

Leadership in Teaching & Learning

'If you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognise the true meaning of life before you can become a great leader. You must understand yourself first.' (Master Nam Huai Chin, speaking about the Confucian theory of leadership.)

(Senge, Scharmer, et al 2005:180)

Ideas of leadership

Developing leadership capability has proved to be an interesting and contested project aspiration and intention of the project.

In the first year of the project we noted that there was an absence of any common vocabulary (languages/discourses) in the university sector around leadership capability in teaching and learning or in reference to excellence in teaching. Mention the word *leadership* and elicit a range of reactions from hostility and indifference to resistance. 'Leadership' is a loaded term, associated with positional leadership in the academy for teaching and learning staff who were the target group of the project. Many teaching and learning staff do not identify themselves with this label in terms of aspiring to it or seeing it as part of their professional activities. Of course there are also other pervasive or generic institutional factors that impact on staff's preparedness to engage in leadership capability development —time, energy, motivation and perceived relevance of 'leadership skills' to teaching and learning.

The project commenced with an idea of leadership as an extension of the sort of coursework that CEDAM offers in its Academic Leadership and Management course, which is a component of both the Graduate Certificate and the Masters in Higher Education. It focuses on the competencies needed for academic leadership and management and provides an opportunity for participants to extend their repertoire of skills and strategies, and strengthen their management and leadership practices.

Over the first twelve months of project there was a significant shift in the project team's conceptualisation of leadership. Through conversation and reflection with communities of practice, and also spurred on by Carrick's own Leadership Symposium, the team articulated the key attributes that distinguish our approach from traditional concepts of positional or hierarchical forms of leadership. The attributes of the project's model of leadership include:

- distributed, not positional;
- networked, collegial, multileveled;
- inclusive of academic and professional staff;
- voluntary;

- orientated to doing and learning from action; and
- engaged with change.

We were clear that leadership is a situated and contextual experience. In our case the context is teaching and learning, and leadership capacity was being exercised through communities of practice. But was there something also about those communities being able to develop the capability as well? The conceptual wooliness lingered—in organizational theory ‘distributed’ often means scattered through an organization, not necessarily found in positional responsibilities. This is still the phenomenon of leadership arising from the individual, when in the project we were inferring ‘distributed’ to mean shared by the group.

The intent of using the community of practice model was to elicit, develop and share the tacit knowledge that exists in the university about teaching and learning, and about leadership in teaching and learning. The feedback from participants in communities of practice indicated that they valued the opportunity to get together and converse with university peers from a range of disciplines in an informal setting. The project team began to understand that this approach to leadership emphasized the value of social and professional meaning making that occurs in groups and organizations. Drath and Palus (1994:505) consider leadership a social meaning-making process that occurs in groups of people who are engaged in some activity together. They describe how people construct their own personal experiences, as well as how people construct their experiences together. Drath and Palus see meaning and community as being co-constructive—meaning constructs community which constructs meaning. In this analysis leadership is the offshoot of culture building that occurs in communities of practice. Leadership flows from the process of meaning making, instead of meaning flowing from leadership.

Through our work with the Super Community of Practice, and also through developing and running the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*, the project’s thinking moved towards a relational model of leadership. In Gronn’s view (2002) distributed leadership has several distinct attributes that include it:

- being emergent property of a community of interacting individuals.
- involving concertive action³ which is the additional dynamic created through the conjoint activity of people pooling their initiative and expertise;
- being predisposed to widening the conventional net of leaders as its leadership boundaries are open—so it fosters both individuals and the group contributing to leadership;
- using and valuing the diversity of expertise distributed across the community to forge a concertive dynamic beyond than the sum of the individual members.

The project team’s conceptual framing of leadership has incrementally advanced over the last two years in light of its practice-based learning. Of course the team encountered just as many challenges in translating this evolving understanding into capability development.

³ Contrasted with numerical or additive action (which is the aggregated effect of a number of individuals contributing their initiative and expertise in different ways to a group or organisation).

Capability development

In the initial project proposal the approach to leadership capability development was based on self-facilitated learning groups, dependent on alumni from CEDAM (who were to be appropriately trained and resourced) to underpin area-based communities of practice. Key members of these communities would have access to training in coaching, mentoring and facilitation skills, receive tailored resources and stimulus materials and receive ongoing coaching support. The membership of area-based groups was to comprise formal and informal area-based leaders. The project sought to adapt Academic Leadership and Management course materials into self-contained and sequenced modules on topics such as performance management, leading a small collaborative team, and course convening.

