

LEADING LEARNING...OR BEING LED BY IT?

AN EXPLORATION OF THE POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
CONCEPTIONS OF AND APPROACHES TO LEARNING AND THE
EXERCISE OF LEADERSHIP BY HEADS OF E-LEARNING

Final report to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

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Steering group members:

The steering group which will oversee this project will be the Heads of eLearning Forum Steering group. During the project it had the following membership:

Dr Susannah Quinsee, City University

Neil Ringan, Manchester Metropolitan University

Nora Mogeey, University of Edinburgh

Dr Paul Brett, University of Wolverhampton

Dr Barbara Newland, University of Bournemouth

Dr David Nicol, Strathclyde University

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City University, London

BACKGROUND

“Heads...need an appreciation of the [learning and teaching] theory, as well as the practice, of education management” (Bush, 2003) in order to provide adequate, let alone successful, leadership (Hill, 2001 cited in Bush, 2003, pp 16). However, each head’s understanding of learning and their prior orientation to it is based on past experiences of personal learning. Consequently, the assurance and enhancement of learning and teaching which they lead is also influenced by such conceptions. An absence of literature concerned with

- the extent to which leadership in educational institutions is influenced by leaders’ conceptions of learning or their pre-orientation to learning (surface, deep, etc)
- the affects this may have on student learning and an institution’s goal of becoming a learning organisation and
- the way in which institutional development and change happens

highlighted the need for further research in this area. The exploration of conceptions held by such leaders is especially important as those in leadership positions not only represent values, but can also ‘impose’ them.

This study focused on members of the Heads of e-Learning Forum (HeLF) which is a network of senior staff in UK HEIs leading the enhancement of learning and teaching through the use of technology. At the time of the research the forum had a membership of 125 nominated members recognised by their institution as leaders within their context. There is no single term or job description which covers the role of the Head of e-Learning but this title is used here to refer to an individual with institution-wide responsibility for leading the enhancement of learning and teaching through the use of technology. It is important to note that similarly titled jobs in different institutions carry varying responsibilities which reflect their institutional structure and history (Shurville, Browne and Whitaker, 2009).

This area warranted further research especially in the field of e-learning where significant investments have been made by higher education institutions (HEIs). Furthermore, the role of e-learning staff is tied into many sectoral and organisational strategic objectives and is seen as integral to achieving institutional progress. However, these ‘new professionals’ are usually characterised as being marginal and often seen as lacking authority and responsibility (Oliver, 2002).

This research was also timely as the HEFCE was reviewing its Strategy for e-Learning (HEFCE, 2005) where the term ‘e-learning’ gave way to phrases such as ‘enhancing learning and teaching through the use of technology’ (Glenaffric Ltd, 2008) which put individuals with the term ‘e-Learning’ in their job title at great unease.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

This study focused on the Heads of e-Learning across UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and aimed to both pose and answer a pertinent research question and help support this group of professionals. Thus the objectives were both research and practice based.

Through the process of research this project aimed to provide:

- Leadership development opportunities to this group of professionals
- Support for Heads of e-Learning through times of change in discourse and national priorities
- Gain insight into how this group wishes to develop in the near future.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Do the ways in which leaders in higher education, specifically heads of E Learning, conceive of and approach learning relate to the ways in which they perceive their leadership role?

Objectives:

- To investigate the nature and varied conceptions of learning held by the Heads of E-Learning
- To explore Heads of e-Learning perceptions with regards to their leadership role
- To gain an understanding of whether the way in which they conceive of learning impacts on the way they lead the enhancement of learning within an educational setting.

METHODOLOGY

To address the research question the study engaged members of the Heads of e-Learning Forum (HeLF) who are nominated representatives from over 125 HEIs. As such, they are recognised as leaders by their respective institutions and as a collective body of experts by agencies such as the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Academy and the Joint Information Systems Committee.

