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## Collaborative Action Learning and Leadership: A Feminist/Indigenous Model for Higher Education

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## Academic Leadership Journal

A new book, *Enlightened Power: How Women Are Transforming the Practice of Leadership* (Coughlin, Wingard and Hollihan, Eds., 2005) “reveals how women leaders are redefining power and traditional leadership practices to achieve extraordinary business results and positive social change,” according to a press release from Linkage, Inc. (2005). Armstrong refers to a “feminist principle of leadership” that is:

...essential to our vision of healthy equality-seeking organizations...sharing power, authority and decision-making in our common pursuit of social, legal, political, economic and cultural equality... (where) leaders work from a vision of shared power, providing opportunities for all members to develop and use their leadership skills (2005).

Such collaborative action leadership and learning (CALL) is also inherent in traditional Indigenous models of leadership. In 1757, the great Cherokee speaker and chief Atagulkalu, was to meet in South Carolina on important business, but he hesitated to proceed when he came upon the all-male European council. When the Europeans insisted on his getting on with things, he turned impatiently to Governor William Henry Lyttelton and demanded, “But where are your women?”(Mann 1970, 69)

Reference to Indigenous principles has relevance to CALL and to this essay regarding Fielding Graduate University. In 2001-2002, Fielding Graduate University ranked number one in the nation for the number of doctoral degrees conferred to American Indians. Making reference to Indigenous factors in CALL may stimulate readers to look to Indigenous studies when seeking further information. Traditional Indigenous cultures deeply understand the power of the feminine principle in organizing a healthy society in ways similar to how ELC approaches issues and transforming communities (Johansen 2005). On the other hand, Western cultures tend not to understand, even when women rise to positions of leadership (Wajcman and Martin 2002, 985-1002).

There are exceptions. One is an Australian education organization called Akademos (see <http://www.akademos.or.au/home>), an organization that captures the essence of its approach to educational leadership in its Preamble:

Collaboration between individuals, institutions and communities: integration of individuals with society, environment and knowledge; autonomy in economic, scholarly and institutional affairs: these are the preconditions for creation. They stand or fall together. Without collaboration, problems of competition arise. Without integration, problems with society, environment and knowledge arise. Without autonomy, problems of authoritarianism arise. Creation for one another, for ourselves, and for the future depends on these inter-implicating values. In the end, educational justice does so too: access to a vocation, to reflective knowledge and the freedom to apply it... To be realised, every one of these principles requires sustained ingenuity and creativity. Creation, however, includes not only products and ideas, but cultures, communities, and selves: it is the development to and from autonomous human expression (Akademos 2005).

We have selected the four concepts contained in this Preamble and the principles by which Akademos operates (collaboration, integration, autonomy and creation) as way to describe how Fielding's ELC has actually managed to be successful with its CALL. The rest of this paper will discuss ELC's leadership and governance approach and challenges in light of the Adademos vision that prioritizes collaboration, integration, autonomy and creativity.

## ELC's CALL Model

Fielding Graduate University, founded in 1974, offers distributed graduate education and research programs in three social science areas: psychology, human and organizational development and educational leadership (see <http://www.fielding.edu>). All three Schools with the University affirm a commitment to social change and social justice. The School of ELC's initial program, an Ed.D., was developed in 1996 by Willie DeMarcell Smith, Ph.D. Smith had a vision for making doctoral education accessible to working adults, especially those typically underrepresented in higher education whose goals are to make a difference in urban and underserved rural settings. As a result of this focus, the program quickly embraced a "participatory action research" approach (Park 1992) in all aspects of its work. Thus leadership, teaching and research was not just about preparing for action. Rather, action, change and social justice were actually engaged within these three processes.

Early on the ELC doctoral program faltered. During the ensuing leadership transition, two women emerged to form a co-dean leadership team. Susan Taira, Ph.D. and Judy Witt, Ed.D. led the faculty to assure that the Ed.D. program would not die. This transition included the adoption Total Transformational Management Process as the conceptual framework for ELC's governance structure and change model. TTMP is an integrated model for change that emphasizes the entire, larger system, "paying special attention to the human side" (Mink et al 1993, 11). TTMP was instrumental in developing ELC's way of simultaneously working with individual, group and organizational levels, viewing participatory action research as "transformation concomitant with intense learning" (11). Considering the complexity of Fielding's dispersed learning environment, such a transformational priority in leadership, communication and decision-making became a critical priority for both Fielding and ELC. Using CALL to help implement this priority, ELC has created an environment that, in retrospect, prioritizes the four principles of Akademos: collaboration, integration, autonomy and the resulting creativity.

### *Collaboration*

Collaboration is the primary vehicle that ELC's administration, faculty, alums and students to implement the college's distinctive role in higher education. Each group seems to understand that "collaboration is the leadership of ideas, not ideology, of collective goals, not personal vision alone" (Akademos, 2005). Nonetheless, the focus remains consistent with DeMarcell's original vision for work together that will ultimately make a difference in that world. Everyone is involved and everyone shares the responsibility for helping to shape the vision. This includes annual face-to-face meetings of all faculty, staff and administration, as well as student and alum leaders, and opportunities to call the Dean during teleconference "office hours."

