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## Collective Leadership Learning (CLL) – Leader reflections on learning during higher-level, experience-based leadership education

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When providing experienced-based master's degree programs in leadership and management, universities should embrace the use of collective leadership learning strategies, write Øystein Rennemo and Jonas R. Vaag.

BY: Øystein Rennemo and Jonas R. Vaag

To improve leadership practice, universities and other higher-educational institutions offer leadership and management programs at both the bachelor's and master's degree levels. However, critics have claimed that: 1) These educational programs are biased in that they emphasise simplified cause-and-effect relations in leadership (also defined as a functional orientation) in conjunction with analytical aspects, while neglecting the emotional and behavioural aspects of leadership; and 2) This functional orientation is too anchored on the individual and is not able to grasp the collective, relational, situated, and emerging aspects of leadership ([Alvesson & Spicer, 2003](#); [Barker, 1997, 2001](#); [Lave and Wenger, 1991](#); [Mintzberg, 2004](#); [Tourish, 2013](#)). Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) claim that most leaders are strongly influenced by functional leadership theories ([Barker, 2001](#); [Overman, 1996](#)). These theories describe good leadership practice as behaviours that concentrate on visions, strategies, and long-term guidelines and that follow dyadic cause-and-effect relationships ([Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003](#); [Barker, 1997, 2001](#)). Barker ([1997](#)) argues that if we limit ourselves in our understanding of leadership to rational or scientific approaches, which presume cause-and-effect relationships, we prevent ourselves from discovering or unfolding the dynamic processes in leadership.

When functional theorists describe organisational practice, leadership is hierarchically anchored on the leader sitting on top of each organisational unit who is able to exercise control ([Tourish, 2013](#)). Leadership

theories usually start with the idea that leaders are unquestionably necessary for an organisation's functioning (Gemmill & Oakley 1992; Tourish, 2013). These assumptions are, naturally, also found in the minds of leaders themselves. Leaders are trained in this way of thinking through educational programs in which the theories of the field have served as active and powerful factors (Rennemo, 2002).

Functional theorists have also been criticised for describing organisational leaders as independent characters with the freedom to act robustly and consistently, a description which is seldom in accordance with their practice (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). This discrepancy means that the exposed theories are not consistent with the theories in use (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) claim that leadership research has given little help to practitioners, and Alvesson and Spicer (2012) follow up this statement by arguing for the need to go beyond what they claim to be 'the naivety in functional leadership studies'. This naivety is reflected in what is described as the difference between 'good and bad' leadership, which is one of the unfruitful dichotomies often found in leadership studies (Collinson, 2014). In this way, Barker (2001) claims that functional leadership theories have existed as an industry. He argues that the mainstream concepts of leadership function as a social defence to protect existing social orders. Thus, leadership training has been criticised in CLS literature for being excessively oriented towards conserving the mainstream and traditional aspects of leadership practice (Barker, 1997; Tourish, 2013).

A shift towards looking at leadership as an activity anchored to practice is underlined in the stream called Distributed Leadership (DL) (Bolden, 2011). DL claims that focus must be shifted from the attributes and behaviours of individual leaders to a systemic orientation in which leadership is perceived as an emerging collective process among the social actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006) where practices are situated (Spillane, 2006). Similarly, the concepts of shared leadership, collective leadership, collaborative leadership, co-leadership, and emergent leadership all underlie the assumption that leadership goes beyond the monopoly

of the individual and plays a role in emerging social understandings (Barker, 2001; Bolden, 2011). Altogether, this shift in focus represents a challenge to functional and individual anchored theoretical traditions as well as their assumptions regarding leadership training and development. The critical and collective oriented literature, as mentioned above, calls for more focus on the development of interpersonal networks and shared knowledge both within and across organisational borders. This shift in focus also calls attention away from *leader* development and toward *leadership* development. Quoting Bolden (2011, s. 263), 'elaboration on how this might be done effectively remains an important area for further research', which is an important contribution of this study.

