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Leadership as a Situated Practice: Critical Connections and Liberated Networks

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Abstract

Learning Development is founded on multidisciplinary partnerships and collaboration, which can make it difficult for practitioners to recognise leadership in themselves and have it recognised by others, stymieing progression and confidence. This study aims to explore what leadership looks like in a collaborative, community-driven, third space field of practice, and how Learning Development practitioners might recognise leadership in themselves and enact it in practice. Based on based on semi-structured interviews, a phenomenological approach is taken to explore the perceptions and experiences of 20 participants who self-identify as Learning Developers with an interest in leadership. Four key themes emerged from the analysis: Being in the role; Being part of a team; Being part of a community; and Taking a wider view. Each indicates how leadership in Learning Development is values-driven, social, networked, critical, and operates on the three levels of team, community, and field. The interrelationships between these are expressed as a model for strategic influence driven by collaborative connections, and findings suggest that practitioners act as a hub through which knowledge and connections can flow. Given the challenges currently facing the higher education sector, it is vital that institutions are able to harness these crucial roles to remain flexible, responsive, and effective. This study provides a means for recognition and advancement in fields that lack the clear progression routes of academic and professional services colleagues.

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Practitioner Points

1. Learning Development is a cross-boundary field of practice located in third space, where practitioners are likely to have a dynamic professional identity.
2. In the contingent and ambiguous social reality of third space, leader-centred models of leadership are of little relevance to Learning Developers.
3. Leadership can be considered a situated, relational, social construct that embraces relationships and the flow of resources, norms and trust between them.
4. Leadership in Learning Development comprises values-driven expertise and multidirectional strategic influence, operating across team, community and field.
5. Leadership in Learning Development is responsive to context, distributed in terms of power, and grounded in the Learning Developer's relationships and networks.

Introduction

Located in 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2013), Learning Development (LD) is a relatively new subfield of higher education. Using Whitchurch's (2008) terminology, Learning Developers are "cross-boundary professionals," who are able to "actively [use] boundaries to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity, [capitalise] on their knowledge of territories on either side of the boundaries that they encountered [and] … display negotiating and political skills" (pp. 382-383). LD as a set of practices is dedicated to working in partnership with students to help them make sense of higher education through critical and inclusive pedagogy (ALDinHE, 2024).

Characterised by a diversity of practices, structures, entry routes, and backgrounds, qualifications and experiences of its practitioners, the field is strongly and pragmatically values-based (Syska & Buckley, 2022). It is recognised and enacted internationally through Academic Language and Learning Specialists (Australia), Tertiary Learning Advisors (New Zealand), Learning Specialists (Canada), Academic Literacy Practitioners (South Africa) and Learning Developers (UK), which is the umbrella term that will be applied here to all such practitioners. Like other third space professionals (Whitchurch, 2013), such as academic or faculty developers, research managers and administrators, and librarians, Learning Developers are arguably vital to student success in a higher education increasingly required to be flexible, multidisciplinary and bold (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). They act as mediators "between the knowledge and skills which students bring to university and the demands and conventions of academic subjects" (ALDinHE, 2024, para. 4), occupying and utilizing this third space between the binary opposition more familiar in higher education. In this blended and unbounded zone of collaborative activity (Whitchurch, 2008), predicated on partnership within a community of practice, practitioners can have a dynamic professional identity, that may flex and respond to the evolving demands of contemporary higher education (Buckley et al., 2024).

In the context of a contingent, ambiguous, and dynamic social reality, leader-centred models of leadership, which focus on an individual responsible for influencing or motivating others (Benmira & Agboola, 2021), are of little relevance to Learning Developers (Schweiger et al., 2020). However, the process of emergence and recognition of leadership in third space must take place against a backdrop of leadership theory with roots in organisational and social psychology (Hogg, 2001), political science (Kane et al., 2009), entrepreneurship and management (Cogliser & Brigham, 2004). Despite higher education attracting its own leadership-related literature, it is less

developed, with a hierarchically bounded focus on continual improvement and change management (Bryman, 2007; Doyle & Brady, 2018). Nevertheless, this does not mean that leadership does not exist within LD. An alternative, 'processual' approach recognises the ambiguity, dynamism and contradictions inherent in the leader's social reality, but it can be hard to implement, as it relies upon the individual developing a "*viable* sense of self-as-a-leader" (Schweiger et al., 2020, p. 428; original emphasis) in the face of self-doubt. This tension creates difficulties in identifying leaders and leadership in the field, including recognising it in oneself, with potential negative consequences for advancement and promotion, and subsequent drives to advocate for, advance, and theorise the field.

