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Learning through leadership: capturing practice architectures

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ABSTRACT

This article depicts the emergence of an intercultural learning community through an international research project on educational leadership. Drawing from partners' self-reflections collected and analyzed during the project, we engage with concepts including transformative leadership, practice architecture, and Northern/Western power and privilege. We argue that trust and norms of engagement take time to build in non-hierarchical education practice architecture, however the resulting holistic and capacitating co-production of knowledge can be a model for academic development in individuals, in higher education institutions, and in international project work.

Introduction

Leadership of educational institutions is often conceived as a highly bureaucratic and mechanistic endeavor, devoid of romantic notions of changing lives as with teaching or of futures thinking or innovation. In this article, and in the spirit of holistic academic development (Sutherland, 2018), we consider the ways in which a comparative leadership project inspired a dynamic learning community that ultimately reflected the kind of transformative leadership (Shields, 2010) we hope to see in educational institutions globally. The project involved seven partners from universities and training organizations in Azerbaijan, Mongolia, Switzerland, and Australia who expanded knowledge production alongside educational leadership practitioners and contributed to local teaching and learning cultures (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016) through creation of the Comparative Educational Leadership Lab (CELL) (www.compedleadershiplab.com). A significant, unintended outcome was an understanding of how the project can serve as a strategic intervention in academic development in higher education. The project goal was to create an open-source, interactive, virtual learning space allowing users to gain new knowledge, share learnings, and self-reflect on their own leadership approaches.

The CELL provides an exchange platform for school leaders, educators, and researchers at all institutional levels. Covering diverse country contexts, the CELL offers innovative 'teaching case studies' on school leader responsibilities and challenges, available for in-class learning and self-study. The website fills a three-fold gap in the educational leadership field which lacks: 1) a pedagogical mechanism for engaging current and aspiring leaders in timely issues faced by their peers around the world, 2) a dissemination platform enabling even the most remote and under-resourced leaders to study educational leadership from reality-based, practice-oriented (and therefore highly useful) perspectives, and 3) sufficient literature and research from outside the Global North/West. We support Fields, Kenny, and Mueller (2019, p. 218) that 'it is imperative for institutions across the globe to better understand the characteristics and qualities of educational leaders that enable them to influence and enact change'. While our immediate objectives were to develop case studies, we engaged in self-reflection and group discussions about how we were evolving into our own learning community including rich experiences of transformative leadership itself.

Thus, this article contributes to the scholarly discourse on transformative leadership and learning communities adding a much-needed critical perspective on Northern/Western privileges in international collaboration, by asking: To what extent can an international research project exemplify transformative leadership in its practice architectures and thus contribute to academic development? It captures two synergetic aspects: first, the project equipped each partner with knowledge and skill development and second, it expanded the academic development of our respective institutions. We therefore pursued scientific inquiry in the form of a collective self-study, and have applied Kemmis (2009) 'practice architectures' to frame and share our experience.

Transformative leadership, practice architecture, and questioning the theoretical 'center'

Transformative leadership

Leadership theory applied to education has been evolving (in the Global North/West) for over 100 years, and in that time, various approaches have emerged, been adjusted, and been replaced. Each one – including trait leadership (Tead, 1935), situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977), transformational leadership (Tichy & Devanna, 1990), distributed leadership (Harris, 2003), culture-attuned leadership (Dimmock & Walker, 2005), instructional leadership (Elmore, 2000), and many more – has contributed to our understanding of what leadership is and how it can benefit particular individuals, institutions, and societies.

For this self-study, we employ the contemporary *transformative leadership* theory (Shields, 2010) which builds on Mezirow (1996) transformative learning theory centering on the evolution of one's knowledge framework. It is based on self-reflection as a tool to encourage introspection, deep learning, and individual change. Others have extended the concept to include aspects of power and privilege, particularly relevant when working across contexts with differing socioeconomic circumstances. If transformative learning 'involves [. . .] knowledge that disrupts prior learning' (Davis, 2006, p. 10) and allows for

restructuring existing and potentially deep-seated beliefs and prior conceptions, then transformative leadership, for its part, 'must be critically educative; it cannot only look at the conditions in which we live, but it must also decide how to change them' (Foster, 1986, p. 185).