An even more recent concept of leadership in the CLS literature, one that builds upon the same activity orientation, is described in the book *Leadership-as-Practice: Research and Application* (Raelin, 2017). Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) focuses on how leadership emerges, rather than on how leadership is conducted by individual actors based on their traits and/or actions (Raelin, 2011). This leadership perspective contrasts with the dominant individualistic approach and views leadership as a cooperative effort among participants to achieve a distinctive outcome (Raelin, 2017).

Criticism has also been directed towards leadership programs provided in universities. Mintzberg (2004) claims that university leadership programs are mostly designed for young people with little experience. Educational programs provided to aspiring leaders with little background to draw upon may suffer the pitfall of being too focused on theoretical (rather than practical) aspects of leadership.

Generally, there are many reasons to research leadership development programs. Hannum and Martineau (2008) mention three important elements that are relevant to the aim of this study: it is important for such programs to 1) finetune their approaches to achieve defined goals, 2) evaluate and ensure that the participants and their organisations benefit from the development program, and 3) encourage more comprehensive discussions about what works and why.

Because of an increased focus on the role and function of leadership, considerable efforts have been made to study the impact of leadership training both inside and outside university institutions ([Braun, et al., 2009](#); [Brungardt, 1996](#); [Collins & Holton, 2004](#); [Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005](#); [Hannum, Martineau, & Reinelt, 2006](#)).

In these studies, one important aspect is neglected: the perspective of the participants—the students themselves. When neglecting this aspect, and merely focusing on evaluating predefined learning outcomes, we may fail to both grasp the student perspective and make use of students' reflections and resources in further development of an experience-based master's program. Having previous experience with leadership, and also with a motivation to still practice leadership after completion, the students of such programs can provide substantial information about what they view as important in their own development. This insight leads us to the following research question:

What do leaders participating in an experience-based master's program emphasise when reflecting upon their learning throughout the program?

This research question requires a meta-perspective regarding the features of leadership education. It also requires an understanding of leadership in general, which would add to the perspectives addressed in critical leadership studies. We use data material based upon free reflections from leaders who participated in an experience-based master's program in leadership. These reflections were published in their final master's theses, which allowed for an explorative investigation into what the participants emphasised when reflecting upon participation in their program of study. Our group of leaders is quite different from the inexperienced leadership students described and criticised by Mintzberg ([2004](#)). By taking this meta-analytical position (using the leaders' own reflections and going beyond predefined learning outcomes) we are able to grasp what the participants themselves view as important. In this way, we avoid a narrow analytical approach.

## Methods

### Setting

In 2003, Nord University started a Scandinavian

master's program in knowledge management. The program's main objective is to develop reflective and action-oriented approaches to leadership practice in the knowledge society. It is a three-year, part-time program comprising 90 ECTS credits and is based on experience. The average age of the students is 45 years, and they are mostly from Norway. All students hold a leadership position in their respective organisations, at which most are middle level. The student population is heterogenic, with participants recruited from various industries within both private (35%) and public sectors (65%). The program includes four modules (15 ECTS credits), a master's thesis (30 ECTS credits), and 13 workshops (3–6 days), of which one is in Copenhagen (Denmark), one is in Green Bay (Wisconsin, USA), and the rest are in Norway. The work requirements include six articles (written in groups), participation in net-based group discussions, a group project, three home exams (written in groups), and a master's thesis.