A mixed-method, phenomenological approach was adopted for this sector-wide study and similarities and variation across and within participant cases was sought. This study has four distinct phases:

1. As leadership is contextually and culturally bounded and thus intertwined with its environment (Dimmock and Walker, 2005) an initial scoping survey was carried out which collected information about the individuals who hold this leadership position as well as information with regards to the institution in which they are employed. Acknowledging the role of the individual within organisational structures the initial survey collected sector wide information with regards to:
 - Participants' positions within the organisations and specifically with regards to the level of authority, power and ability to influence developments all of which vary between institutions
 - Their access and proximity to senior management, including reporting lines
 - Information with regards to the participants' academic background which also influences the way in which they view learning.
2. Qualitative data with regards to conceptions of learning and leadership was collected through semi-structured interviews. From the self-selecting sample of those who completed the questionnaire (38.5% response rate) a number of selection criteria were applied (including the subject which participants studied during their formal higher education) so as to identify the participants which were to be interviewed for the purposes of this study. The sample finally comprised of a total of 6 Heads of e-Learning representing both pre and post 92 HE institutions, with varying levels of responsibility, across all available age groups and across all available subjects areas studied at degree level.

Each participant took part in a one-to-one, semi-structured interview with informed consent forms being signed prior to the interview commencing. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face except for one which was carried out telephonically for financial and temporal reasons. Interviews lasted between 40-65 minutes and questions focused on:

- Personal experiences and theories of learning and
- Personal experiences and theories of leadership.

Each interview was audio recorded, with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Relationships between the two concepts of learning and leadership were sought through a cross sectional analysis of all participant cases as well as through a case-by-case approach within participant cases.

The analysis procedure was informed by publications by Moustakas (1994) and Smith and Osborn (2008) on phenomenological approaches to analysing data. Furthermore, Inwood (1997), Mulhall (2005) and Heidegger (1962) informed the conceptual framework adopted to underpin the analysis and discussion of the findings.

3. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Avolio, Bass, and Jung (1996) was used to quantitatively measure leadership behaviours and effectiveness.
4. The focus groups discussed in detail the findings from the previous methods and participants made recommendations with regards to providing support for the leadership and professional development for members of the Heads of e-Learning Forum.

The table below summarises the methods used in this research:

Data collection methods	Data yielded from each method
Scoping survey	Personal data including educational background, formal elements of leadership, perceived institutional culture
Semi-structured Interviews	Perceptual data with regards to conceptions of learning and leadership
Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire	Leadership style and behaviour
Focus groups	Recommendations and way forward

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The scoping survey of the HeLF community had a 38.5% response rate. Survey responses highlighted that the length of time HEIs have had posts with the remit of leading the development of e-learning institutionally varies significantly with the majority of institutions only instating such a role in the last six years. Job titles also vary (head, manager, advisor, co-ordinator, officer, etc) indicating the variance in responsibility and possible influence the post holders may have within their institution. Similarly, employment contracts vary in nature (senior manager, academic, administrative, etc) with almost three quarters of respondents stating that they are on academic or academic-related contracts.

The survey also shed light on the type of activities with which Heads of e-Learning engage. The majority of respondents spend most of their time authoring institutional strategies, sitting on high level committees, managing budgets and institution-wide projects, etc. The remaining respondents have a role more focused on professional developmental and thus liaise regularly with academics across the institution, co-ordinate staff development events, run workshops, facilitate good practice exchange networks, chair user groups etc. Only one respondent reported spending most of their time working one-to-one with academics on small scale developments and administering e-learning applications. Interestingly leading e-learning may not be necessarily the post holder's main responsibility but may encompass other elements of learning and teaching.

A key finding of the research from the interview phase was that both the phenomena of leadership and learning can afford personal growth. When greater self-presence (i.e., personal involvement, emotional attachment and responses/interaction) of participants was evident both phenomena afforded challenging learning experiences which led to personal growth. However the notion of developing as a learner over time was more prominent in their accounts than was the notion of developing as a leader over time. Furthermore, it is important to note that greater self-presence in a phenomenon did not always correspond to a positive outcome. Research findings position greater self-presence positively with regard to learning, but negatively in relation to functional performance in leadership.

The majority of participants who took part in the interviews expressed feelings of being an imposter which manifested quite clearly in their accounts of both learning and leadership. These feelings arose in the majority of participants due to:

- Their formal elements of leadership (position in the organisational hierarchy, type of employment contract)
- Being the only person within an institution with an e-learning remit - they were leaders by default rather than by merit
- Disliking certain elements of the job
- Not being long enough in post to establish oneself as a leader nor having fully developed leadership views
- The perceived lack of authority inherent in leadership roles within higher education.

