

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2011 Conference Proceedings (Toronto, ON,
Canada)

Learning to Lead as Learning to Learn: The Experiences of Malay Women at Malaysian Public Universities

Norseha Unin
Universiti Teknologi MARA

John Dirkx
Michigan State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Unin, Norseha and Dirkx, John (2011). "Learning to Lead as Learning to Learn: The Experiences of Malay Women at Malaysian Public Universities," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/105>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Learning to Lead as Learning to Learn: The Experiences of Malay Women at Malaysian Public Universities

Norseha Unin,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, MALAYSIA

John Dirkx,
Michigan State University, USA

Keywords: Informal Learning; Social Context

Abstract: This study examined how Malay women learn to lead within their social context. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with four deans and two directors from Malaysian public universities. The findings demonstrate the paradoxical contexts that these women faced in learning to lead, and how they learned to navigate the multiple tensions and contradictions they faced in assuming leadership roles. For them, learning to lead is about learning to learn from and through tensions and contradictions. We discuss the implications that the findings hold for conceptions of informal learning, especially as reflected in the social context of women within nonwestern societies.

Introduction

Individuals working as deans or directors in higher education are generally “leading from the middle” (Lindholm, 1999). They function within complex contexts, characterized by “loosely coupled systems” (Weick, 1976) that often lack coordination and have differentiation of components. At mid-level administration, they operate within multiple power and authority structures (Kezar, 2001). They face a perplexing mix of social expectations, which they have to interpret in a meaningful way allowing them to quickly learn to lead. In general, women as leaders experience a different reality and they interpret it differently than their male counterparts, who represent the more traditional group within higher education leadership (Gosetti & Rusch, 1995). For Malay women, however, as representatives of nonwestern societies, learning to lead occurs within a society that holds to traditional values and norms. They must learn to make sense of their realities that reflect an appreciation for and honoring of the norms. Within the Malay community, women have to tread carefully to not upset the norms of a gendered and hierarchical society (Mohamad, 1994).

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how Malay women learn to lead. The purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of how they learn to lead within their social context. Previous studies of women leaders as learners (Astin & Leland, 1991; Helgesen, 1990; Van Valsar & Hughes, 1990) report that women experience ongoing learning from a variety of sources. One of the ways for learning is informal, and the value of informal learning has been acknowledged in the leadership development literature (Day, 2001; McCauley, 2001). In this study, we sought to develop an understanding of how their particular social context shapes the learning processes.

Theoretical Perspective

Higher education leaders are increasingly faced with issues for which they have little experience or formal preparation (Gmelch, 2002; Wilson, 1999). With little training, learning to lead for them is often a process of learning on the job through everyday experiences. In the adult learning literature, learning through daily experiences is known as “informal learning” (Davies, 2008; Garrick, 1998; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). It is one of the most pervasive forms of learning in the workplace (Leslie, Aring & Brand, 1998; Lohman, 2000, Livingstone, 2001). As a kind of learning that transpires within the context of the participants’ social and cultural values (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1996), informal learning provides a useful theoretical framework for this study.

The learning processes are viewed as intentional and unintentional. When an individual has a defined purpose for learning (Schugurensky, 2000), it is intentional. Some processes are unintentional, which is learning by “bumping into things” (Dirkx & Lavin, 1991), where the individual does not realize that learning is occurring, but later realized that something was learned. Informal learning includes self-directed (Knowles, 1970), reflective (Mezirow, 1991), experiential (Boud & Walker, 1996), incidental (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), and tacit learning (Schugurensky, 2000). These perspectives, however, reflect an emphasis on the individual and often do not adequately address the influence of the broader social context on the learning process. Relatively few studies of this complex process have examined how adults might learn through informal learning in nonwestern cultures, in which traditional values significantly influence the structuring of social roles and norms.

Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2007; Copley, 2001; Lieblich, 1998). We conducted two in-depth interviews with six Malay women who were deans (pseudonyms: Azizah, Kamila, Sabrina, Norizan), and directors (pseudonyms: Mariani, Latifah) at Malaysian universities. The first interviews were an abbreviated life story interviews. The second interviews raised questions that emerged from preliminary analysis of earlier interviews, and focused on critical incidents (Gremier 2004) that were important in understanding how they learn to lead. All interviews were conducted in English with brief responses in Malay phrases that provided emphasis on local perspectives. The transcribed interviews were subjected to categorical content analysis (Lieblich, 1998).