### **Data**

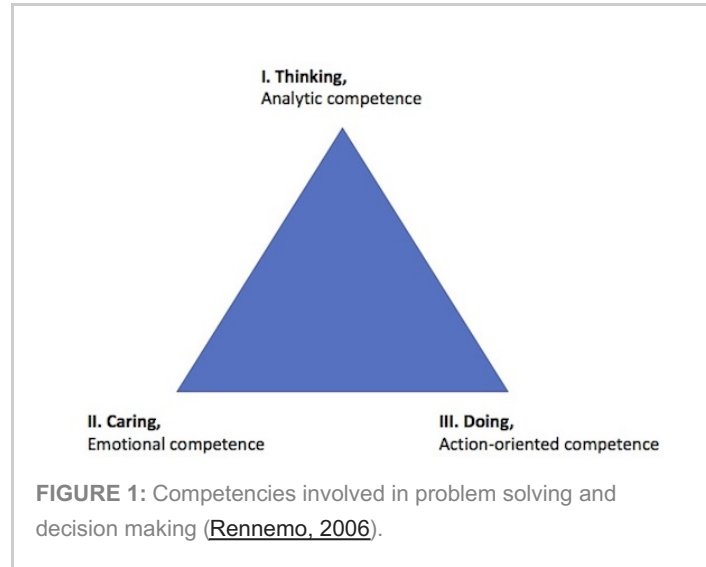
The master's theses published and made publicly available in the university library within the 2011–2016 period were reviewed; 44 of the 100 theses under consideration included systematic reflections about the competencies achieved during the leadership program. These reflections are based on experiences with both writing the master's thesis and learning attained throughout the entire study program. About 70% of the theses were written in groups of two or three students.

### **Design and analysis**

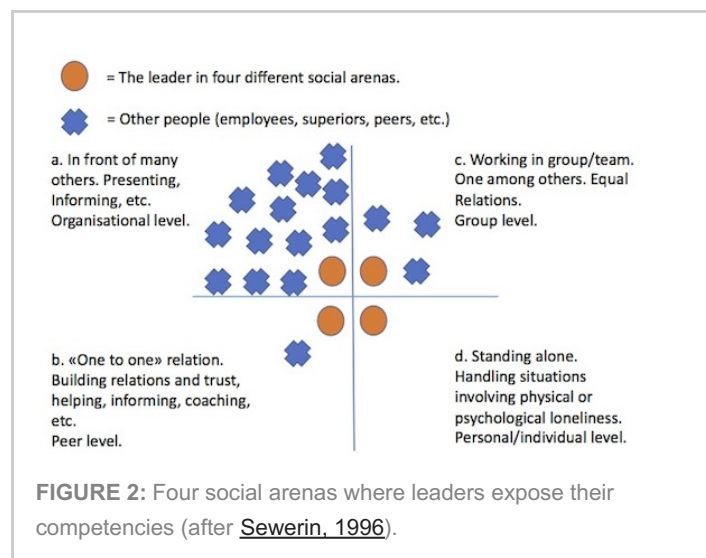
We used template analysis to structure the data ([King, 2012](#); [King & Brooks, 2016](#)). Before systematic analysis, *familiarisation with the data* was achieved by reading all available material. In the preliminary coding and clustering stage, an a priori theme was developed based on two components ([Rennemo, 2006](#); [Sewerin, 1996](#)). The first component was introduced at an earlier stage than the second and should be viewed as *an initial template*.

The first component relates to three dimensions that are always important when people (such as leaders) are mobilising resources to handle the world around them (for instance, in problem solving, decision making,

etc.). These three dimensions may be viewed as analytical (I. Thinking), emotional (II. Caring), and action-oriented (III. Doing) competencies (Figure 1). Two of these dimensions can sometimes dominate the third, a tendency which might result in a weaker leadership decision than if all three dimensions were involved (Rennemo, 2006).



When applying the initial template to the data, we found that students referred to different social situations that were related to their leadership reflections. Some of the reflections occurred at the organisational level, while others were related to individual- or peer-level situations. To discern these nuances, we developed a second component in our template that included the social dimension. Sewerin (1996) extracts different social arenas into four social situation categories, which are illustrated in Figure 2. In the version below, we have also connected these arenas to different levels in the organisation.



