

“Leadership learning: from hype and hubris to hope and humility”

Dr Elaine L. Dunn

Introduction

The forthcoming paper by Collinson and Tourish (2015) expertly combines a wide range of critical perspectives in order to reinvigorate how the academy might teach leadership. In doing so it provides a platform for re-thinking leadership pedagogy drawing on the emergent field of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS). In this paper I outline my contribution to developing these proposals by bringing into play my own research into learner experiences on ‘critical leadership studies’ programmes (Dunn, 2011), a focus on the gender power dynamic associated with patriarchy (Fletcher, 2012) and insights from philosophy (Ladkin, 2010).

Collinson and Tourish (2015) argue that the dominant approach to the teaching of leadership in elite business schools continues to major on the heroic individual leader who is probably male, and who is destined (or entitled) to be powerful, charismatic, inspirational and so on. Acknowledging that several business school programmes already include critical perspectives on leadership, they propose a radical shift in the teaching of leadership, drawing on the emergent field of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) with three guiding principles. These are critiquing romanticism, foregrounding power and rethinking followership.

Their proposed leadership pedagogy has the potential to minimise the managerial misbehaviours which led to recent economic and corporate meltdowns (e.g. Fraser, 2014), thereby delivering significant benefits to individuals (e.g. employee wellbeing), organisations and wider society. Their critique of the romanticised view of “great men performing miraculous deeds” (p16) is thorough and timely. Their proposals for ‘foregrounding power’ highlight the failings of corrupt, overly optimistic or misguided leaders, but what’s interesting is that this is predominantly a narrative about testosterone fuelled men! The masculine perspective also penetrates their proposals for ‘rethinking followership’ in which greater importance is to be given to followers’ agency and the possibilities of dissent and resistance. This seeks to redress the balance of power between leaders and followers, but it locates agency within individuals (orthodox psychology) rather than in relationships (relational psychology) (Miller, 1986) thus revealing its masculine origins.

If we are to develop a new leadership pedagogy which serves the interests of all stakeholders, not just men, and not just people participating in business school programmes, then I propose that Collinson and Tourish’ (2015) guiding principles require further development in three important areas, namely hope, gender and the leadership ‘moment’.

Balancing critique with hope

A critical treatment of mainstream (romanticised) leadership theories is essential within any academically robust programme and is already evident in numerous business school programmes. However, findings from my research (Dunn, 2011) clearly demonstrate that there are negative consequences for some learners if critique is not balanced with constructive and hopeful alternative thinking. Inspired by a plethora of publications bemoaning the state of management education (e.g. Grey 2004; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Willmott, 1994) my research focused on the experiences of learners on two critical leadership programmes, from 2005-07. One, the MA in

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Leadership Studies at Exeter University, was an early example of the leadership pedagogy proposed by Collinson and Tourish (2015). The second, the Ashridge Masters in Organisational Consulting, embodied critical action learning (Critchley et al, 2007; King 2010). The Exeter programme (now closed) generated disturbing outcomes for some learners, in contrast to the Ashridge programme which resulted in learners developing a relational mode of practice, after an emotional revision of their assumptions about the nature of reality, knowing and organising.

Hope is necessary for successful action (Rorty, 1999) and the hopes we share with students need to be informed by organizational knowledge arising from research (life is messy, complex, agentic and relational) and not a modernist masculine fantasy (individual achievement, illusion of control, granting legitimacy and status to leaders) (Czarniawska, 2003). Czarniawska feared that letting go of fashionable theories would make people sadder but wiser but my findings show that this is not the case as long as learners have a credible alternative way of understanding and enacting their role.

Including gender in the foregrounding of power

Collinson and Tourish (2015) recognise that context and culture shape leadership practices and mention the gender bias within heroic depictions of individual leaders, reminiscent of the idea that doing good work in leadership is often conflated with doing masculinity (Martin, 1996; Martin & Collinson, 1998). However, what’s missing is an explicit recognition that culture embodies social norms which affect whether an individual’s behaviour is said to be ‘leadership’. Women enacting a more relational model of leadership face particular challenges in terms of being perceived as doing leadership (Fletcher, 2004). Hence what’s missing from the proposed leadership pedagogy is careful consideration of how it might work for women. This is not about feminizing the workplace, but about teaching all students about the relationally intelligent stance, summarised in column 2 of Table 1 below, and contrasted with the heroic masculine leader (column 1) and the weak feminine practitioner (column 3). As long as all three modes of practice are discussed and critiqued then this avoids the danger of replacing one orthodoxy with another.

Table 1: Relational Practice Rubric (adapted from Fletcher 2012, p97)

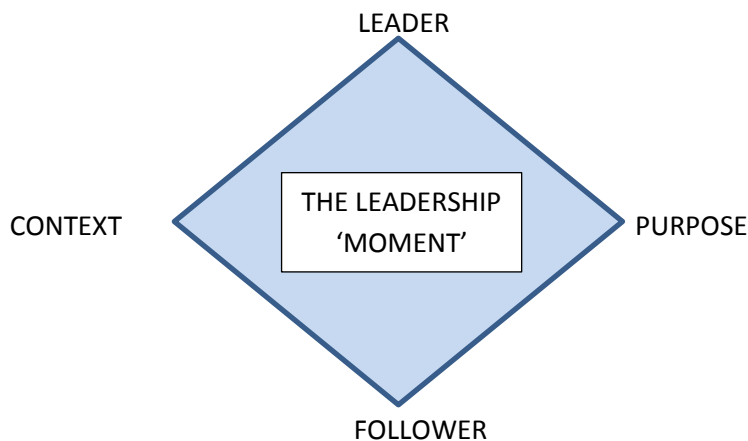
1 Non-relational Practice	2 Relational Practice	3 Relational Malpractice
Dysfunctionally command and control	Relationally intelligent	Dysfunctionally relational
Task	Creates conditions where task can get done (process and task)	Process
Knows everything (never get input)	Fluid expertise (nature of task decides)	Knows nothing (always gets input)
Authoritarian	Authoritative	Authority-less
Good for my career?	Is it good for the work?	Will they like me?
Concerned with enacting masculine gender identity	Concerned with doing good work	Concerned with enacting feminine gender identity

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Rethinking followership – via the leadership ‘moment’

Finally, Collinson and Tourish’s (2015) proposals on re-thinking followership could be enlarged by drawing on Ladkin’s (2010) philosophical treatment of the very nature of leadership. Informed by phenomenology, Ladkin offers the ‘leadership moment’ as a way of “conceptualizing the interactive and context-dependent nature of leadership” (p27) as depicted in the figure below (adapted from Ladkin 2010, p28).



Here leadership is understood as a product of the context in which it arises. Leadership emerges in the ‘space between’ leader and follower, where there are absent but psychologically present expectations, stories and cultural influences (values, beliefs, norms, taboos). Rather than rethinking followership via a focus on follower agency and dissent, a much deeper understanding could be developed via discussion of the ‘leadership moment’. Not only does this avoid the fallacy of locating leadership within leaders, it also clearly identifies leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon emerging within the relationship between individual agents (leader and follower) within a specific social context (Wood, 2005).

Conclusion

Collinson and Tourish (2015) provide a robust platform for re-thinking leadership pedagogy drawing on the emergent field of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS). However, their three guiding principles require further development in order to balance critique with hope, explicitly include gender in the foregrounding of power and to re-think followership (and leadership) via the leadership moment. Without these changes, the new leadership pedagogy risks simply curtailing the mad men without enabling the wise women (- and men!)

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Extended Abstract for International Studying Leadership Conference, December 2015

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