From learning communities to practice architectures

A systems theory approach involves acknowledging the many complex factors affecting individuals and groups over time and emphasizes 'interconnectedness' or 'networks' (Evans, 1996). While activities may differ among individuals, all are connected by a common goal. As individuals working together but across vast distance, on different but related components of a common project, the extent to which we engaged in 'professional dialogue, through seeking out information and evidence, through self-reflection and feedback' (Mohr & Dichter, 2001, p. 746) impacted the extent to which we incubated a 'learning community' (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A learning community generally signals the extension of classroom practice to engage participants in reciprocal learning. In our case it activated coactive academic development among higher education professors-come-colleagues.

Reflecting on collaborative work about educational leadership attending both to the ethical practice necessary to guide schools and the practical needs of students, teachers, and communities responds to the double purpose of education itself: to help people live well in a world worth living in (Kemmis, 2009). To make sense of the way 'practice' goes beyond simple activity, Kemmis (2009) developed a concept of *practice architectures* to involve discourse as *sayings/thinking*, actions as *doings*, and human interactions as *relatings*. They capture how 'practices in the social world hang together in three ever present dimensions' (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015, p. 152): the semantic space, the physical space-time, and the social space. Practice architectures are the sites in which practices are bundled together resulting in different 'products' such as ideas, objects, or networks. Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 38) explain:

> . . . educational practice, properly speaking, initiates learners into forms of knowledge that foster individual and collective self-expression, modes of action that foster individual and collective self-development, and ways of relating to others and the world that foster individual and collective self-determination, and that are, by virtue of these things, oriented towards the good for each person (individually) and (collectively) the good for humankind.

Reflection is crucial if practitioners wish to consciously sustain practice architecture *and* counteract the reproduction of inequitable, power-laden practice traditions.

Questioning the 'center'

Our project team's multi-national character shaped our learning community dynamics and inspired us to question the 'center' of theory and knowledge production. We come from contexts of widely differing sociocultural and political dynamics. Nevertheless, over the two-year span of cooperation we found ourselves asking many of the same academic questions and learning from each other. Transformative leadership theory helped us to: 1) work non-hierarchically, despite occasional frustration resulting from taking longer

time to achieve objectives and 2) elevate the status and amplify the voices of non-Western experiences and partners while also including those from the West. It required us to 'broaden our perspectives on the history of educational thought and practice . . . [in order to challenge] our own ethnocentrism and the ethnocentrism of others' (Reagan, 2005, p. 4). Reagan (2005) explains that rarely is ethnocentrism expressed blatantly, but rather it happens when one uses 'one's own society and sociocultural practices as the norm by which other societies are viewed, measured, and evaluated' (p. 4–5). Similar to Semali and Kincheloe (1999), we 'find it pedagogically tragic that various indigenous knowledges of how action affects reality in particular locales have been dismissed from academic curricula' (p. 15) and to that end, attempted to challenge this 'norm' by highlighting knowledge production arising from various geographical points.

We tried to escape forms of 'orientalism' (Said, 1978) and new imperialism (Tikly, 2004) by de-centering Northern/Western thought, but recognize that in setting the theoretical framework above for the analysis in this article we already privilege a Western approach. We therefore acknowledge this limitation and in response try, through reflective self-study, to expose our positionality and power by questioning our assumptions and actions. In fact, one non-Western partner made a critical reflective observation while writing this article:

> I think we started working together based on [de-centering Western thought], but in the end we created a learning community or practice architecture which by its nature made any de-centering or centering meaningless. The community/practice we created cannot be de-centered by the West or de-centered by the East. It was built on sharing and self-reflection on our own experiences . . . which excludes dominating. Equality of sharing excludes domination of either the West or the East. Self-reflection also . . . is a universal feature.

Methodology

To investigate our unfolding learning community, we employed a qualitative methodology consisting of a reflection-based collective self-study (Lunenberg et al., 2007). While Western partners were concerned about self-reflection being a Western-oriented practice, we learned that all partners considered it important whether culturally, socially, or professionally. Partners' insights provide a point of entry for academic developers who search for empirical justification to promote international professional exchange.