The two components were brought together as a revised template that shows leadership competencies in different social arenas and consists of 12 areas of competency. This final template is illustrated below and was used in our data analysis and in the organisation of student reflections. The categories presented in the results section are based on quotations from several sources and reflect the commonalities between the quotes.

<b>I. Thinking, Analytic competence</b>	Ia. Org. Level. Exposed to many.		
	Ib. Peer level. Exposed to one.		
	Ic. Group level. Exposed to equals.		
	IId. Individual/personal level. Exposed to being alone.		
<b>II. Caring, Emotional competence</b>	Ila. Org. Level. Exposed to many.		
	Ilb. Peer level. Exposed to one.		
	Ilc. Group level. Exposed to equals.		
	IId. Individual/personal level. Exposed to being alone.		
<b>III. Doing, Action-oriented competence</b>	Illa. Org. Level. Exposed to many.		
	IIIb. Peer level. Exposed to one.		
	IIIc. Group level. Exposed to equals.		
	IIId. Individual/personal level. Exposed to being alone.		

**FIGURE 3:** Revised template (after Rennemo, 2006; Sewerin, 1996).

After applying the revised template, we continued to find an important aspect of leadership development which a substantial number of students described as important. A fourth category was introduced and applied in *the final template*: Collaborating – The learning network.

## Results

Based on the findings, we chose to present the categories in the following sequence: (1) Thinking – Analytical competence; (2) Doing – Action-oriented competence; (3) Caring – Emotional competence; and (4) Collaborating – The learning network.

### 1. Thinking – Analytical competence

We first explored the areas of competency related to the thinking and analytical dimension of leadership. When we related statements about this dimension to the social areas of competency, we found that the following competencies were frequently mentioned: (a) new perspectives on the organisation as a whole; (b) new perspectives on individuals in organisations/organisational networks; (c) new perspectives on groups, leader groups, group behaviour, and social relations; and (d) competencies that are individually anchored and related to leadership. All of the theses included reflections related to the

thinking and analytical dimension which seemed to have improved during participation in the master's program.

a. New perspectives on the organisation as a whole

Through participation in lectures, reflective discussions, and academic writing with papers and theses, students reported that the acquired knowledge and competence provided a new view on the organisational and leadership practice as a whole.

We are fascinated by the concepts of knowledge (the epistemology) that we found in the study program, which we have been a part of for the last 2.5 years. We have recognised arguments found in the literature about why this way of understanding knowledge is relevant for leadership and organisational development. Without participating in the study, we would not have gained such a multi-perspective view on the organisation, where we are able to see that different realities exist side by side.

b. New perspectives on individuals in organisations/organisational networks

This newly acquired knowledge and competence is described to stimulate a reflective distance and understanding of the individuals who are part of the organisation. For example, in terms of individual differences and behaviour:

I have a much better understanding of the impact that different concepts of knowledge have on the way we understand and help individuals. After my realisation, a meeting with every new customer became a new situation, and I was much more amused by simply observing my colleagues in different situations.

c. New perspectives on groups, leader groups, group behaviour, and social relations

Analytical competence regarding understanding group social relations and group dynamics, and how leadership is practiced and developed within these groups, was also put forward in the leaders' reflections, as exemplified by this quotation:



It has been a great pleasure to find new knowledge about groups in organisations—for me, especially leadership groups and teams, since these groups are very important in my leadership practice.

d. Individually anchored competencies related to leadership, such as language development as it relates to leadership and knowledge management, tools for personal reflection, methodology, and a better capacity to relate to the academic world, including through academic writing

We have learned about scientific methods and scientific writing. My reading abilities have improved, and the process of writing academic texts has been personally developed. Since my background is in nature science, it has been important and interesting to spend much time working with perspectives and methods [that are] anchored in a different tradition.

Theoretically, this has been a learning process, full of conceptual contemplation, encountering new perspectives, and a growing understanding of different theoretical positions, their possibilities, inherent contrasts, contradictions, and limitations.

