Learning to Lead for Malay Women in Higher Education
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Abstract
This study examined how Malay women learn to lead using the informal learning framework. Six women deans from public universities in Malaysia were interviewed to gain an understanding of how they learn to lead within a Malaysian socio-cultural context. The findings demonstrate the paradoxical contexts that these women faced, and how they learned to navigate the multiple tensions and contradictions they faced in assuming leadership positions. Central to the processes by which these women learn to lead was their commitment to learning to learn. They learn to lead by living through and learning about paradoxes that characterize their roles as leaders within the particular social context - described by the participants as largely patriarchal and quite hierarchical. This emphasis on learning to lead contributed to their ability to navigate the complex social roles in which they found themselves as leaders in a male-dominated and hierarchical society. While much research and theory regarding informal learning has been focused on explicit structures and functional processes, this study supports greater attention to the more tacit and paradoxical qualities of everyday experiences, and the importance they play in our learning from and through these experiences.

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Introduction
The literature about women leaders as learners (Astin & Leland, 1991; Brant, 1992; Helgesen, 1990; Miller, 1986; Van & Hughes, 1990) suggests that women experience ongoing learning from a variety of sources. 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). The themes about women leaders as learners are consistent with some aspects of the informal learning theory that are experiential,

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less-structured, and non-institutional (Burns & Schaefer, 2003, Marsick & Watkins, 1990). For Malay women, learning to lead in higher education occurs within a society that holds to traditional values and norms (Unin & Dirkx, 2011). The Malay societal norms for rising to and holding leadership positions have largely favored males (Ong, 1990), and Malay women who become leaders in an organizational setting are usually working against the grain of social norms and values that exert a very strong influence on women’s proper roles (Ariffin, 1992; Ng & Yong, 1990, Raja Mamat, 1991).

Purpose of Study

This study examined how Malay women learn to lead within their social context. According to Unin & Dirkx (2011), when learning to lead, Malay women must make sense of their realities that reflect an appreciation for and honoring of the social norms. However, studies about Malaysian women in academic settings have yet to prioritize their lived experiences as ways of knowing and understanding the world (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan 1982). While scholars have studied them in terms of career progression (Lund, 2007), career mobility (Maimunah & Roziaah, 2006), globalization and women in academia (Luke, 2001) and as managers in higher education (Asmah, 1993), we have little understanding of how they learn to become leaders within their social and institutional settings. The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how their particular social context shapes the learning processes.

Theoretical Perspectives

Higher education leaders are increasingly faced with issues for which they may have little experience or formal preparation (Gmelch, 2002; Wilson, 1999). Malay women as higher education leaders face a perplexing mix of social expectations, which they have to interpret in a meaningful way allowing them to quickly learn to lead through daily experiences (Unin & Dirkx, 2011). With little or no recourse to formal training, learning to lead in higher education 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 participants’ social and cultural values (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1996), informal learning provides a theoretical framework for this study.

Informal learning includes self-directed (Knowles, 1970), reflective (Mezirow, 1991), experiential (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1996), incidental (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), and tacit learning (Schugurensky, 2000). The learning processes are viewed as intentional and unintentional. Learning is said to be intention when the learner has a defined purpose for learning (Schugurensky, 2000). Some processes are unintentional, which refers to 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. These perspectives on informal learning, however, reflect an emphasis on the individual and often do not adequately address the influence of the broader social context on the learning process (Unin & Dirkx, 2011). Therefore, studies that examine how adults might learn informally in non-western cultures need to consider the influence of traditional values on the learning process.

Research Design

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2007; Cobley, 2001; Lieblich, 1998) that involved two in-depth interviews. Six Malay women deans (pseudonyms: Azizah, Kamila, Sabrina, Norizan, Mariani, Latifah) from Malaysian public universities were interviewed. 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 (Gremler 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

The findings demonstrate the paradoxical contexts that these women faced, and how they learned to navigate the multiple tensions and contradictions they faced in assuming leadership positions. Consistent with the theoretical framework presented earlier, their informal learning was essentially self-directed, experience-based, and both
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 learned to lead by learning about paradoxes becomes a way for them to negotiate the societal expectations and multiple tensions. Additionally, their learning involves relational and emotional processes.

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.

While learning to learn required them to acknowledge their status as “a married person,” learning from paradox required them to hold both of these tensions the whole time. There was no mention of the strength of one tension to diminish the other. As they learned to work through the paradox, they actually sustained and balanced the tensions; they did not go either way. 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. Honoring both values became a useful way for them to manage the multiple roles and negotiate the implicit societal expectations. 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.” 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.

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 deans. 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 emotions such as “frustrating,” “discouraging,” “challenging,” “problematic” and “disappointing” emerged sparingly throughout their stories. For the participants, these 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. 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 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 situations, Clore (1994) argues that emotions can guide one’s attention to act in ways that are relevant to goals and concerns. Emotions can also cause learners to prioritize (Davies (2008). However, 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 master’s 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 disclosed, “My husband 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 two-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 in a friend’s apartment at 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.
Conclusion

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. They championed 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 Theory and Practice: The informal learning literature often suggests a view of learning that is more orderly and systematic than the processes that are described by women in this study. Given that much of their learning was related to daily experiences, and meaning is defined through a cultural lens in which the experiences occurred, certain cultural values become essential considerations for their learning. 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. Within the informal learning theories, considerable emphasis has been placed on the role of reflection. However, these women’s stories revealed limited instances of the explicit use of reflective learning. This lack of clear evidence for the use of reflection suggested that their learning differs from a western notion of learning that focuses on the individual’s reflective construction of knowledge (Merriam & Young, 2008). Additional research on this area of study may reveal more subtle ways in which this tacit form of learning was manifested in the development of their leadership knowledge and skills.

References

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