Collective self-study

The project partners engaged in a collective research activity based on their personal reflections. According to Lunenberg et al. (2007, p. 414), 'Self-study is a specific form of practitioner research and can be described as systematic research and reflection by teacher educators on their own practice . . . and . . . emphasizes learning through questioning'. Self-study research has increasingly gained in significance and plays a vital role in closing the gap between theory and praxis by including a reflective dimension and, as Lunenberg and Samaras (2011, p. 841) argue, has been 'formalized

as a viable school of thought and action'. Among heterogeneous professional and cultural backgrounds, collective self-study sheds light on collaborative experiences and insights. As Smith (1998) states, especially in multicultural groups, (in)dependence and group efforts can be understood differently, impacting the project's overall development and success. Capitalizing on our ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, the learning community functioned as a knowledge exchange platform. Because project partners only began to recognize and articulate their sense of individual/collective learning (from each other and the project case study work) at mid-way point, we initiated data collection one year into the two-year project.

Role of reflection: positionality

A reflection-based collective self-study of a particular project not only contributes to crucial (applied) knowledge production through the very content of the project, but it teaches the members of the learning community themselves about their own positionalities. The benefits and lessons for both practitioners and researchers (Mezirow, 1990) can be adapted to myriad academic contexts.

Reflection as a primarily qualitative cognitive research practice (Dahlberg et al., 2001) plays a central role in experience-based learning (Boud et al., 2000), in effective leadership (Castelli et al., 2014), and in transparent and authentic academic development in higher education. In this study, the partner-researchers, through reflection, influence the research design, objectives, analyses, and finally the knowledge production, and in the process they become (more) aware of their own and others' positionality/ies. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this is achieved by first talking about past experiences involving education, work, family background and, second, unraveling how these lived experiences impact the role as a researcher. The two lead authors acknowledge their privilege in being based in the West and having the institutional support to conceive the project and write this piece. Simultaneously, we are aware that our biases and worldviews underlie decisions such as self-reflection and question construction. Further, when trying to de-center 'the West', it was crucial for all partners to review collected data and contribute to evolving drafts of this article to mitigating particular authors' biases.

Methods

Participants' written and verbal reflections

During and after the project's mid-point in-person meeting, project members' self-reflections were collected in the form of questionnaires and video-taped interviews. The questions for both instruments were drafted by the two lead authors, based on previous learning community research conducted by the first author, around six themes such as defining the project's culture, governance, and norms of engagement (Magno, 2010). The topics were aligned with Kemmis (2009) practice architectures capturing partners' individual and collective academic development. Only the open-ended responses were analyzed for this study.

Qualitative content analysis

Data analysis consisted of three main steps. First, participants' hand-written responses to the reflective questions were copied into a Microsoft Word document. Second, data were analyzed using Mayring (2015) qualitative content analysis approach focusing on relevant categories and themes. Finally, we visually/textually represented those themes as findings (Madison, 2012). In our analysis, we employed Mayring's techniques of summarizing data and forming inductive categories; we then re-situated and re-structured content according to types aligning with Kemmis' three practice architectures in the following way:

- Sayings/thinking: Partners' expression of project culture and partners' equity-mentality;
- Doings: Partners collaborating in same physical space-time and supporting each other through informal or virtual discussions; and
- Relatings: Partners demonstrating collegial respect, building professional networks, and enjoying intercultural exchange.

Findings and discussion

The findings presented and discussed in this section help answer the underlying research question re-stated here: To what extent can an international research project exemplify transformative leadership in its practice architectures and thus contribute to academic development? Project partners enact practice architectures through sayings/thinking, doings, and relatings which "unfold discursively through language in real flows of time as characteristically interdependent and overlapping. [These practices] are interwoven . . . with sites, not just 'set' in them" (Edwards-Groves, 2018, pp. 124–125; emphasis in original). Each of the three concepts within our project's practice landscape is described below (also see Table 1), along with a finding demonstrating the institutional strategic relevance of communities of practice (CoPs).