Findings

Consistent with the theoretical framework presented earlier, their informal learning was essentially self-directed, experience-based, and both intentional and unintentional. However, the findings reveal that opportunities for these women appeared to be influenced by constraints represented by patriarchal values. The findings demonstrate the paradoxical contexts in which they learn to lead. In the process, they learned to navigate the multiple tensions and contradictions they faced as women leaders. Participants learned to lead by learning about paradoxes that exist within their roles as leaders in a society, where a male-dominated structure exists, and their duties as wives take precedence. For these women, *learning to lead* is about learning to learn from and through these social tensions. *Learning to learn* from paradoxes becomes a way for them to negotiate the societal expectations and multiple tensions. Additionally, their learning involves relational and emotional processes. *Learning to lead as learning to learn.*

For these women, *learning to lead* means that they are constantly *learning to learn*, which involves learning to negotiate and balance their professional and traditional roles. When navigating these roles, they were holding two demands in contradictory relations to one another. The problems they encountered, and the culture in which they encountered the problems, are perceived as being paradoxical and contradictory. The participants realized that recognizing the paradox was important to their learning processes. They were constantly faced with situations that require a generous attitude towards *learning to learn*. For example, Kamila explained that, “Some males may not like a female as their leader.” In that case, she said, “a lady boss *mesti pandai* [must be able to] play the games.” She described it as, “*sama juga macam kita jaga suami kat rumah* [how we care for our husbands at home],” which illustrates an influence of patriarchy, wherein males enjoy customary status in the family. Azizah, on the other hand, realized that women deans are a minority among academic leaders. For their voices to be heard, Azizah argues that their ideas or suggestions must be “practical” and “beneficial” as viewed from a patriarchal perspective. The findings reveal that the study was more about *learning to learn* as opposed to *learning to lead*.

Their commitment towards learning to learn was central to the processes by which they learned to lead. This emphasis on *learning to learn* contributed to their ability to navigate the complex social roles, as women leaders, in a male-dominated and hierarchical society. Patriarchy and unwritten rules stood out in many of the interviews. Both these norms shape the ways these women describe what it meant for them to be female leaders. Consequently, these women regularly need to “see” things from a male perspective. Learning to lead for them is all about learning to learn the obvious contradictions. In many ways, learning to learn for them was a paradoxical phenomenon.

As women leaders, they constantly learned the need to navigate the paradox. Many of their stories referred to learning by “bumping into things” (Dirkx & Lavin, 1991), and making sense of things while they were in the learning process. These women were NOT acquiring a set body of leadership skills, but rather constructing skills that were useful in the context of *learning to lead*. As a woman dean, Norizan advised, “You must NOT show that you are competing with men.” “And that is the hidden rule,” she reminded. Norizan further affirmed that, masculine attributes such as being “competitive” or “aggressive” can be viewed as inappropriate for women leaders in the social context. They learn to lead by living through and learning about paradoxes that characterize their roles as leaders. However, these women were smart and sharp at balancing the tension of these opposites.

Learning from paradox required them to hold both of these tensions the whole time. In addition, *learning to learn* required them to acknowledge their status as “a married person.” As they learned to work through the paradox, they actually sustained and balanced the tensions; they did not go either way. There was no mention of the strength of one tension to diminish the other. Both tensions were held to be true, even though they contradict one another. There were obvious contradictions in what it meant for them as leaders, and what it meant for them as mothers and wives. Sabrina, for example, uttered this paradox, “We have this value system, where regardless of how highly qualified you are—you can be the prime minister of Malaysia and yet there’s an expectation.” In her words, it is understood that “You are not a prime minister at home.” Sabrina explained, “As a woman dean,” leading in a patriarchal society, one needs to be cognizant that “when you go home, you are not a dean.” In essence, Sabrina points to the importance of recognizing the “hidden rules,” wherein men’s perspectives are more valuable. In this social

context, women also need to acknowledge that their duty as wives remain a priority. But, despite all the contradictions, these women did amazingly well in working through the paradox.

Honoring both values became a useful way for them to manage the multiple roles and negotiate the implicit societal expectations. The cultural contexts in which they work were described as largely patriarchal and hierarchical. In a society where gracefulness is highly valued for Malay women, Norizan cautioned, “the minute you become visible and deemed as competitive to men,” that is when “the glass ceiling” stops. Norizan realized, women could also “try to walk in men’s shoes,” and “to see how things are looked at from their perspectives.” While these women were not discouraged from assuming leadership positions, they experienced little explicit or direct support for their roles as leaders. Nonetheless, they still flourished as higher education leaders.