In the first year of the project there was much conceptual wrestling with our understandings of leadership, and it was difficult to also implement leadership capability building strategies. In part this was also due to the slowness of community formation and CEDAM having to play a more direct role than anticipated in their establishment. In early sessions with fledgling communities of practice there was much more interest in sorting out their goals and dynamic than in undertaking a capability needs assessment.

The project team had many questions that were not being resolved:

- What would constitute leadership in teaching and learning?
- What are meaningful and relevant leadership attributes in the teaching and learning context?
- Do they differ from general academic leadership attributes?
- Can these attributes be developed, and if so how?

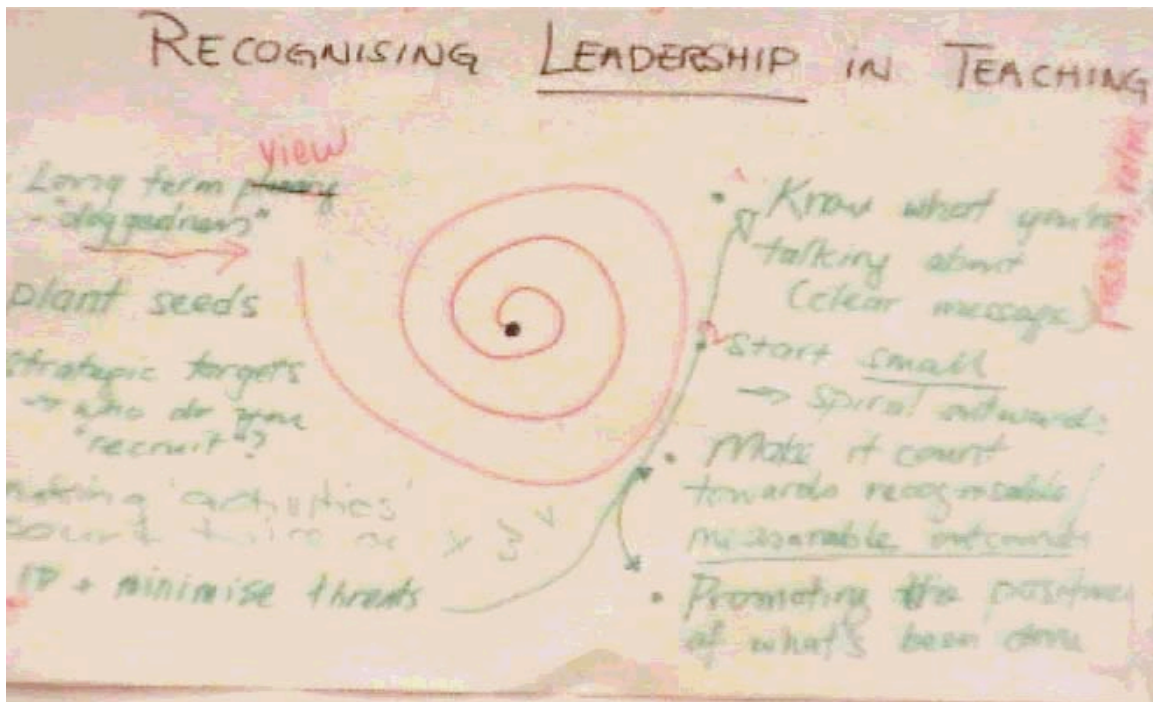
In part we started to address issues such as the attributes or activities that might constitute leadership in teaching and learning through considering case study materials and conversations with project participants around campus. People often assume that what they do that contributes to excellence in teaching and learning or leadership is self-evident, when clearly it is not. Is it a case of semantics or is there a deeper issue—a lack of insight into their own practice activities that is not associating certain areas of work, duties/performances with leadership? The challenge for the project became for a short time how to make explicit what leadership is within this teaching context, in a manner that allows for cross-disciplinary dialogue.

Many university teaching and learning staff already assume short-term leadership responsibilities or roles, but often they do not conceptualize their activity as 'leadership'. Our evaluation data from the *Practice in Leadership Workshop* indicates that people chose to list, in some groups on Day 1 what they saw as leadership qualities include the following.

<i>Personal qualities including:</i>	<i>Having the ability to:</i>
• creativity	• recognise expertise
• entrepreneurship	• reflect
• innovation	• collaborate
• enthusiasm	• navigate through issues

- collegiality
- good-will
- communicative
- disseminate information
- share authority
- listen
- interact

In terms of what is leadership in teaching and learning participants clearly saw that it was not positional leadership or a formal role, rather they suggested it was more intangible ... 'not being the boss, but doing something that models way(s) of working—leading by example. Participants spoke of being proactive, initiating things, having a vision, and being brave enough to try. Leadership both inside and outside the classroom shares the congruency of modelling ethical ways of being and doing—embodying of professional practice. This also extended to modeling learning to students and also modeling leadership to students and to the next generation of teaching professionals. Some people felt that the corporate university only recognises leadership outside the classroom through awards, promotion and recognition, and that practice and performances inside the teaching domain remain hidden and private.