Literature

Leadership, as a concept, resists simple definition: a study in 1985 concluded there were over 350 published definitions (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, cited in Ford et al., 2008), and the same authors upgraded their estimate to 850 definitions just over a decade later (Bennis & Nanus, 1997). Leadership has been a source of curiosity and concern across millennia, continents and cultures, producing philosophical treatises by Plato (2007), Tzu (2005) and Machiavelli (2003) and, in more recent years, a whole industry of training courses and handbooks, breaking leadership down into a series of ingredients and the recipes to best combine them, such as 'the 3Es of communication', 'the 5 Os of coaching' and 'the 5 Ps of success' (Owen, 2011). Despite this long tradition, leadership remains an empty signifier. 'Leadership' and 'leader' are iteratively performed into being (Ford et al., 2008) and come to mean something simply by virtue of being used. The question, then, is what meanings leadership carries and whether those meanings suffice, particularly in contexts such as third space that defy simple categorisation.

In a comprehensive synthesis, Nienaber (2010) traces the origins of leadership alongside its cousin, management. The two are often used interchangeably. This is due, in large part, to their long, intertwined history, which emphasises their contributions to handling resources, including people, in pursuit of success and improvement. Leadership is the "formulation of policy", and management its execution (Nienaber, 2010, p. 665). However, despite this dichotomy, a considerable overlap between the two is evident from an economic perspective, since the goal of both leadership and management is taken to be "a broad, functional way of solving problems of coordination, cooperation, and uncertainty" (Hiller et al., 2020, p. 2).

Spisak (2020) suggests an evolutionary driver for the emergence of leaders in early human prehistory: to support the exploitation of the known, the investigation of the new, and the coordination of the group(s) undertaking these tasks. As such, leadership is a *process* of "interaction ... to solve situational challenges" (ibid., p. 2) rather than a *person.* A significant strand of social psychology is, therefore, interested in the leader in the context of a situated social group with which members feel kinship, recognition and belonging. The leader is an "entrepreneur of identity" (Haslam et al., 2020, p. xviii) in that they shape, contain and embody the beliefs, values and meanings of the group they represent. Leaders in social identity theory thus "serve as a psychological anchor for other members to the extent that they represent the shared social reality of the group by embodying the collective sense of self (i.e. "we") that is important to these other group members" (Steffens et al., 2021, p. 39). Importantly, although a central aspect of a leader's character remains their ability to inspire and transform, they are also, in turn, "shaped and

transformed by their engagement in shared group activity" (Haslam et al., 2020. p. 16). As a result, the leader also shapes the nature of the social context.

In a review of contextual influences on leadership, Oc (2018) determined that the omnibus (the who, where, when of a context) and the discrete (task, social, physical, temporal) interact to shape the nature of the leadership process, fluidly and responsively. Autonomy and confidence are cited as vital to the performance of the task, with positive outcomes reinforcing the social, where a team coheres around a competent individual – an expert. However, recognition of expertise depends on others. Where the social context values participation, teamwork, and autonomy, this form of expertise-based leadership can thrive (Liu, 2021).

Considerations of leadership within a higher education setting have shifted over time to meet this position, from prioritising the paradigm of the powerful individual operating within a hierarchy (e.g., Bryman, 2007), towards explorations of a shared servant (Holcombe et al., 2023; Turner, 2022), networked (Taylor et al., 2021) or distributed (Bektaş et al., 2020) approach. Crucially, when taking the position that leadership is ultimately about people in relation to one another, the capacity to influence does not rely upon hierarchy or formal authority. Instead, it rests on being favourably perceived as "other-oriented, forward-looking, and focused on [...] collective goals" (Kauppila et al., 2021, p. 767).

The role of shared values plays into this conception. In their discussion of virtuous leadership, Newstead et al. (2021) identify five points of contact that bring virtue and leadership into relation: ethics and effectiveness, learnability, character, universality, and connection to community. It is this latter point that is of greatest interest to McCauley and Palus (2021), who maintain that "leadership...is fundamentally collective" (p.2). By emphasising the relationships inherent to any community, McCauley and Palus (2021) recognise the capacity of a community to produce leadership, rather than the ability of a leader to create a community. Leadership is thereby "mutually constructed through communication, negotiation, and sense-making" (ibid., p. 2). Thus, the lingering 'Great Man' model of history (Ford et al., 2008, p. 81) can be dispensed with in favour of a focus on the whole group, which is, moreover, a group bound by values-driven behaviours.

Yet despite this, Lumby (2019) perceives that power remains "an essential component" (p.1916) of leadership, albeit in the context of empowering others, even as Ryan and Goldingay (2022) call for a greater challenge to "managerial exercise of power from the top down" (p. 122). Both Lumby (2019) and Ryan and Goldingay (2022) critique the distributed leadership model as an oft-cited alternative suitable for higher education, for its continued reliance of delegation and, therefore, power. Although the intention is that leadership is distributed via processes, projects and relationships, it is not always clear what is being distributed, to whom and by whom (Bolden et al., 2009). Moreover, Jones (2014) contends that it remains unclear whether distributed leadership can operate outside of hierarchical structures. She found that decision-making processes remain centralised, and recognition of expertise often takes the form of endorsement on the part of formal leaders, limiting potential for collaborations and consultation. Studies of distributed leadership tend to remain stuck resolutely to the distribution of power, and therefore to organisational boundaries and role structures (Bolden, 2011). Even a recent collection that surveyed leadership pathways in teaching and learning, including those that broke disciplinary boundaries to enter third space, maintained the figure of the leader as someone with power (Hosein et al., 2023).