Although many of them were trained abroad at the graduate level, there was little acknowledgement of this educational training to their learning to lead. They were using concrete everyday experiences as locations and contexts for learning about what it means to lead as women leaders. They were talking about a process of learning using inquiry in developing themselves. Their accounts of emerging as leaders reflected a process of *learning to learn* from working through contradictions, rather than a process of learning about what constitutes good and effective leaders. To this end, their leadership development involved *learning to learn* from paradox, which is powerfully embedded in concrete daily aspects of their lives.

Learning to lead as emotional processes.

In their descriptions of critical incidents, their personal stories reflected learning processes that involved influential relational and emotional processes. Words describing negative emotions such as “frustrating,” “discouraging,” “challenging,” “problematic” and “disappointing” emerged sparingly through out their stories.

For these women, some negative emotions triggered a prompt for learning. For example, Norizan revealed that being in administration “has its moments” and there were times when “some individuals would give you a hard time.” In such a case, she learned to “vent” her frustration by sharing the “grouses” with friends who could be “from outside your work realm.” For Sabrina, her learning experiences involved dealing with “unpleasant news, unpleasant discussion,” and “little incidences” where at times “big problems are bound to happen.” For instance, resolving “staffing issues” was “a good learning experience” for Sabrina.

For Mariani, “it was discouraging” when academic staff as “people who are supposed to be intellectuals” and “should be thinking differently,” but they became part of the “resistance and misunderstanding” against a controversial policy initiative. She further explained,

But, then, you have got to counter argue and convince them that if we have a good policy on board, you can become a role model to other universities that do not have such a policy. I think that kind of strategy of going around, lobbying, that’s how it took time.

Although it was initially “frustrating” because it took two long years, “to get the issue on board,” Mariani realized that there were “lots of learning involved.” She learned to “gather support from people at the grass root level.” She also acquired the skills “to convince top management.” She came up with brilliant ways to foster a rational approach in realizing the socially controversial policy. All these personal stories represent issues with people on staff that were emotionally

laden, but at the same time, these women gracefully viewed such everyday experiences as locations and contexts for learning.

In some emotional situations, Clore (1994) argues that, emotions can guide one's attention to act in ways that are relevant to goals and concerns. Additionally, Davies (2008) argues that emotions can also cause learners to prioritize. We argue that such priorities would also take into account the social context. The study reveals that all six participants experienced relational issues that were deeply emotional, and had caused them to prioritize. While Mariani, Norizan, Azizah, and Sabrina dealt with complex emotional situations with people on staff, Kamila and Latifah were confronted with challenging episodes during their doctoral studies.

In Kamila's case, "the trial was great" at a time when she was pursuing her PhD abroad. Upon completion of his masters program, her husband had to return to Malaysia with their three older children. Kamila stayed in the UK with two younger children, aged three and five. Unexpectedly, she gave birth to her sixth child abroad, in the absence of her husband. She said,

My husband was supposed to come, but then, he arrived a bit late. The baby was already delivered and I was, at that time, I felt I had all the strengths, Alhamdulillah (thanks to Allah)! I felt VERY strong. I believe I could face any challenges. It was not easy.

Kamila represents an individual who simply plows forward when faced with emotional challenges. For Latifah, a conflicting emotion drove her to accelerate the completion of her doctoral study at a Malaysian university – a process that was taking her 6 years. In the first three years, she was in Amsterdam for 6 months and another 6 months at the University of Illinois. Latifah admits that this was a difficult phase in her life. During her enrollment abroad, her husband, mother, and mother-in-law cared for her 4 year-old daughter. Her husband would visit her in brief 2-week stints. After three years of study, her teaching duties required her to commit more time in the classroom, taking away time that she could have used to write her dissertation, which forced her to act. In the end, she made a decision to seclude herself at a friend's apartment in a coastal town of Malaysia. The three-month seclusion, nevertheless, yielded the desired results! But the decision came with emotional sacrifices – separation from her family being the most obvious one.