Sayings/thinking

In analogy to our virtual working space and connectedness through the CELL, the project provided a stimulating, reflective space free of formal constraints. Noted as 'inspiring' and 'culturally sensitive', it challenged individuals' thinking. Using different languages,

Table 1. Three concepts of the project's practice landscape.

Dimension	Enactment	Products
Semantic space	Sayings/ thinking	• Project partners express similar understandings of the project • They practice equity-mentality • They engage in a 'collaborative work process'
Physical space-time	Doings	• Project partners collaborate in physical and virtual space-time and provide collegial support through discussions • They learn from and teach each other about intercultural aspects of academic development
Social space	Relatings	• Project partners construct practice architecture based on openness, flexibility, and collegiality • They establish new practice traditions in global research on academic development

speaking/writing styles and the (in)formality of discussions helped to deepen their thinking beyond limitations typically imposed through national or professional boundaries (see Table 1). The intentionally inclusive sayings and thinking increased creativity and productivity and offered partners a form of academic development they would not have in their home institutions. The members underwent brainstorming, sharing, and self-reflection, enabling them to adopt and assess multiple perspectives about educational leadership on conceptual, personal, institutional, and international levels (Taylor, 2005). One participant stated, 'All the discussions about our concerns and thoughts are inspiring' and another mentioned 'For me it was an inspirational moment when I (learned) from colleagues about their experiences, ideas'.

A major aspect of the project was the sharing process, in which individuals communicated their own leadership understandings and practices, and in so doing helped to appropriate the project's cultural-discursive arrangement. One noted, 'It was exciting, useful ... to share own experience and get feedback from team members'. Further, another said, 'Things ... move forward ... with shared understanding of why and where we move', illustrating the interconnecting research mentality. This demonstrates the way that sharing overlaps with inspiration to complete necessary work; that being, in our project, the local country case studies. One explained, 'I like to listen (to) what the others say, and if I want to share something, the others give me the space', activating the intersubjective semantic space of expressing ideas and content. The project provided a form of mentorship in that individuals offered to each other their own expertise as experienced researchers and practitioners (Fields, Kenny, & Mueller, 2019). As explained by one partner, 'When I spoke with people [in a country context very different from my own], they were people like we are. They have problems, they have thoughts, they have ideas ... '. Given the transdisciplinary nature of the project with the common focus on educational leadership, mutual learning experiences were frequent and proved valuable, especially when non-dominance/equity was accentuated. One said, 'Encouragement and sharing ... reflections have an important role in collaborative work'.

The practice of equity-mentality was captured in comments about the non-hierarchical working style of the collaborative, mentioned as a mostly positive aspect. Partners noted the 'equality of voice', showing 'respect, trust and mutuality', and suggested that the 'very effective, inclusive, collective approach is necessary to give voice to all'. Another attended to the power and privilege dynamic, saying, 'Following a non-hierarchical leadership model, it gives power to everyone, it is not clear whether a different approach would be more effective, maybe more results quicker, but not as deep a learning experience'. Importantly, one partner noted, 'I think we need more guidance ... a team with equals needs a leader, if not it's nice but it's not goal-oriented'. These comments demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of the collective and potentially diverse needs related to feelings of productivity and 'process-' versus 'outcome-'oriented individual dispositions. A leadership lesson here is to be highly attuned to various working styles and interests and to remain flexible.

The experience of participating in a non-hierarchical environment served as an illustration of how academic institutions could function if hierarchies are relaxed. Partners mentioned transparency in both management and content. 'Decisions are made in a very open, flexible way', said one partner; others said, 'I opened my mind for other thoughts', and 'everyone can openly share their opinion, no authority' and that

governance is 'collectively based on discussion and reflections'. One explained, 'All team members are mature, self-realized professionals coming from diverse cultures. So a flexible, creative approach was relevant'. Another suggested a parallel to the CELL content, saying, 'while the case studies may not necessarily identify core issues, the stand-alone situational contexts are enriching and offer voice to many who feel alone, isolated, or silenced in educational leadership'. In sum, through *sayings*, each partner contributed ideas. All voices were given equitable 'airtime' through the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) allowing every member – independent of national origin or academic background – to enhance the community's educational development.

