Course Team Symposia: A useful launch pad for exploring course leadership?

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Course Team Symposia are a funding opportunity provided by Charles Sturt University's Flexible Learning Institute to help course leaders engage their teams in blended and flexible learning design. Initial findings from this preliminary study suggest that course leaders and their educational designers have used the symposium process to 'try out' leadership practices on the job by clarifying and developing a shared vision of blended and flexible learning, supporting collaborative planning, helping their teams reflect on their own practice and forming strategies to improve that practice. In doing so, they are building a repertoire of leadership strategies to use with their teams in the future. Further research involving more symposium recipients will shed additional light on how leadership is being supported through this initiative, and any implications for student outcomes.

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Introduction

> We can only learn about leadership through practising leadership, just as we can only learn how to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle…This 'learning by doing' within a well-thought-through framework is the only way we can turn the leadership development key and unlock the organization's leadership potential (Peters & Smith, 1998, p.285).

Leadership in higher education is traditionally defined as the 'everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues' (Ramsden, 1998, p.4). More recently, it's been aligned with managing change (Parrish, 2011), and motivating diverse groups of people to work together to achieve shared outcomes (Fullan & Scott, 2009). Arguably, strong university leadership has never been more important than it is today, with significant global and national changes in the sector forcing universities to rethink their purpose while, at the same time, deal with a leadership succession challenge prompted by the impending retirement of its baby boomer senior managers. Such challenges have understandably prompted an increase in research on academic leadership in recent years (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008; Fullan & Scott, 2009; Parrish, 2011) as universities struggle to ensure they are well equipped to re-vision their place in the community in this climate of change.

One leadership role that remains surprisingly under-researched given its significance in terms of course quality and learning outcomes is that of the course leader. Indeed, course leaders are a core asset to universities (Balogun, 2003, in Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2012), directly influencing curriculum change and ensuring that courses remain effective and relevant to a broader and more discriminating student cohort used to a world of ubiquitous knowledge and open educational resources.

Yet despite such key responsibilities, the role of the Australian course leader is often ill-defined, involving an eclectic mix of curriculum design, managing complex academic and professional teams, staff mentoring, marketing, quality assurance, pastoral care and administration (Krause, Scott, Campbell, Spencer, Lizzio, Bath, Fyffe & Clark, 2010). Individual leaders show little similarity in the significance they place on each responsibility, and universities typically do little to support the development of those taking on these roles, instead leaving this to *ad hoc*, on-the-job training and generic leadership programs (Inman, 2009). It's hardly surprising then, that many course leaders see their work as being like 'a small fish in a largely cloudy pond' or like 'rowing without an oar' (Scott et al., 2008, p.50).

Scott et al. (2008) suggest that current approaches to leadership development need to be 'radically reconceptualised' (p. xvii) and mirror established approaches for engaging students. Burgoyne, Mackness & Wiliams (2009) found that development approaches are most effective when conducted in a contextually appropriate way that involves authentic learning activities and opportunities for leaders to 'try out' leadership practices on the job. Similarly, Burgoyne et al. (2009) found that emerging leaders find coaching and mentoring to be particularly effective in supporting their development as leaders. These points are echoed by Scott et al.

(2008), who add that conversations about work with people in similar roles, participating in peer networks both within and beyond the university, and studying real-life workplace problems all have a medium level of influence on effective leadership development.

Course Team Symposia – a conceptual framework

Course Team Symposia are a funding opportunity provided by Charles Sturt University's Flexible Learning Institute (FLI) to help Course Directors engage their teams in Blended and Flexible Learning (BFL) design. The symposia were conceptualised in 2010 as a response to two key drivers. Firstly, the Faculty Deans requested that FLI's current approach to supporting staff through individual Teaching Fellowships (Keppell, O'Dwyer, Lyon & Childs, 2010) be expanded to engage a broader base of staff in BFL design. Secondly, in 2011 the University began its implementation of the CSUDegree (CSU, 2012), which moved curriculum renewal away from an autonomous, subject-based focus to one that was more collaborative, holistic and future-orientated, focused at the course level. Through the CSUDegree, the University made a series of commitments to its undergraduate students to provide opportunities for them to develop in-depth discipline, professional and personal skills, including learning effectively in online environments.