The model of distributed leadership aspires to situate leadership within social practices, but it remains a flawed model for LD and other third space professions, thanks to its reliance on power and delegation. However, distributed leadership has also been described by Fields et al. (2019) as “emergent, collaborative and situational” (pp. 218-219), prompting them to see it as the best means of supporting collaboration through what they call local leaders, who are those who share knowledge, form networks, mentor, and facilitate change. In a setting like higher education that places great value on collegiality, a shift from title and position to action and process opens leadership up to more potential leaders. These are the people who have expertise, are active, are connected to like-minded others, who understand their role and responsibilities, and know what they want to achieve (van Ameijde et al., 2009). The only proviso is that, to be truly effective, communication – and therefore influence – must travel vertically as well as horizontally, and arguably externally as well as internally (Roxå et al., 2011) in order for the leader and the network to avoid becoming too inward-looking and isolated.

Taking leadership as a situated, relational, social construct releases it fully into collaborative third space, free from the bundle of personal traits and attributes attached to the leader label. With an emphasis on social capital and social networks (DeMayo Pugno, 2023), a situated form of leadership embraces relationships and the flow of information, resources, norms and trust between them, and the “accumulation, transfer or deployment” (DeMayo Pugno, 2023, p. 18) of this social capital among a networked community. In this post-structuralist view of leadership, which rejects definition and prioritises context, power is therefore liberated from hierarchy and into more informal and dispersed relationships and structures (Collinson, 2011).

The current study intends to disrupt the traditional notions that have previously been wrapped around leadership in higher education by examining leadership specifically in the context of third space professionals. The subset of particular interest, Learning Development, is notably values-driven and collaborative and, as such, its practitioners do not fit traditional views of leadership. Although recent studies, such as those by DeMayo Pugno (2023) and Fields et al. (2019) in particular, have taken situated networks as their alternative leadership model, this study builds on that work by explicitly connecting that situated network model to third space professionals, which is a connection that has yet to be made. Not only is third space as a concept gathering increasing momentum, but learning development is a field growing in scale and confidence (Syska & Buckley, 2023). However, its practitioners currently lack a model of what leadership means in their professional context, and how it can be exercised and recognised by others. A critical exploration of what leadership looks like in LD and throughout third space is therefore both timely and necessary.

This paper, therefore, pursues a rounded exploration of leadership within the liminal (and expanding) borderlands of higher education where LD is situated. It does so by moving away from ideas around individual agency, attributes and personality, and the structures in which individuals operate, which is categorised as transformational or ‘Great Man’ leadership (Benmira & Agboola, 2021), towards leadership as a situated social practice. The research is framed and guided by two key questions:

> **Research Question 1:** *What does leadership look like in a collaborative, community-driven, third space field of practice?*

Research Question 2: *How do LD practitioners recognise leadership in themselves and express it through their practice?*

Method

In asking what leadership looks like in a collaborative third space field of practice such as LD, and how it can be expressed and recognised by practitioners, this study focussed on the social reality of those engaged in it. By privileging the perceptions and lived experiences of those practitioners who identify as Learning Developers, a phenomenological approach was held to be most appropriate. This allows for a situated understanding of each participant's unique view of the world, and their experiences of leadership within their professional context, which can then be analysed to identify common themes (McKay et al., 2024). Ethical approval was granted by the author's institution.

Sample

The participants were recruited through purposive sampling via the LDHEN jiscmail list, a UK-centric mailing list for all those engaged in LD work – approximately 900 individuals – inviting all those with an interest in leadership in LD to take part. The study takes LD to be a cultural domain (Tongco, 2007), within which leadership forms a subdomain of interest, so participants were sought with knowledge of LD and interest in leadership in an LD context (Palinkas et al., 2015) to create a coherent, shared view of leadership in LD rooted in participants' 'social reality' (Liu, 2016, p. 161). There were no pre-conditions for inclusion, for example participants were not required to have had experience of either leadership or management.

Twenty-one individuals responded directly to the researcher. One of these was subsequently excluded from the study due to a misalignment with the study goals as they wanted to discuss specific issues around line management rather than leadership in LD as a concept. Of the 20 who remained, all had experience as Learning Developers, with just over a third currently working as a manager in LD. All but one worked in British universities (the exception being Participant 15, who was based at an Irish university), with ages ranging from 30 to 55 years. Further information about the participants' background and experience is presented in Table 1.