Doings

The action/physical space-time space (see Table 1) was defined by several elements of the project that demonstrated its identity as a '(virtual) community of practice' (Dubé et al., 2005): through video, telephone, and text media as well as through in-person meetings in three partners' 'home contexts' (Azerbaijan, Switzerland, and Australia). Collaboration was mentioned as central to the project and of great importance to partners. One partner described the culture of the project as 'co-constructive' and another said that the joint meetings were 'the best time for collaboration'. A third said, 'there are many one-on-one or small group discussions and collaborative conversations that shift (improve) group dynamics and increase learning for individuals'. Partners noted the 'collective, mutual, interactive' nature of our work together.

The learning community largely emerged as diverse partners found connective tissue amongst themselves. As a project involving physical mobility, meeting in three countries offered the opportunity to learn not only about leadership in each context but other cultural, material, and economic circumstances. The compression of geographical space allowed for deeper understanding, discovery, and dialogue. Partners were enthusiastic about this and said one of their favorite aspects of the project was learning about 'language, food, and literature'. One said, ' . . . you can't make any comparative analysis if you don't smell, don't touch, don't think together'. These learnings increased mutual understanding and appreciation. This supported learning about and increased interest in leadership content as a theoretical research topic and actual practices. Comments included, 'how to work in an international team, how to reflect and analyze own experiences through comparing (with) other national contexts' and 'intercultural exchange: try to understand what the others mean and how their school systems work'. Others noted their gaining of 'intercultural knowledge about people, leadership as a fascinating and important topic' and 'how to work in a diverse group'. Academic developers in higher education institutions might take note of the embedded professional learning opportunities in order to increase institutional support for participation in such projects. In our project we combined spaces that are not necessarily otherwise connected and circulated knowledge – or as one partner said, 'ideas which are flying in the international community about leadership'. One mentioned, 'we are very grateful for these encounters' and another emphasized:

the multidimensional nature of our experience and practice which also involved knowing, tasting, smelling, etc. contributed to make a mutual learning, practice, experience deeper rather than just single dimensional academic conversation (when, often, academics from the West produce thoughts and academics from the East examine them in their contexts trying to either prove the universality of those ideas or show some of their limited implications in other contexts) or project experience (when one leads and others follow).

Three partners described the project as networks and webs; two used the image of clouds that grow, ebb and flow. Both metaphors illustrate one partner's reflection:

> The various [leadership] trajectories are infinite but very hard to define, describe, explain. The quality of leadership may not rest in the intellectual ability or capability of any one individual. It requires a mastery of understanding people, context, and timing

.

Relatings

The social space of relatings (see Table 1) included exchanging stories, jokes, motivation, food, and – ultimately – trust. In a short (two-year) project, it is difficult to build high levels of trust, and it is possible that this happened in our project because participants felt that their own communication styles fit well with other partners' styles, and because some members knew each other previously. It was noted that during meetings there was a greater tendency to listen and ask questions than to talk.

Through relatings, partners mentioned exchanging not only information about educational leadership but also 'personal stories' and 'moral support'. This indicates that the project achieved something (i.e. relationships) beyond its explicit goals of creating case studies. The partners were relating to each other as individuals, friends, and confidents. They reported thinking differently about their own work and about educational leadership in general as a result of participation in this project. In this sense, academic development was experienced as de-territorialized and de-linked from any particular institution. One West-based partner wrote,

> the lived experience of working together in Azerbaijan . . . resulted in an opportunity to test, confirm and realign my understanding of leadership . . . . It has furthered my resolve that there is a need for training and development not only for the emerging and aspiring leader, but also seasoned, well-experienced ones.

This suggests that Western individuals and institutions can learn from the 'East' and that there are multiple angles to individual and institutional academic development and offerings (Crawford et al., 2006). Various unintended dyadic relationships were also formed among partners, which evidences eagerness to connect outside the confines of the project itself as well as the importance of hubs within professional networks (Taylor et al., 2021). A stunning example of this was when a Swiss partner and an Azerbaijani partner were discussing children's literature and, several months later, their bond materialized into a contract between an Azerbaijani author and Swiss publishing house (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntalrNtO5gw).