Worksheet, PILW, 2007

Workshop participants could articulate that individual leadership activities included initiating, taking on additional roles and responsibilities, applying for grants, being on committees, reviews, presenting and being involved in communities of practice. Here is a longer list of specific leadership activities that they nominated post workshop. It is interesting to scan because it indicates a shift in what they are prepared to name and recognize as leadership (reflecting responsibility, and personal agency in their work context):

Attributes or activities that might constitute leadership in teaching and learning: what came out of the Practice in Leadership Workshop

- Taking on additional roles and responsibilities at the departmental, school and faculty level.
- Working with a community of students to evaluate their learning needs and plan activities.
- Compiling a review of the internal teaching award structures, protocols for support and patterns of engagement.
- Submitting grant application for development of teaching and learning community of practice.
- Using leadership resources to inform the university's Women's Network and Planning and Quality Office change management project.
- Participating in a University Working Party on Assessment to formulate new policy.
- Leading a curriculum overhaul through a community of practice.
- Giving presentations on work to various professional development groups within my institution.
- Presenting at a teaching and learning forum being run by the DVC.
- Being co-opted to a new University Assessment Working Party to assist in drafting new policies on assessment.
- Participating in an assessment project being carried out in another large faculty in the university.
- Working with a colleague to provide research-type lab experiences even for non-majoring physics students.
- Working to get a new Centre for Learning & Teaching in Physics – which can be treated on a par with the other Centres and Departments – off the ground.
- Involvement in discipline area in the development of a national resource base and interest group for teaching and learning.
- Working, with collegial support, to draw honours and postgraduate students into our research community.
- Forming a group that might evolve into a research centre.

Workshop participant's nominated leadership activities

After working ideas and making lists of leadership qualities the project team determined that taxonomies and reductive analysis into skills, attributes, techniques etc, was a recipe book approach when communities of practice were flagging that leadership emerges from context and the potential inherent in a situation and a group.

The capability development approach in the originating project proposal derived more from a 'leader development' philosophy—a human capital approach—that is build individual knowledge, skills and abilities and explore qualities and skills that aim to improve performance at an individual and organisational level. This approach assumes that more effective leadership occurs through the

development of individual leaders. It also assumes that leadership is an ingredient that can be added to improve social and operational effectiveness.

Communities of practice do not fit the human capital leadership capacity approach. The project team came up against this forcefully in planning the design for the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*. There was a realization in a design session that our thinking was still predicated on **individual capability development**, but in a group setting, not on the possibilities and possible approaches to **group leadership capability development**.

It was a gradual realisation in the project that the community of practice model favoured 'leadership development' a distinction based on the idea of social capital. The social capital model emphasises building networked relationships amongst individuals that enhance cooperation and resource exchange to create organisational value, (Day, 2001: 584-585). In this view leadership is not a thing added to existing systems rather leadership is an emergent property of social systems. Leadership emerges with the process of creating shared meanings.

This shift in understanding generated a different set of questions for the project team to consider and answer.

- What constitutes distributed leadership in a community of practice?
- What occurs in a community of practice that facilitates this leadership capability?
- What are indicators of leadership manifesting through a community of practice?
- How does distributed leadership develop in community?
- What can the project team do to resource this form of capability development?

By late 2006 and into 2007, the project team was thinking about accelerating the development of leadership, and came up with the idea of the Super Community of Practice. At the planning day in January 2007 three issues were canvassed that impinged on this fast-track capability development strategy:

- ADU staff feeling that they did not have the expertise to teach or facilitate this area of leadership capability development.
- Participants in the project's communities of practice having little conceptual framing of leadership and understanding about its practice.
- A lack of clarity in how the ADU should approach its role in accelerated leadership development.

The project team did not have immediate responses to these issues, but through further discussion suggested that capacity in communities of practice could be evaluated into two dimensions:

- changes in attitudes or mental concepts about leadership; and
- increase in competencies and skills.

The second year of the project was characterized by an explicit shift from a focus on individual leadership to the possibility of developing distributed or collegial leadership capability. The Super Community of Practice was established and premised on CEDAM taking an active role in delivering a needs-based capability program. There was an understanding in the project team that as participants in Super CoP we too were learners engaging in mutual leadership capability building.