Authentic, passionate dialogue and cooperative argumentation replace conflict in successful collaborative leadership. Opportunities exist at ELC through a variety of group activities, with follow-up continuing via conference calls, email and forums. They result in a deliberative community that enacts

the vision “through cooperative inquiry, decision making and relational accountability” and that encourages argumentation and critical thinking designed to help individuals and groups make the best decision in any given situation” (Makan and Marty 2001, xii).

In conceiving a collaborative governance structure using TTMP and the participatory action research model, equity in representation and clear and consistent communication lines are crucial if CALL is to work. At ELC, faculty, students, alumni and staff all serve on Governance Teams, including an “Equity Council” that helps assure college wide adherence to ELC’s principles of social justice and diversity. Each team keeps agendas and minutes that are posted online giving information access and feedback opportunities to the entire community of faculty and students alike (See Supplement for Diagram of the ELC Governance Structure in Word Doc *elcgovstructure.doc*)

To be successful in such a distributed and networked organizational structure, CALL needs a spiritual faith in the team’s ability to accomplish any goal if one keeps the good of the whole in mind. This is messy and often painstaking work, requiring careful attention to some basic ideas common to feminine/Indigenous principles. CALL requires:

- Respect for other
- The ability to withhold judgment
- Authentic transparency
- Patience
- Treating mistakes as learning opportunities
- Honoring diversity for its value to the whole

### *Integration*

Spirituality in Indigenous cultures generally means recognizing and embracing the idea that everything is related; that each part is significant; and that all have responsibility to the whole (Jacobs 2002). To help accomplish integration, ELC has employed Stagich’s Synergy Principles (Stagich 2003) to build the environment needed for persons to truly see the integration. These principles which focus on valuing differences so they can be transcended, were crucial when in 2002 the ELC faculty became divided and in conflict. Using CALL, the Dean launched an intervention based on the principles of developing synergy in an effort to bring people back into a healthy, collaborative team. To regain synergy and trust, she used the winter all-faculty retreat to identify publicly a major strength she saw in each faculty, attaching a descriptive word to the person that accurately reflected his or her contribution to the team. This set the tone for the rest of the retreat, and set the stage for a transformation that continues to this day. Eventually, a renewed understanding emerged about everyone’s interconnectedness and its relationship to bringing out the best in individuals without sacrificing autonomy or shared values.

### *Autonomy*

Interestingly, strong sense of autonomy in ELC faculty may have seeded the conflict within the group. What was needed to restore harmony was to balance the autonomy with an equally strong sense of

belonging. When people were encouraged people to remember what Karl Menninger (1963) once called “the vital balance” between self and other, faculty autonomy became an asset not a hindrance. From an Indigenous perspective, harmony can only be “created or reclaimed in environments which embody the core values represented by the circle of courage” which include a balancing of independence, belonging, mastery and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern 1990, 51). This is not an easy process. It takes strong administrative commitment, will, and modeling as well as patience.

Note that a major factor in CALL is the concept of authenticity. “Leaders who are authentic – consistent in words and actions, committed to a moral cause, and willing to take a stand...are transformative, working for change wherever they find inequity. They are cross-cultural, working with people from many different cultural groups in order to enhance leadership skills, both by doing the right thing and figuring out how to do things right” (Shields 2003, 28-29). Furthermore, this authentic commitment to the ELC values must be reflected in all aspects of the organization. For example, it must be obvious in marketing and recruitment, where concern for the candidate’s potential to be successful in a self-directed program is more important than the candidate’s tuition.

Ultimately, integration can only work when values provide the glue.

## Creation

The fourth and last Akademos principle for CALL reveals itself in ELC by coming full circle back to its vision for social justice and diversity. In his highly praised book on creativity, Csikszentmihalyi ultimately concludes that creativity, which he says is about capturing those moments that make life worth living, is necessary for the future health of the world (1997). When mastery, generosity, independence and belonging are nurtured and balanced in a system where collaborative and loving leadership emerges from all participants, creation cannot help but to manifest in the work involved in making life worth living for all creatures. Fullen echoes this logic as well. “Sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (Fullen, 2005, ix). The innovative structures and processes at ELC in tandem with the innovations in faculty mentoring and student dissertations are thus born from the interrelationships that have been described in this article.

In an article published in *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, the author state that in the leadership world, making sense of things may be more important than seeking what works and that what works may be difficult to identify let alone replicate (Simkins 2005, 9-26). ELC’s CALL may be more or less dependent upon the unique attributes of its various constituents. For example, who can say how vital a factor is the Dean’s background that emphasized improving communities over financial reward and her persistent faith in positive outcomes?

Peter Block (1993) argues that leaders need to replace the concept of leadership with that more aligned with the idea of stewardship. Indeed, choosing partners, choosing empowerment and choosing service is what ELC “leadership” has done. Its “CALL” will hopefully bring forth a new way of doing leadership that is feminine, synergistic and sustainable in ways that bring to mind the ancient wisdom of our Indigenous ancestors whose ideas about leadership may be essential for future health and survival (Four Arrows forthcoming).

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