CoPs as 'strategic intervention' in higher education

The findings summarize the ways in which our (unplanned) CoP sayings, doings, and relatings materialized in practice for higher education academics. The implications of such practice echo and build on literature in the field, with the purposeful cultivation of international CoPs as a 'strategic intervention' higher education institutions can make (Clegg, 2009). Arthur (2016) argues, and our experience supports, the notion that CoPs are critical to professional development of academic staff across their careers and that it is equally critical for academic developers to 'embrace this type of learning' (p. 230). New forms of international CoPs, expediated by accessible travel and technology, can enhance and motivate tertiary academic staff at any level of expertise (James et al., 2016). The benefits of internationally dispersed CoPs can be harnessed (Arthur, 2016) to address tensions, especially relevant to our study, around unequal global power dynamics and intellectual debate about how academic development and its mechanisms in the 'North' impinge on the 'South' (Clegg, 2009, p. 404). In flattening hierarchies so that relatings placed equal weight on perspectives from the 'South' the CoP in this study opened space for new insights and feedback to participants' respective (Northern *and* Southern) institutions. For example, in Australia, two new programs in international education were approved after our partner showcased our project, and in Azerbaijan, our partner's academic Dean accompanied her to an international project meeting, at the expense of their university, to demonstrate support for the collaboration and bring learning back to the university administration. In all partner institutions, the CELL is being used in Bachelors and Masters courses, thus impacting many academic programs and outcomes.

Conclusion

In documenting an emergent learning community emanating from an international project, we see the 'transformative power' of working across national borders, of self-reflection, and of questioning one's own knowledge frameworks within practice architectures. We did not begin the project with a particular form or theory of leadership in mind, such as transformative leadership, nor with the explicit goal of creating a learning community. Nevertheless, as the project evolved, we found ourselves in the midst of self-discovery, self-reflection, and growth, so we spontaneously explored it with purpose, especially as a mirror to our working topic of educational leadership. We realized that documentation and analysis of our work together could inform others interested in individual or institutional academic development. We found that we were continually engaged in the transformative process described by Shields (2010) as 'deconstruction and reconstruction of social/cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity, acknowledgement of power and privilege' along with a 'dialectic between individual and social' (p. 563). We encouraged each other to share personal stories, include family members in meetings, and open our homes to one another, following Clegg (2003) urging for academics to not 'leave aspects of their identity at the door' (p. 46). This allowed for interpersonal, intercultural, international, and interdisciplinary boundary-crossing as we engaged in professional, practitioner-oriented, research-based academic development. In communities of practice, trust and mutual encouragement is not automatic, especially in academic institutions founded on individual competition. As summarized poignantly by van Schalkwyk et al. (2013), academic development is a journey

influenced by many factors which are perceived and processed differently by each individual, making (critical) reflection an indispensable tool for professional educational practices. They conclude that there is 'the potential for adding richness and depth to our work when we draw on our combined knowledge, experience and individual research' (p. 149). Analyzing the sayings, doing, and relatings in our emergent CoP allows us to characterize it as a 'third place' of meaningful, equitable associations (Gachago et al., 2021) in which the role of academic developer becomes also that of activist and advocate for international learning.

Contrarily, most international academic development projects are more materialist and outcome-oriented than introspective and reflective. Typically, international projects obtain funding in the North/West, and as a result the objectives and processes are pre-defined by Northern/Western principal investigators who carry biases and inherited privilege. The CELL funding similarly came from Western Europe and the goals were initially determined by the Western principal investigator, who remained *accountable* to the funder, to herself, and to her partners to ensure project completion. However, a concerted effort was made to flex the objectives and remain open to evolving notions of purpose and possibility. To do this, the principal investigator had to trust that her colleagues would feel equally *responsible* for project success. As one partner put it, "I think in the community we created and experienced, we went beyond of just responsibility for project success …. The practice we all were involved in excluded domination of anyone's thought over any other one's thought." By employing collective self-reflection, we documented how each partner transformed not only individually but also transformed their institutions. We see that this practice architecture, built through a transformative learning community, could be a model for higher education exchange, international project work, leadership training, and for academic development broadly.

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