Realising the power of the group

In the Super Community of Practice model leadership was conceived of as a dynamism or a state embedded in the group's mutual co-creation of meaning. The Super CoP in the first phase of 2007 focussed on building capability in group dynamics, and in understanding the complexity of interactions and relations of individuals and their professional areas within the larger social ecosystem of the Australian National University. As the session table shows in Appendix 3 this program considered the university context, issues of power, personal agency, the challenges in human interactions, not from a theoretical perspective but arising from the real issues and stories shared by participants from their own practice situations. In the second half of the year this community moved from being turned inwards to an orientation back to the larger university community with a new sense of possibility, responsibility and agency to offer resourcing and support for others developing communities of practice.

What capacities?

Drath and Palus (1994: 23) see the relational leadership skills for distributed leadership as arising from community-oriented meaning-making capacities, including the capacity to:

- 'understand oneself as both an individual and as a socially embedded being;
- understand systems in general as mutually related, interacting, and dynamic;
- take the perspective of another; and
- engage in dialogue'.

Capacity to understand yourself

'This blind spot concerns not the what and how—not what leaders do and how they do it—but the who: who we are and the inner place or source from which we operate, both individually and collectively.'

(Scharmer et al, 2005:5)

Through this project people have built a broader understanding of leadership and an awareness of its requirements. The experience of both the Super CoP and the PILW highlight the significance of changes in self-perception, context and peer support in naming and claiming activities in teaching and learning under the banner of leadership.

A critical factor in manifesting leadership capability is the developing awareness of 'self as leader'. The significance of changes in self-perception, combined with increased confidence, contribute to a preparedness:

- to act in a leadership capacity, and
- to name what people do as 'taking the lead'.

Leadership also involves a shift in valuing what we bring to our work and what we can offer staff and university as a living system. This shift in a community of practice is concomitant on making sense of ourselves as socially embedded beings in the workplace. Members of the community actively assist each other to develop this awareness. There is also a shift in intention over time—away from *what can I achieve, to what can we achieve together ...* This awareness of the source of our personal intention ... away from an imposition of will to allowing for other possibilities ... is accompanied by a parallel realisation that we are not separate from others or from the things we are trying to change.

At a behavioural level both workshop participants in their post workshop responses and Super CoP members through individual answers and focus groups indicated that they are putting their hands up, taking the initiative in situations, going beyond their job role and contributing to change in their universities.

Understanding systems, sense-making, context building

Through the project's communities of practice and the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*, people working across disciplines or across institutions in the higher education sector have been able to evolve broader, richer understandings of inter-institutional and inter-disciplinary issues and contexts in relation to teaching and learning. At the workshop various teaching and learning staff had a good local grasp of issues, but not a strategic perspective. Bringing people together, getting them talking, enabled people to see that the local issues connect up and repeat, creating patterns people could recognise across the sector. There is also in a sense of people constructing their experiences together to create a more holistic explanatory framework of organizations and systems and the intricate inter-relationships that arise between them.

The feedback from Super CoP participants also reflects this experience of capacity building and there is an evident increase in the sophistication of their strategies and approaches to problem-solving and to planning their goals and activities for 2008. This maturing contextual understanding and group process has in part fuelled the community turning outwards to engage with the university and offer their capability to support other communities in formation.

Capacity to take the perspective of another

Taking the perspective of another is a way of considering the mental models and habits of thinking that inform our interactions and decisions. Super CoP and *Practice in Leadership* participants were exposed to a range of different perspectives and encouraged to practice listening to each other, to suspend judgement and consider through observation and inquiry how other people did things.

Both project staff and members of Super CoP and the PILW participants found it difficult to surrender control, (and that encompasses control of the argument) and to shift into a more generative form of engagement. In focus group session participants indicated a strong sense of feeling obligated to support their community, and of feeling a growing responsibility towards the members of the group (for example, feeling the need to support fellow members in areas outside of teaching and learning).

Communities of practice embed people in commitments: in allowing others to make claims on them. (Farley, 1986)[This] Implies some sort of opening up of individual boundaries, of allowing the concerns, hopes, beliefs, convictions, fears, destinies of others to become part of one's own individuality.

(Drath & Palus 1994:13)

Capacity to engage in dialogue

Feedback from Super CoP participants indicates capacity building in this area and many participants have remarked on their changed listening capabilities. People have also spoken of their willingness to disclose and to be vulnerable in this learning context. People traced a shift in Super CoP from starting off in the usual 'judging' phase of group interaction, but moving to a great acceptance of people's individual idiosyncrasies on the journey. In part dialogue has manifested a dynamic in which there is more space, moments of silence, reflection that shows in the increasing numbers of people lingering after the meetings to consider what happened or what could be different. Another important indicator of growing capacity is people not thinking that a person is 'difficult' or that there is a problem with an individual—the membership now see that any interaction issue is a group responsibility to manage and resolve.