Fostering institutional change through learning leadership – a study of stories of adaptation in blended and flexible learning and distance education.

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This paper discusses the significance of a research project between Charles Sturt University (CSU) and Massey University (MU) which aims to build knowledge and understanding of the impact of distributive leadership approaches to transforming teaching and learning in relation to distance education. Authentic, situated approaches to change offer a powerful conduit for building "street level leadership", the sharing of knowledge, skills and information within and between schools and as a basis for whole-of-institution cultural change driven through practice. This research provides an opportunity for evaluation of authentic, situated approaches as a mechanism for institutional renewal of learning and teaching practices in relation to distance education (DE). Such a

reorientation of practice affords CSU and MU a chance to increase the equity of student experience and engagement in learning through blended and flexible delivery.

The changing environment

The Higher Education Sector faces many challenges in the 21st Century, especially in respect to the quality of learning and teaching in the digital age. Academics remain focused on the development of new knowledge and discipline expertise, yet students increasingly demand high quality learning and teaching expertise. Consequently, changes in learning and teaching practices need to be achieved to counteract this divergence. Gourley (2010) argued these "new dynamics in higher education require a fundamental shift in the way in which institutions conduct their affairs, from leadership and strategic thinking to management and fundamental operations" (p. 34). Professional Development (PD) is recognised as one means of facilitating this transformation (see for example, Stes, Clement & van Petegen, 2007; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004), however, "effective staff development of academics remains a challenge" (Kerr, 2010 under blind review). This raises the question of what an institution can do to foster innovative learning and teaching approaches?

Addressing these changes

The University Sector has adopted a wide range of strategies in an attempt to foster change in learning and teaching in response to these new times. Charles Sturt University (Australia) and Massey University (New Zealand) wanted to collaboratively understand and learn from insights about their respective strategies, and to this end in 2010 was successful in gaining funds from DeHub to support two research projects. Through change, both institutions seek to transform the student experience, leading to quality and equitable outcomes for students. Both institutions have a history of DE that reflects the generational models developed by Taylor (1995) – the Correspondence Model, Multimedia Model, Telelearning Model, and the Flexible Learning Model based on online delivery via the Internet. In reality, all four models co-exist, in various ways, at the partner's institutions. The speed of change has posed significant challenges in generating "qualitatively different teaching-learning environments, pedagogical practices and organisational infrastructures" necessary to shift from first to fourth generation DE (Taylor, 1995). To complicate matters, both institutions have entered a "fifth generational" phase, where a focus on innovative and transformative learning design based on blended and flexible learning has evolved. In response to these challenges, both universities have sought institutional renewal through shifting cultural practices associated with conventional distance education towards blended and flexible learning. Knights, Myer and Samson (2007, p. 237) proposed that "rich workplace learning" (in their case, team-teaching) offered greater opportunities to achieve sustainable change in learning and teaching practices than "formal programmes of professional development for academics, particularly in the early stages of their teaching careers". The premise of the PD approaches taken at CSU and MU is that one way of achieving this "fundamental shift" is by adopting strategies that aim to build learning leadership capacity and local agency.

In their review of the literature, Southwell and Morgan (2009) reported to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) that "academic development initiatives are seldom studied systematically" and that the ALTC needed to "fund projects that specifically focus on quality teaching for learning through the development of leaders" (pp. 3-4). We know that PD can transform learning and teaching and impact on the quality of student learning opportunities (see for example, Stes et al., 2007; Spillane et al., 2004), however "effective staff development of academics remains a challenge" (Kerr, 2010 under blind review). Tynan et al. (2010) argued that "successfully embedding change of instructor practices for enhancing student learning in distance education modes" requires a number of support mechanisms including "institutional readings", "an institutional response to professional development" and the development of "impact evaluation indicators". Thus, these findings

illustrate the need for systematic research, such as that proposed by the research project, to evaluate the strategies and impacts of initiatives that support academic development.

Substantial effort has been expended at the partner's institutions in pursuing cultural change in learning and teaching practices in relation to DE, open and distance education. Both institutions have adopted authentic, situated approaches that provide mechanisms of support for individual academics, and teams, to develop genuine solutions to learning and teaching challenges. Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008, p. 99) proposed that developing "learning leaders" was an essential component in institutional change, which aligns with the body of knowledge (for example, Sergiovanni, 2000; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Spillane et al., 2004; MacBeath, 2005) that proposes "distributive leadership" approaches to change provide institutions with an opportunity to foster leaders *in situ.* Jitse, Nelson, Billsberry and van Muers (2009, p. 767) argue that "one of the defining principles of distributed leadership is that it arises from the interactions of diverse individuals in a setting where expertise is a dispersed quality" (See also Keppell, 2009; Spillane et al., 2004; Gronn, 2002). Distributive leadership is not about "delegated headship", rather it is about situated leadership regardless of rank or role, where decision-makers understand their locus of control, the forces that drive and constrain it, and innovate or transform the learning and teaching spaces within, and where possible, connected to, their "situatedness".