The ongoing search for new perspectives and different ways of understanding leadership and organisational life has led me in the direction of becoming a reflective practitioner.

In summary, students of the experienced-based master's program underscore the importance of building analytical competence through education. They described changes in how they relate to individuals, groups, and the organisation as a whole through the acquirement of theoretical and empirical knowledge as well as an understanding of scientific methodology and academic language.

## **2. Doing – Action-oriented competence**

The second area of competency is linked to actions, or the ability to act in different social situations at different levels of the organisation. Among different action competencies, one strong pattern is found in the data, namely the ability to act as a reflective practitioner. This competency is mostly related to an inherent personal capacity and therefore occurs at the individual level (d).

However, several students also link this capacity to the organisational level and describe a better capacity to understand organisational life in a more holistic way (a). Another often-mentioned competency that is easily related to the organisational level is an improved ability to express oneself with better precision, especially in written form. Those who described this skill emphasised the training they received in academic writing and through work on their theses. Nevertheless, significant contributions have been made to the other organisational levels as well (b and c). The following competencies were frequently mentioned:

a. To express oneself with better precision; to stimulate knowledge development in one's own organisation; to use better implementation strategies, plan development, and decision-making skills; to professionalise the role as a change agent

We had a lot of practice looking for different perspectives in everyday conversations which had the consequence of making us question the situation to a stronger degree. We think more openly about the situation and what is said, and we have a better understanding of what the best follow-up initiatives are.

Because of the study, and in relation to organisational conditions and to our own leadership practice, our ability to express ourselves more precisely with access to relevant concepts has improved considerably.

b. Strengthened relational orientation with peers and better (some mention less defensive) communication skills

Reflexive practice does not appear individually and in a vacuum. You need to reflect in tandem with somebody. We had each other. We have proposed (in our organisations) that every employee and change agent needs a 'critical friend' to reflect with.

We have discovered the necessity of face-to-face communication in dialogues. In an ordinary busy working day, it is easy to be too fast in communications, especially on digital platforms.

c. Better ability to handle conflicts, antagonism, and dilemmas within and between groups

Professionally, the program has changed our behaviour to such a degree that people around us comment on it. We have brought reflection and learning into focus and into new practice.

d. Reflective practice, the ability to connect theory to the practical situation, self-discipline, a scientific approach to one's own organisation, and working systematically and with a more research-based mindset

Writing the thesis has been a positive culmination of the study. Because of this work, we have had the opportunity to study our field of practice, and the process has forced us to critically evaluate our practice and ourselves.

The process gave us valuable insight into the role of being an academic researcher in our own organisation. We feel confident about carrying out an action-based research process and designing processes for knowledge sharing and development.

In summary, this dimension concerns being able to act as a reflective practitioner at different levels of an organisation, and we find it well-represented in the leaders' reflections. It seems that this dimension is developed through both the theoretical parts of the study program as well as through the collaboration and exchange of experiences between the participants.

### **3. Caring – Emotional competencies**

Reflections regarding emotional competencies are represented to a lesser degree than the analytical and behavioural aspects of leadership. We found reflections about the development of emotional competencies in 22 of the 44 theses. A distinct pattern appeared after sorting the reflections into social arenas. There were 11 emotionally-oriented reflections in a situation where the students were co-writing, especially when writing their master's theses. Some also mentioned co-writing papers. These situations encouraged feelings of closeness and opportunities to learn about oneself in relation to peers (b).

The second most-mentioned emotional dimension relates to leadership situations where being alone enables a better ability to handle stress, strengthen personal endurance, and handle discomfort in learning

processes (d). A few gave examples of emotional leadership competencies that are related to the organisational and group levels. Emotional competencies are described as being closely related to relational aspects of leadership development. They revolve around feeling more confident in relation to many people (a) and recognising situations where working in groups is necessary for involvement and anchoring (c).

