaborative discovery learning online prepares students for work in environments in which new problems are the norm and professionals work collaboratively to solve them in virtual spaces. And further Alvai and Gallupe (2003) found greater levels of critical thinking skills for online students involved in collaborative interaction and discussions.

Despite this much leadership development teaching and executive education remains face to face (Mabey and Thompson 2000; Burgoyne 2001). The face to face engagement creates a wealth of opportunity for 'doing' or practicing leadership however, this can lead to reflection on leadership being secondary (Storey 2004).

Through the MSc LPR we seek to address both the practicing and reflective elements of leadership through the adoption of blended networked learning in ways that allow doing, seeing, talking, reading and writing about leadership which Jackson and Parry (2011) claim helps students to understand what good leadership looks like. Through the programme students go through these processes a number of times both face to face and on-line. Thus enabling students time to consider their experience and how they might apply it to their own context. Conrad and Donaldson (2011) support the notion of asynchronous activities which synthesize a learning experience rather than activities that are done quickly which typically create a reactive response.

A blended approach that includes periods on and off line as well as face to face seems advantageous and is supported by several authors who found such an approach offers the best of both worlds (Burgoyne 2004; Macdonald 2008; HEA case study by Cramp). Cramp observed that this appears to work best after students have had a face to face experience and then move to an on-line experience as this enabled a richer dialogue amongst students who already knew one another. Networked learning in addition emphasises the importance of designing programmes that capitalise on and use ICT to support dialogue, inquiry and critical reflection (Hodgson and Watland 2004 and Ferreday et al 2006).

Of particular importance to the networked learning approach adopted on the MSc is the notion of storytelling or the creation of a narrative to help students organise their lived experience in meaningful ways. This is frequently followed by a process of reflection. Sharing stories about practice is a recognised tool for developing reflective thinking and critical thinking (Mc Drury and Alterio 2003). These types of activities lend themselves well to on-line forum discussions. Tomkins (2009) describes this approach as 'active learning' or a series of staged activities fundamental to the module design which enable students to reflect upon aspects of their personal and professional development leading to the application of these new insights.

Further as is generally the case for networked learning programmes the MSc relies heavily on group work and peer supported learning to supplement more traditional academic teaching. Hornyak et al (2007) describe this as 'intentional learners' with students being able to adjust quickly to different environments and assimilate knowledge from a variety of sources and

develop lifelong learning skills. Raelin (2000) concurs with the added value of reflection through peer groups describing this as ‘a shared and collective activity in which students discuss issues, problems and their solutions.’ Lapadat (2002) illustrates the importance of writing online as a vehicle to obtaining higher order thinking with students using developing a relationship between writing and cognition.

In other studies Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006) claim from their review of the online management education literature that online learning communities obtain better learning outcomes when their work is structured around collaborative activities. In a more recent review of research into online and blended management programmes Arbaugh (2014) commented that ‘Positive student–student interaction experiences, particularly in the context of smaller student groups as subsets of the entire class, have been shown to help to create cohesiveness and trust among group members’ (Arbaugh, 2014, p. 798). And Ferreday et al (2006) illustrate the dialogical and reflective nature of work and discussions that takes place in a networked learning MA for management developers and leaders.

The skill and ability to engage reflectively and critically in dialogical interactions both face to face and online are for leadership learners and students are becoming increasingly necessary and common place. In an increasingly connected and globalised world and where many of our current cohort working in global organisations leading distributed teams they could be considered essential. An observation made by West and West 2009

Learners...are now demanding online instruction that supports participation and interaction. They want learning experiences that are social and that will connect them with their peers (West and West, 2009:2)

The fostering of these types of activities creates for students a process of sense making for their leadership learning. Kempster (2006) argues that this process is an expansion of ‘learning by doing’ which encompasses aspects of observation and participation in a variety of contexts. The design of the modules and the activities themselves create space and time for students to do this.

The MSc is still in its first year and the authors themselves are following a reflective and process of sense making with regards to the pedagogy of the programme. We are seeking to build on the opportunities for reflective on-line discussions and peer to peer learning in greater depth for future cohorts. That is to build on the tradition of educational philosophers such as John Dewey (1916) and Eduard Lindeman (1926) and as cited by Lusty (1969:53) create an opportunity described by John Amos Cornelius in the 16th century to;

Let the main object of this, our didactic, be as follows: to seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but learners may learn more.

These ideas we feel resonates with the theme of this year’s conference and the strand of leadership of the future through technology and virtual teams.

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