The key to getting past having feelings of fraudulence is making an accurate and rational evaluation of ones own performance. However, 'embeddedness', the measure of success associated with leadership in e-learning which arose from this study, does not readily lend itself to such an evaluation. With 'embeddedness' it is difficult for Heads of e-Learning to distinguish their personal contribution to the success of wider institutional agendas.

Finally, the interviews highlighted the importance of the environment in both phenomena. When considering leaders as learners the work place environment constitutes the main learning environment. However, it is one which is susceptible to change. For leaders there are two environments which need to be taken into consideration - the actual and the desired. The perception Heads of e-Learning had of the difference between the two environments at various times influenced their actions and therefore any learning they undertook within their role.

The MLQ highlighted areas in which Heads of e-learning perceive they should improve in their role as leaders. A number of specific transactional, transformational and outcomes-based behaviours have been identified as desirable and for which support and development is needed for Heads of e-Learning to develop these. These include: displaying confidence and power, articulating a compelling vision, use satisfying methods of leadership and heightening others desire to succeed. Each MLQ participant received a personalised developmental action plan and the group's results are being considered by the HeLF Steering Group in planning future events.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

While it is important to reflect on nature of learning and leadership and the identified relationships between them, a more important task is how HeLs as leaders might be nurtured. Five recommendations are offered based on the research findings and the analysis of data from the focus groups. These focus on the importance of learning in the workplace, identifying measures of success and establishing conditions which foster learning and leadership within contexts. These are offered with caution as they may not be applicable for or generalisable to leaders not in the unique position of 'Head of e-Learning' (middle management, new professionals, straddling both administrative and academic domains, etc) or leaders outside HE as value systems vary significantly. It is recommended that:

- Measures of success need to be identified/developed for the work of HeLs which enable them to make accurate and realistic evaluations of their own performance, thus enabling individuals to overcome any feelings of fraudulence they may have
- Heads of e-Learning need to develop skills which enable them to lead at multiple levels in the ecology of leadership (line, network and executive) within their area of expertise
- Heads of e-Learning should take an active role in creating conditions within their contexts which enable them to lead. Some of these have been identified by this research, however personal preferences and individual contexts need to be taken into account
- Heads of e-Learning need to include themselves in the change they seek to bring about. In educating others they must also be willing to engage in learning
- Heads of e-Learning should develop an appropriate appreciation for work-based learning. If learning is to become more embedded within the Head's leadership role the notion of developing as a leader over time also needs to become embedded.

OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

Immediate, intermediate and final outcomes derived from the research with respective short, medium and longer term impact/benefits are listed below:

IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES

Short term impact

- a. We were able to build an understanding of leadership positions in the e-learning field across the UK. It has been confirmed by a number of individuals and associations that this is a worthwhile exercise to assist in the establishment of the professional identity of Heads of e-Learning across the UK. Through this project there have been some interesting discoveries with regards to contract types, status of staff within institutions, reporting lines, leadership development, career moves, etc which are proving to be thought provoking at both a group and individual level.
- b. This project has helped raise personal awareness of leadership behaviours held by each Head of e-Learning and has provided the vehicle for engaging them in dialogue about leadership. Ongoing dissemination and engagement with the Heads of e-Learning community was crucial to the ongoing success of the project. The project team was keen on making this initiative a developmental activity for individuals as well as a research

project on which to base further actions with regard to the direction of HeLF and meeting its leadership development needs.

- c. We have built an understanding of how conceptions of learning can influence leadership in educational organisations. The in-depth interviews and focus groups highlighted a correlation between these two areas and as thus we have made an original contribution to this field of research in these areas.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

Medium-term impact

- d. The project has given the HeLF group renewed energy and impetus and a feeling that they are recognised nationally through the funding received. Furthermore, it has supported the Heads of e-Learning through times of change in national discourse and priorities. This project was positively received within HeLF and has given more direction to the network and its meetings. Specific leadership and professional development needs were identified through the research, which are being addressed at both individual and group level.

FINAL OUTCOMES

Longer-term impact

- e. Having identified some of the leadership development needs for this group of professionals HeLF intend to incorporate appropriate leadership development event(s) into the 3 regular meeting of the HeLF per year.
- f. This research has provided a starting point for documenting the way in which leadership vision with regards to e-learning is articulated in the field of e-learning across UK HEIs. The results of the research and the lessons learnt are being disseminated through a number of conference presentations and journal publications. A list of these can be found in the relevant section of this report.