The CSUDegree presented challenging demands for course teams, many of whom had not worked collaboratively on course design in the past. Course leadership was also being reconceptualised, moving away from Course Coordinators who focused on administrative tasks, to Course Directors who would focus on strategic leadership, planning and curriculum development (CSU, 2010). By 2011, most Course Directors were still feeling their way in their new roles, some adjusting quickly supported by strong backgrounds in curriculum development, others finding the right vision but being limited by overwhelming administrative responsibilities, with a small number locked into a less collaborative model of curriculum design. Similarly, some educational designers were taking on informal leadership roles, while others sat outside the renewal process.

The FLI saw the symposia as a way to respond to these drivers. A total of 21 course teams in 12 symposia were supported during the 2010-2012 period (FLI, 2012) through a small financial grant as well as planning, resource and strategic support before, during and after the symposium. The financial grant allowed the Course Directors to bring their multi-campus teams together to collaboratively engage in course design through a focus on BFL. Through forming a draft course strategy, they also provided an opportunity for Course Directors to build leadership experience in their own, authentic context, supported by mentoring from a FLI staff member.

This preliminary case study formed part of a larger research project between Charles Sturt University and Massey University designed to explore learning leadership (Childs, Brown, Keppell, Nicholas, Hunter & Hard, in press). It aimed to explore how course leaders were thinking about and refining their leadership role through the symposium process.

Method

The study used mixed methodology, including analysis of websites and documents emerging from the symposia, as well as a questionnaire and focus groups involving course leaders and educational designers from the initial round of offers. This was important, given the very limited number of symposia (n=4) available to be analysed at the time of writing. All participants (n=8) taking on a leadership role in the first four course team symposia were informed of and invited to participate in the study. The chosen data collection methods included:

- analysis of documents emerging from the symposia, as well as relevant and publicly available websites,
- a questionnaire (n=4) completed by course leaders (n=2) and educational designers (n=2) involved in the first four symposia undertaken as part of the initiative, and
- a focus group comprising questionnaire respondents was conducted to probe, clarify or extend responses from the participants. It was held via teleconference and utilised semi-structured questions to guide the facilitated discussion. The recording was transcribed and analysed for emerging themes. Participants were assigned a code based on their role in the symposium (e.g. CD1, ED1) to ensure anonymity in reporting.

As a preliminary study, this method is limited by the small number of participants, the exclusion of symposium recipients other than course leaders and educational designers (resulting in perceptions of leadership coming only from the leaders themselves), and limited time between the symposium and the focus group, making it difficult to make any longer term assessments of whether each symposium assisted in leadership development. A more extensive longitudinal study is currently in progress.

Findings and discussion

Perception of selves as learning leaders

Each participant expressed an individual leadership style, ranging from being the principle leader (CD1), to leading 'from behind' (CD3), collaborating with others in the team who had specific learning expertise (CD2), and a more facilitative role, ensuring that things 'get done' (ED1). These reflect depictions of leader roles in the literature, and show a balance between the empathetic management of 'people' and the more developmental side of leadership and managing change.

The participants saw leadership as a natural part of their designated role, and felt particularly comfortable with models of leadership that inspire others toward a shared course vision, and which involve creating a comfortable environment in which to identify opportunities for, and facilitate, change. Three of the four questionnaire respondents deliberately set out to inspire or influence others through the symposium, and this seems to have had some initial success, with each respondent impacting on the teaching of between 1 and 4 other academics.