**a. Confidence and flexibility in the leader role**

Through this process, I have seen my organisation from an external perspective and have been able to reflect on our way of working. From this [insight], I have learned to rely on my intuition and to dare to challenge mainstream activities and assumptions that are taken for granted.

**b. Working with peers; closeness and feedback**

Last but not least, we have learned a lot from writing together. We have been challenged to investigate each other's mental models and our own. We have learned to listen, to be open to each other, and to be willing to put private preoccupations aside. We have learned about private peculiarities, sometimes through self-evaluations, but other times from open, reflective conversations based on mutual trust.

**c. Emotional processes related to working in a group**

Based on theoretical contributions achieved through the master's study, we think that knowledge develops in relation to and in cooperation with others. From such perspectives, it is wise to remove focus from the leader as a person and look for co-created solutions, as highlighted in the program. We believe this attitude is more future oriented.

**d. Gaining courage, patience, and endurance**

On a personal level, work on the thesis has contributed considerably to my personal development and maturation as a leader. In addition, the working process itself has been valuable. We needed to concentrate within the available frameworks with reference to having a full-time job as a leader and having a family that also has its needs. This situation has called for discipline and structure.

In summary, the emotional aspects of leadership were less represented in the data material. Nevertheless, their descriptions of emotional development arose throughout the program, but mostly on the individual and peer levels.

#### **4. Collaborating – The learning network**

The network among the leaders—and its effect on knowledge sharing and collaboration—was strongly represented in the material. There was a strong impression that the pedagogical methods, program organisation, and didactics provided an opportunity to establish a collaborative platform for development. We saw this mentioned frequently in the leaders' reflections, not only as an isolated category in itself but also closely related to the other competencies in our template and almost serving as an overarching theme in the data material.

In my experience, discussions and reflections with others, academics, and practitioners have been very helpful. From this [discourse], I have gained new perspectives and have been able to restructure my own thoughts.

Prioritising and providing space for reflection was emphasised as an important part of the master's program.

After interesting lectures, the program workshops have given space for reflections and engagement among a very experienced and heterogeneous group of students.

When provided space, the group of leaders co-created an inspiring and reflective milieu for learning, which was also put forward by students as one of the most important aspects of the program.

Being part of a group of students was very important. Having feedback from many people was very inspiring and stimulated creative thinking.

Since we started in January 2009, the master's thesis has had an effect of rich social interplay through interesting discussions and group reflections among a group of great fellow students and inspiring teachers. A team of 40 students managed to combine their knowledge and create new meaning for each other as leaders.

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated what leaders regard as important outcomes of learning in an experience-based leadership program. Based on the leaders' reflections, as presented in 44 master's theses, we divided the descriptions into thinking, doing, caring, and collaborating aspects of leadership development. We found that most of the descriptions were based on the analytical and behavioural aspects of leadership. Emotional aspects of leadership were also described but to a lesser extent, at least at the group and organisational levels.

Working with other leaders was described as important with respect to the emotional and relational aspects of leadership development during the study program. This cooperation was also reflected in our fourth category, not included in the initial template, that represents the leaders' appreciation of the emergence of a platform for collaboration, mutual help, and knowledge sharing. This platform was developed through a common interest in leadership that is based on years of experience and was made possible through participation in a university-based master's program. This fourth category was closely connected to the other categories, almost serving as an overarching theme in the material.

The study leaves a strong impression that these leaders find their master's program supportive of the CLS view of leadership as a collective anchored process and of learning as a situated process. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate self-reflections on leadership development among leaders who participated in a university leadership program at the master's level.