EVALUATION

The ongoing evaluation of the project was a key feature of this study as it ensured the ongoing commitment from the Heads of e-Learning in UK HEIs. Oversight, feedback and constructive advice were built into the running of the project which ensured that the specified milestones were reached within the timeframes outlined in the proposal. The work in this area is briefly outlined in this section:

- **Steering group oversight**

The HeLF Steering group which oversaw the work of the project was updated about each of the phases at their regular meetings (three times per year) via the co-project manager Dr Susannah Quinsee. Furthermore, the project successfully engaged with the Heads of E-Learning Forum (HeLF) members which was a key feature to the success of the project and also attracted interest from a number of bodies who are awaiting the further dissemination of the results of this study.

- **Feedback from the HeLF community**

Information derived from the scoping survey was used to enhance the contextual validity of the interview phase of the study and the findings were validated by HeLs during the focus groups. As part of the ongoing evaluation of the project dissemination and feedback loops with Heads of e-Learning across the UK were established in order to balance the reliance on self-reported data. As thus, findings were presented at the HeLF meetings on four occasions. It is noteworthy that there was general agreement that findings from each of the phases reflected many Heads' of e-Learning views on learning and leadership and provided essential information on which to base future leadership development of this group of professionals.

- **Critical friend**

Martin Oliver from the Higher Education Academy kindly acted as a critical friend to the project and provided critical and useful advice to the project managers throughout.

All of the above assisted in achieving the key milestones which are briefly summarised in the table below:

Key milestones	Status
Approval of proposal from LFHE	Completed – November 2008
Development of research tools	Completed – January 2009
Administration of all surveys (scoping and MLQ)	Completed – February 2009 and July 2009
Interviews	Completed – April 2009
Focus groups	Completed – November 2009
Data analysis	Completed – November 2009
Research shared with stakeholders (HeLF)	Completed – November 2009
Dissemination activities	Ongoing – please refer to next section

The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe the participants' lived experience of phenomena. As thus thematic portrayals of participants' conceptions of the two phenomena have been composed. These are based on their personal experiences and theories of learning and leadership and collectively describe the multiplicity of qualities pertaining to two phenomena as defined by HeLs. Furthermore, in order to identify possible relationships between the conceptions of learning and leadership the structures of each phenomenon, derived from the analysis across all cases, were compared and contrasted resulting in a set of possible relationships. It is hoped that further dissemination of these will be done through journal papers and conference presentations. In summary, the research approach facilitated the achievement of the stated project objectives:

Stated objectives	Status
To investigate the nature of and varied conceptions of learning held by the	Achieved

Heads of E-Learning	
To explore Heads of e-Learning perceptions with regards to their leadership role	Achieved
To gain an understanding of whether the way in which they conceive of learning impacts on the way they conceive the leadership of the enhancement of learning within an educational setting	Achieved

DISSEMINATION

The nature of this project required the project team to communicate regularly with all the Heads of e-Learning across the UK as well as other professional bodies and associations which influence their work. Briefly, contacts, presentations and ongoing dissemination activities are listed below:

- a. Nov 2008, Edinburgh: Presentation to HeLF community by Dr S. Quinsee
- b. March 2009, London: Update of project to HeLF community by K. Anagnostopoulou
- c. June 2009, York: Update of project to HeLF community by K. Anagnostopoulou. Members of UCISA, ALT, SEDA and the HEA were present at the York meeting and expressed interest and commented on how this project related to their activities and explored synergies
- d. Nov 2009, Glasgow - Presentation of outcomes of the project to HeLF community
- e. Nov 2009, Denver: "Leading learning or being led by it" a presentation by Dr S. Quinsee and K. Anagnostopoulou at the international Educause 2009 Conference in Denver, Colorado
- f. January 2010, Reading: A presentation of the project's findings at the 8th ELESIG Symposium by K. Anagnostopoulou
- g. January 2010: Paper proposal was submitted to the ALT-C2010 Conference titled: 'Leading e-Learning: achieving personal growth whilst overcoming self-doubt' Presenters: Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou, Middlesex University and Susannah Quinsee, City University
- h. N. Sumner has been sharing of information with Imperial and the LSE who are working on boundary and identify work for learning technologists and hope to publish a paper soon.

FINANCES

Details of all financial expenditure have been provided separately on accompanying spreadsheet. All expenditure has been within budget and receipts have been kept for any future audits.

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