The participants agreed that the symposium had clarified their role rather than changed it. Responses suggest that they were using it to 'listen' to others and 'link' (Fullan & Scott, 2009) strategies employed to how they might lead curriculum change in other courses:

> It enhanced my role as a leader but I consider it more of a learning experience...What the symposium has empowered me with is the right approach...I didn't have the capacity to, I didn't have the right words if you want, to help these people in the course meeting before the FLI symposium. I wouldn't have known how to approach them without, sort of, hurting a few feelings. I'm more comfortable now having live examples of what we could do...it doesn't have to be dramatic changes it can be incremental changes. It's much better to look at where we want to get as a course, and slowly work towards that. That's been a great experience for me. (CD2)

All questionnaire respondents felt that the perception of themselves as learning leaders had strengthened as a result of the symposium, with perhaps the strongest response coming from the educational designer:

> I feel that my role was strengthened purely through actually having a path to follow. I feel like before we did the symposium there was a lot of talk about incorporating the CSUDI into courses ...but it always got stuck for me as to the how, the when and why we are doing it...the symposium clarified for the course what we wanted to do, why we wanted to do it and when we wanted to have it done by...before we'd done the symposium someone might come to speak to me about BFL but they wouldn't really have a holistic concept of what it was so it made it really difficult for me to suggest the kind of things that they wanted (ED1).

Misconceptions about BFL

A particularly strong theme emerging from the focus group was the benefit of the symposium in providing clarity and addressing misconceptions about their own understanding of blended and flexible learning.

> For a long time I thought that BFL was synonymous with more electronics in teaching...It was when we got together...that a switch went on and (I realised that) this BFL is actually a learning strategy...(CD2)

The leaders felt that the Symposium had helped them develop a clearer vision and engagement in BFL design with their teams, indicated by Fullan & Scott (2009) as critical factors in successful turnaround leadership. Some participants also commented that they had helped them reverse a feeling of disempowerment amongst their colleagues by affirming that many of their current strategies reflected good practice, and were a solid platform from which to build a more consistent and integrated course approach.

Opportunities to develop teams

For half of the questionnaire respondents, this was the first course-level planning meeting that they had attended at CSU. The symposium offered a 'launch pad' from which they could establish strong course team

relationships and processes, which were later built on as each course leader worked independently with their teams. Here, a Course Director comments on how the symposium helped him move from ineffective processes:

> We have a regular monthly discipline meeting...and sometimes we just don't get anything achieved...One of the consequences of the BFL symposium was that I've come up with a structure for four course teams potentially five course teams within our discipline group...one of the things I wanted to do was to test it out and it worked well I think ... I was impressed. (CD1)

Similarly, other course leaders spoke of the symposium as enabling academics to feel more comfortable in being transparent as individual lecturers and looking at each other's subjects. Each agreed that this was an incremental process, and a learning curve for all involved.

The course symposia, by nature, encouraged academics to reflect as a team on their current practice, particular challenges that were being faced, and possible design solutions to those challenges. The importance of this 'space' for reflection is demonstrated through the following comment:

> We are pulled into a cycle of activities that does not allow for reflective practice. We used the BFL symposium as a reflective period of time, otherwise we just wouldn't dedicate that time to it … I had the opportunity to reflect on it further because I had to put the document together. That was very good … I was forced to have a period of reflective practice, which I wouldn't normally have. (CD2)

Conclusion

Given the significance of the course leadership role, especially in our current climate of rapid change, institutions need to explore a range of approaches to supporting course leaders' personal learning about their role. Although one-off course team symposia can never provide all that course team leaders require to lead innovative course design, nevertheless they do provide valuable and much needed launch pads for trying out a range of leadership strategies 'on the job' that can then be refined and transferred for use with other course teams.

The initial findings from this study suggest that participants have used the symposium process to clarify their conceptions of blended and flexible learning, develop a shared vision, find ways to support collaborative planning within their teams, and reflect on their own practice and changes that need to be made to improve that practice. In doing so, the participants seem to be building on their repertoire of leadership strategies that they can take forward to use with their teams in the future.

Course team symposia are thus a valuable addition to the personal learning opportunities offered by institutions to those undertaking this important role. Used in conjunction with other contextually appropriate, authentic strategies, they may be able to help reverse Inman's (2009) finding that universities do little to support the development of our course leaders.

Further research currently in progress involving additional symposium recipients will shed more light on how leadership is being supported through the symposia process, and any implications for student outcomes arising from this initiative.

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