In conclusion, it is clear that emotionality played a role in the learning processes. The challenging instances they encountered were taken as opportunities to learn, and develop competencies that become imperative for success in their leadership positions. Instead of lamenting on difficult situations, these women emerged strong by working hard, and accepting offers of increased responsibilities and promotions. None of these women expressed regret in stepping up to the challenges of being female deans and directors. In fact, they are glad that they had the opportunities to accomplish and achieve, to make a difference and contribute, and to learn from the complexities of being women leaders in their social context.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Welton (1991) characterized the workplace as a primary location of adult learning and development. We know that much of adult learning and development occurs through the everyday experiences we encounter in the workplace. These everyday experiences, however, present complex socio-cultural and psychosocial dynamics. While much research and theory regarding informal learning has focused on explicit structures and functional processes, this study supports greater attention to the more tacit and paradoxical qualities of everyday

experience, and the importance they play in our learning from and through these experiences. At the same time, while considerable emphasis has been placed on the role of reflection within informal learning theories, these personal stories revealed few instances of the explicit use of reflective learning. Additional research into this issue may reveal more subtle ways in which this form of learning was manifested in the development of their leadership knowledge and skills.

References

- Astin, H. S., & Leland, C. (1991). *Women of influence, women of vision: a cross-generational study of leaders and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. & Walker, D. (eds.) (1996). *Using Experience for Learning* Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clore, G.L. (1994). *Why emotions vary in intensity*. In P. Ekman & R. J. Davidson (Eds.), *The nature of emotion: Fundamental questions* (pp. 386-393). New York: Oxford Press.
- Cobley, P. (2001). *Narrative*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Davies, L. (2008). *Informal learning: A new model for making sense of experience*. England: Gower.
- Day, D. V. (2001). Leadership development: A review in context. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11, pp. 581-613.
- Dirkx, J. M., & Lavin, R. (1991). Understanding and facilitating experience-based learning in adult education: The FOUR thought model, In C. Bruning & LR Sandmann (eds.). *Proceedings of the MWRP Conference*, pp. 50-57. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Garrick, J. (1998). *Informal learning in the workplace: Unmasking human resource development*. London: Routledge.
- Gmelch, W. H. (2002). *The Call for Department Leaders*. Retrieved October 4, 2009, from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/19/9d/00.pdf
- Gosetti, P. & Rush, E. (1995). Re-examining educational leadership: Challenging assumptions. In D Dunlap & PA Schmuck (eds), *Women leading in education*. NY: SUNY Press.
- Gremler, D. D. (2004). The critical incident technique in service research. *Journal of Service Research*. 7(1), pp. 65-89.
- Helgesen, S. (1990). *The female advantage: Women's way of leadership*. NY: Doubleday Currency.
- Kezar, A. J. (2001). *Understanding and facilitating organizational change in the 21st century: Recent research and conceptualizations*. ASHE-ERIC higher education report, 28(4). SF: Jossey-Bass.
- Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy vs. pedagogy*. NY: A. Press.
- Leslie, B., Aring, M., & Brand, B. (1998). Informal learning: The new frontier of employee and organizational development. *Economic Development Review*. 15(4), pp. 12-18.

- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). Narrative Research. Reading, Analysis and Interpretation. *Applied Social Research Methods Series vol. 47*. London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Livingstone, D. W. (2001). *Journal of Workplace Learning*. 13(7/8), pp. 308-317.
- Lindholm, J., & ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges. (1999). *Preparing department chairs for leadership roles*. Los Angeles, CA: ERIC Clearinghouse for community Colleges, UCLA.
- Lohman, M. C. (2000). Environmental Inhibitors to Informal Learning in the Workplace: A Case Study of Public School Teachers. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(2), pp. 83-101.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*. International perspectives on adult and continuing education. London: Routledge.
- McCauley, C. D. (2001). *Leader training and development*. In Zaccaro, S.J. & Klimoski, R. J. (eds.), *The nature of organizational leadership*, pp.347–383. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. The Jossey-Bass higher & adult education series. SF: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mohamad, M. (1994). *Poststructuralism, power and third world feminism*. *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, 12(1,2), pp. 119-143.
- Schugurensky, D. (2000). *The forms of informal learning: towards a conceptualization of the field*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the U. of Toronto, Toronto, NALL Working Paper No. 19, .
- Van, V. E., & Hughes-James, M. (1990). *Gender differences in the development of managers: How women managers learn from experience*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Education systems as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21. 1-19.
- Welton, M. R., & Deakin University. (1991). *Toward development work: The workplace as a learning environment*. Geelong, Vic: Deakin University.