This study contributes to theoretical discussions within the field of leadership education at universities. First, the students studied described the development of both analytical and action-oriented competencies, contradicting some of the criticism that leadership programs at the master's level are too focused on theoretical and functional aspects to the detriment of the practical and behavioural aspects of leadership ([Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003](#); [Mintzberg, 2004](#)). We found that when reflecting on their learning, the students themselves highlighted the multi-perspective and actionable outcomes of their education as well as the practical help the program provided. Their self-described ability to act as reflective practitioners, with a background from a variety of theoretical perspectives, also stands in contrast with critiques from the CLS literature ([Barker, 1997](#); [Tourish, 2013](#)). Our findings seem to oppose some of the claims that university leadership programs are excessively oriented towards conserving the mainstream and traditional aspects of leadership practice.

Second, when it comes to the emotional dimension, it is reasonable to claim that the leaders are provided with the opportunity for personal and peer-relational development. The emotional dimension in organisational and group settings is represented to a lesser degree. Therefore, it is likely that the program addresses these dimensions to a lesser extent. Because emotions are an important aspect of the behavioural dimension of leadership, this point could support the critics from the CLS literature ([Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003](#); [Tourish, 2013](#)). Based on these findings, additional studies should investigate different guidelines for how to train and develop emotional competencies at the group and organisational levels in a university context. We are fully aware of the existence of well-driven, but also costly, initiatives by private institutions, consultancies, and prestigious university-based leadership programs, such as IMPM ([IMPM, 2018](#)), MIT Sloan School of Management ([MIT, 2018](#)), and Harvard ([Harvard, 2018](#)), all of which creatively use different techniques to address both behavioural and emotional aspects of leadership. Nevertheless, in an affordable and open university context, this approach seems to be less recognised, at least in Norway. The gap between analytical and practical

knowledge may be sustained by the university's focus on textual curricula, theoretical lectures, and grading of written assignments. This focus may blur the practical and situated knowledge related to leadership. This gap may also be sustained by lecturers having less experience with leadership in practice than their experienced students. To bridge such a gap, it is important to make use of the experience base represented in the students themselves, which is underlined in our next argument.

Third, we have found that the network among the leaders—and its effect of knowledge-sharing and collaboration—is important for learning throughout the master's program. This form of collective learning which the students describe could be termed Collective Leadership Learning (CLL). CLL is a form of leadership learning that makes use of the leadership students' experience base and that stimulates the use of knowledge-sharing and collaboration. A lack of this form of learning process has been addressed on multiple occasions. For example, in his critique of traditional leadership training, Barker (1997) emphasises the importance of such a community-developing process and recommends that leadership training concentrate on the dynamic development of organisational systems. From the leader reflections, it seems that the master's program stimulates the collective and community-developing aspect of leadership training. This stimulation is also in line with recommendations from social- and situated-learning approaches (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and is incorporated into the learning literature (Hjorth & Johannisson, 2009; Rae, 2000, 2006). It is reasonable to suggest that the places where free dialogue evolves make it possible to develop new insight and identities as a leader and to act as central drivers for creating meaning regarding where leadership emerges. The master's program seems to be such a place. In essence, Collective Leadership Learning (CLL) follows the same mechanisms as described in distributed leadership and leadership-as-practice theory (Bolden, 2011; Raelin, 2011; Spillane, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Therefore, it is important to view this collective learning process as parallel to how leadership is practiced in the participants' respective organisations. This importance



is thoroughly described in the leaders' reflections and suggests a form of situated learning process that is not clearly defined in the textual curriculum but rather is learned through experience and social exchange between the participants.

Fourth, it has been claimed that university leadership programs often consist of young people with little experience (Mintzberg, 2004). The students contributing data to this study were older (with an average age of 45) and had long-term leadership experience. We do not know what the effects of a similar study program would be on a different and less experienced group of students, which is a limitation of this study. However, if a master's leadership program that is oriented towards a student group with these characteristics can overcome severe criticism from the CLS literature, an argument could be made for considering leadership training at universities from a lifelong perspective. Since knowledge sharing between participants in the master's program is highlighted as such a fundamental outcome of learning, universities may stimulate the creation and maintenance of learning networks, both before and after graduation. At this particular master's program, this aim can be accomplished by providing support for alumni initiatives.

