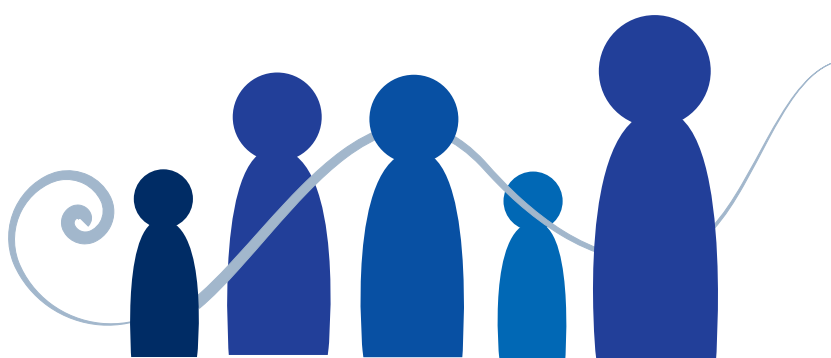


Learning leadership in Higher Education – the big and small actions of many people

What do the strategies and activities designed to foster change in blended and flexible learning and distance education developed at Charles Sturt University (Australia) and Massey University (NZ) help us to understand about learning leadership?



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[2012]

Fostering innovation through learning leadership: the big and small actions of many people

This short report provides a summary of research conducted at Charles Sturt University (Australia) and Massey University (New Zealand) through a DeHub funded research project. The full report of this project is titled *Learning leadership in Higher Education – the big and small actions of many people*.

The research posed the question:

What do the strategies and activities designed to foster change in blended and flexible learning and distance education developed at Charles Sturt University (Australia) and Massey University (NZ) help us to understand about learning leadership?

A Case study approach was adopted, and eight case studies were developed to represent strategies and activities at the macro, meso and micro levels of the two institutions. Two of the case studies were developed at Massey University, and six were developed at Charles Sturt University, focused on the period 2008-2011.

Data for writing the case studies was collected from two major sources:

1. Artifacts related to the case studies, available in the public domain.
2. 1:1 interviews and questionnaires to supplement some of the case studies.

Learning leadership

'Learning leadership' was adopted as a term for this study, and we acknowledge the work of Scott et al (2008) in our use of it. However, we used the term 'learning leadership' as a collective noun – an organisational 'hum' made possible through the sum total of strategies and activities and connected actions of individuals and groups in relationship to blended and flexible and distance education. We did not ascribe 'learning leadership' as an act of 'learning leaders' or to those in roles of authority. Rather, this capacity was widely located across each institution, in every area occupied by staff – all of whom may have, at different times and for varying reasons, displayed learning leadership. We understood learning leadership to be connected and multi-directional and not owned nor inhabited by any one person or role.

Findings and Lessons learnt

Five insights, three lessons, and five 'take home messages' were derived from the study as specific to Charles Sturt and Massey Universities. They are offered here as of use to the higher education sector more generally.

Five Findings

1. Learning leadership was enabled by the large and small actions of many people working individually and collectively in relationship to change (Moncrieff, 1999).

The case studies suggested that the strategies and activities associated with fostering change in blended and flexible learning and distance education at CSU and MU involved many connected people involved in numerous tasks developed at different levels of granularity. Every strategy and activity, and constellations of people, were connected to, and shaped, the meaning and direction of change.

2. The large and small actions of many people working individually and collectively in relationship to change were fostered through a range of different operational models.

The case studies suggested that innovation was enabled through collaboration, networked professional learning, sharing and supported experimentation rather than any one approach to leadership development.

3. Innovation in the case studies were fostered through – delegated leadership, distributive leadership model, faculty

scholarship model, networked learning model and diffusion of innovation model.

The case studies suggested that different approaches had been adopted by the institutions to foster change and strategic alignment to the goals of the institution. Both institutions used a distributed approach to change management through delegated leadership. The way in which delegated leadership was interpreted by positional leaders was to encourage collaboration through distributive leadership, faculty scholarship, networked learning as well as planned and viral diffusion.

4. Innovation in BFL and DE was aligned to strategic institutional intent through the influences of staff within each institution.

The case studies suggested that strategies identified in this research provided 'time-out' for academics to develop or report their innovations in blended and flexible and distance education. Workloads and other resources had been allocated to support innovation, was aligned with the strategic intent of the institution. Alignment was however, also to the strategic interests of the staff involved, and their professional and at times socio-political commitments as tertiary educators and researchers. Alignment was not utilitarian, but interpretative.

5. "Innovating", "influencing others", "collaborating" and "sharing" had positive connotations.

The case studies suggested that some staff did not use the term 'leadership' or 'learning leadership', nor did they see themselves as 'learning leaders' – while others did. This variability was not necessarily tied to role. Expanding opportunities for staff to innovate and share was highly valued. This finding gives 'food for thought' in terms of future directions – how should we think about the use of the

term 'leadership'? Will capacity building associated with a 'distributive leadership' framework, necessarily foster innovation and creativity through activity?

Three Key Lessons

Three key lessons emerged from the study:

1. Innovation needs to be aligned to institutional vision – and the institution needs to manage the tensions that can exist between alignment, creativity and innovation.

CSU and Massey employees are institutional actors, recruited because they have something to offer. They have their own agendas, knowledge domains, points of view and disciplinary, professional and pedagogical orientations. In addition, not all institutional norms are visionary. At times, alignment to strategic intent runs counter to technological and pedagogical innovation. Some of the case studies indicated that stepping *outside* institutional norms, rather than alignment to them, was a key to leadership through innovation. In some cases, innovation occurred *because* strategic intent was disrupted, and at times conservative norms were countered with creative approaches and "work-arounds". Alignment to institutional norms, or to institutional vision, does not guarantee innovation.

2. Good practice in blended and flexible and distance education needs to be manifested through sustainable, consistent and supported opportunities.

Defining 'what is good?' without this being translated into check lists that prescribe innovation is a challenge at the micro level of change. There is also the question of who defines 'what is good'? Is it defined through hearing the hum of micro innovation – work being done by staff beneath the radar? Is it defined from research about practice? (Such as the synthesis of good practice identified by Keppell, Suddaby & Hard 2011). Is it legitimized only if it emerges from those in positions of formal responsibility and power? Is definition the domain of the academy, or those outside the institution (such as Accreditation; Teaching Standards; or Benchmarks)?

3. Regardless of the strategy or activity, commitment to approaches that enable academics to take time, collaborate, share, network and connect are key to innovation in blended and flexible and distance education.

The study found that whilst the approach or model adopted to foster innovation varied, the common values that underpinned each were critical. This study confirmed Devlin et al's (2012, p.2) re leading sustainable change in teaching and learning in Australian universities, that strategies and activities designed to foster innovation in blended and flexible and distance education need to be collaborative and developmental, embedded, sustainable and ongoing, and focused on enabling innovation and enhancement.

Five Take Home Messages

1. Strategies and activities generated from the centre and distributed throughout an institution need to be mapped as a basis for future strategic planning, much in the same way that a course needs to be mapped when undergoing curriculum renewal.
2. Strategies and activities generated from the centre could be evaluated from the outside, rather than evaluated as experienced from the inside.
3. Better understanding needs to be developed concerning what works effectively in a comparative sense.

By this we mean – what initiatives should be strongly supported that will have maximum impact on a wide range of practices and staff capacity?

4. 'Top down' leadership is important. Leadership development strategies need to be in place to assist positional leaders to develop leadership capabilities.
5. 'Micro-leadership' and 'micro-influencing' is important. Further work is needed to better understand the best ways of supporting situated innovation, for example through professional networked learning, workloads and resources.

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