Distributive leadership and cultural change at Charles Sturt and Massey Universities

Charles Sturt and Massey Universities had separately and independently adopted institutional and professional development strategies designed to engage academics in change at "the sharp end" of practice. The general approach taken by both Universities was a capacity building one that "on the ground" appeared to bear some of the characteristics of DL. The characteristics of "distributive leadership" were identified. Distributive leadership in this research was defined as "the distribution of power through a collegial sharing of knowledge, of practice, and reflection within the socio-cultural context of the university...through a "faculty scholar model" (Lefoe et al., 2008, pp. 1-2). Distributive leadership is characterised by the building of trust, creation of a learning culture and the sharing and dissemination of information (Brown & Littrich, 2008) an is supported through a number of domains, such as growing, reflecting, enabling, engaging and networking (Lefoe et al 2008, p. 3) and "gives quality time" (Schneider, Applebee & Perry, 2008, p. 898) to institutions to enable them "to investigate, learn, experiment and develop better solutions if they wish to become effective learning organisations" (Fullan, 2006, p. 121). It assumes situated leaders are able to generate change, not only in relationship to their immediate locus of control, but also through impacts generated through professional networks, collegiality and communities of practice.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was adopted, using a case study approach. Through descriptive case studies, "stories of adaptation" in blended and flexible learning, open and distance education will be developed in three domains of activities - institutional, course-based and individual. This research conceptualised institutional change as a consequence of strategies and interventions used to encourage resilience, innovation and adaptation. The idea of institutional change was largely tied to changes in learning and teaching practices, such as practice experimentation, changes to pedagogy and changes achieved through course design, rather than to institutional change such as Senate policy or workload agreements. The cases therefore included insights into practice experimentation as the source of locally mediated leadership and institutional change connected to widening circles of influence. Eight cases were identified (six at CSU, and 2 at Massey) of strategies that had been introduced by the respective institutions to foster change in learning and teaching. Three of these cases (at CSU) were explicitly developed using a distributive leadership approach; the remaining five (CSU and Massey) were developed to build learning and teaching leadership. Development of the case studies was informed by the

literature concerning successful leadership and capacity building through distributive leadership. In summary, these characteristics included (Lefoe et al 2008, p. 1-4):

1. Formal leadership training & professional development activities
2. Authentic learning activities that are situated in real contexts
3. Engagement in reflective practice
4. Opportunities for dialogue about leadership practice and experiences
5. Activities that expand current professional networks
6. Leadership encouraged regardless of formal position
7. Strong institutional support
8. Leadership negotiated rather than delegated

The case studies as stories of adaptation

Of the eight case studies, only three were explicit examples of distributive leadership. Five were examples of capacity building in learning and teaching that aimed to develop learning leadership; and were characterised by at least five of the eight characteristics identified by Lefoe at al (ibid). The case studies are as follows:

Organisational Domain	Case Study
Institutional	• Annual, internal Learning and Teaching conferences (CSUEDs) • The introduction of Stream (MU) • The introduction of ePortfolios at CSU • The Teaching Fellowship Scheme (CSU)
Course-based	• The introduction of Course team Symposiums (CSU) • The redesign of Sociology in the Faculty of Business (MU)
Individual	• In-depth case study: Teaching Fellow 1 • In-depth case study: Teaching Fellow 1

The case studies are being developed with the following common focus areas:

1. Overview
2. Background
3. Visions and Aims
4. Strategies and Activities
5. Outcomes
6. Reflective practice and practice experimentation
7. Connections, collegiality and networks
8. Reflections on leadership development

The "background" of each case study will be informed by the driving and constraining forces (Lewin, 1951) operating at the respective institution For example, in the CSU context numerous institutional elements will act as drivers of course-based planning – Senate requirements, Course Directors, Common Teaching Standards, B&F Learning principles, Learning Management Systems and approaches to PD at CSU and MU. Two of the cases (of Teaching Fellows within the Flexible Learning Institute) include journey and conjecture mapping (Sandoval, 2004, Westbrook, Coiera, Gosling & Braithwaite, 2006) to provide a structure to understanding the different levels of granularity in the educational designs that emerged during the study.

Current activities

By December 2011, a literature review will be completed, and the conceptual framework and methodological

approach will have been refined. Six case studies will have been largely developed, with two to be developed in early 2012. A project web site has been developed, and the findings of the study will be published as a wiki.

Lessons Learnt

The original research plan referred to "design based research" and proposed that the cases studies would be examples of "distributive leadership". Field work has lead to revision of both. Firstly, six of the case studies are largely being developed retrospectively, drawing on secondary data. As such they take the form of descriptive, historic cases that do not involved participants in the development of participatory research. Two of the cases studies (in-depth, of the Teaching Fellows at CSU) are partially auto-biographical, involving reflection about their learning and teaching decision-making. As such, the research is being conducted as case studies, and do not involve design-based research.

Secondly, while three of the cases are of strategies that were explicitly developed as distributive leadership (related to the Flexible learning Institute Teaching Fellowship Scheme, CSU) five were not. Therefore, rather than conceptualizing the case studies as examples of distributive leadership, the cases will be interrogated from the perspective of the *characteristics* of DL as these find meaning in the aspirations of both institutions in terms of the development of learning leaders. Through this lens, the research will identify its current strengths, and establish a framework for future systematic improvements, informed by distributive leadership approaches.

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