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

This study is based on reflections given in leaders' final master's theses. The leaders are encouraged to critically reflect on their development throughout the study program. The strength of this design is that our material is based on what the leaders themselves viewed as important during their studies, and the reflections are not based on predefined themes or questions. Nevertheless, the risk exists that leaders reflecting about learning in a master's thesis are influenced by their position of being evaluated as students by internal and external examiners. To further investigate leaders' perspectives on learning, a longitudinal diary-based design would be an alternative and suitable approach.

### **Conclusion**

This study analysed reflections from 44 master's theses written by experienced leaders participating in a master's program. The following question was used for analysis: "What do leaders who are participating in an experienced-based master's program emphasise when reflecting upon learning throughout the program?" Based on the recorded reflections of these leaders, it seems that the study program covers a broad spectrum of competency areas that are important for leaders. Based on these findings, this study contributes to research by moderating previous criticism of leadership development programs at universities. Nevertheless, somewhat in line with previous criticism, there seem to be areas of leadership the program does not adequately cover, namely the emotional aspects of leadership. Further studies should investigate how to develop this aspect of leadership within the context of an open university.

An overarching theme in our results is that leaders appreciate the ability to collaborate via learning networks and share knowledge and experiences with other leaders and academics. In our discussion, we term this as Collective Leadership Learning (CLL). This collective aspect of leadership development is in line with the central assumptions used in the CLS approach and is also compatible with situated-learning theory, distributed-leadership theory, leadership-as-practice, collective-leadership theory, and leadership as a community developing process. When providing experienced-based master's degree programs, universities should embrace the use of CLL. They should also be creative in designing learning activities that develop not only analytical but also behavioural and emotional competencies. For leaders themselves, the results of this study, which group competencies into analytical, behavioural, emotional, and collaborative areas, may also be used as a conceptual model for evaluation and further development.

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## Abstract

Collective Leadership Learning (CLL) – Leader reflections on learning during higher-level, experience-based leadership education

**Background:** It has been argued that leadership and management programs are biased in that they emphasise the individual anchored and analytical aspects of leadership rather than the collective, emotional, and behavioural aspects. We wanted to investigate what leaders (students) participating in an experience-based master's program emphasised as important when looking back on learning throughout their study period.

**Methods:** We examined systematic reflections regarding leadership development, which were provided in master's theses (n = 44) from 2011 to 2016. We used template analysis and sorted the descriptions into different areas of competencies (thinking – the analytical aspect; doing – the behavioural aspect; caring – the emotional aspect; and collaborating – the collective or relational aspect). We then further sorted into four social arenas of leadership (organisational, group, peer, and individual levels).

**Results:** We found that the thinking (analytical) and doing (behavioural) aspects of leadership development were thoroughly described in the systematic reflections, and the caring (emotional) aspect was described to a far lesser degree. Another important finding was leaders' significant appreciation for a platform that provides collaboration and knowledge sharing, which was made available through the design of the study program.

**Discussion and conclusion:** This is (to our knowledge) the first study to investigate leaders' descriptions of learning throughout an experience-based master's program. The study moderates previous criticism of leadership development programs at universities. Nevertheless, further studies should investigate how to develop the emotional aspects of leadership within a university context. When designing study programs, one should also embrace the rich knowledge and experience that leaders bring into the classroom and the exchange of this knowledge and experience through Collective Leadership Learning (CLL).

**Keywords:** collective leadership learning, critical leadership studies, leadership, leadership development, leadership education, shared leadership.

**Author affiliations:** Øystein Rennemo – Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, Levanger, Norway; Jonas R. Vaag – Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences, Nord University, Levanger, Norway.

**Contact information:** Jonas R. Vaag, Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences, Nord University, Høgskolevegen 27, 7600 Levanger, Norway.  
Email: [jonas.vaag@nord.no](mailto:jonas.vaag@nord.no).

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