In Table 1, participants are categorised broadly as either 'manager' or 'learning developer', the former designation applied to all those who are responsible for leading a team or managing others in a learning development field. Their backgrounds were determined by the general path they had taken into their current role, whether that came from a role as, for example, an employability advisor or learning designer, or directly from having taught in a discipline. Two participants (4 and 13) had entered higher education from the private sector. Years in LD was taken to be specific to that type of role, rather than higher education generally, and divided into three categories to represent those who were; 1. new to LD; 2. established in LD; and 3. experienced in LD. Finally, the type of institution at which each participant worked were classed as either 'research-intensive' (RI) or 'teaching-intensive' (TI).

Table 1

Demographic and Background Data of the Research Participants

Participant	Current Role	Background	Years in LD	Type of Institution	Gender
1	Manager	Other HE* third space roles	>10	RI	M
2	Learning Developer	Disciplinary	>10	TI	F
3	Manager	Other HE third space roles	>5	RI	F
4	Learning Developer	Private sector career	>5	RI	F
5	Manager	Disciplinary	>10	RI	F
6	Learning Developer	Disciplinary	>5	TI	F
7	Learning Developer	Disciplinary	>10	RI	F
8	Manager	Other HE third space roles	>10	TI	F
9	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	<5	RI	F
10	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	<5	RI	F
11	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	<5	TI	M
12	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	>10	RI	F
13	Learning Developer	Private sector career	>5	TI	F
14	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	<5	TI	F
15	Manager	Disciplinary	>5	RI	F
16	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	>5	RI	F
17	Learning Developer	Other HE third space roles	<5	TI	F
18	Manager	Other HE third space roles	>10	RI	F
19	Manager	Other HE third space roles	>10	RI	M
20	Learning Developer	Disciplinary	>10	TI	F

*HE – Higher Education

Data Collection

Due to the need for rich, situated data that would give necessary depth to the answers sought for the research questions, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most effective method for data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These conversations brought situated knowledge into being, rather than merely conveying information (King et al., 2019) and provided space for participants to confidentially and anonymously reflect on their roles as Learning Developers and their thoughts around leadership, with scope to explore and expand upon any emergent points of interest. Interviews took place at a mutually convenient time and were conducted, recorded and transcribed in Teams. Interviewees understood that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their participation would be kept confidential and anonymous. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes, averaging around 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were imported into NVivo for coding and thematic analysis, which followed the precepts in King et al. (2019) of themes being “recurrent and distinctive features of

participants' accounts, characterising particular perception and/or experiences, which [are] relevant to the research question" (p. 200). As such, inductive coding was employed to ensure that ideas of leadership in LD were able to emerge freely, without the constraint or bias of preconceptions. An initial pass through all of the transcripts was undertaken to develop familiarity with the contents. In a second pass, codes were inductively assigned to passages of text, based on the manifest meaning of participants' accounts (Kleinheksel et al., 2020), repeated throughout the dataset until saturation was reached and to confirm that this descriptive coding had been applied consistently. At this stage, an interpretive review of codes focused on the latent meaning of the accounts (Kleinheksel et al., 2020), capturing key concepts in line with the research questions and the literature that has informed them (indicated as latent codes in Table 2). Finally, four explanatory themes were derived (King et al., 2019).

Results

Four key themes emerged from the data and these are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Emergent Leadership Themes

Theme	Latent Codes	Initial Codes
Being in the role	Personal values	Integrity
		Authenticity
	Expertise	Value of prior experience
		Knowledge of role
		Knowledge of subject
Being part of a team	Collegiality	Communication
		Working together
	Signposting	Promoting the team
		Having impact
Being part of a community	Internal networks	Connection
		Task openness
	External networks	Dissemination
Taking a wider view	Influence	Having influence
		Role modelling
	Shared vision	Seeing the bigger picture
		Professional recognition

Being in the Role

Personal Values

This theme covers not only how the study participants operate, but also how they work with others. These values were often expressed when participants discussed the level of autonomy they experience in their roles and its function more broadly in the service of LD goals. For example, Participant 11 felt that autonomy was important because it allowed her to resist the “real push for a one size fits all approach,” which is imposed “from top down.” The more desirable state is to have the “autonomy to do what I think is the right thing and not have to check it with people and being trusted to just get on with it and [have] new initiatives, new ideas ... rather than just reacting to things” (Participant 18).

In their responses, participants identified two benefits to this approach. Firstly, it focuses on “what students need rather than what departments need” (Participant 1) and allows for the LD approach to be more firmly embedded in the learning and teaching culture:

> That's my mission, to make sure that tutors get to think about the ‘how to’ themselves and that collaboratively we're able to help students as much as possible so that, you know, they don't just focus on content, but also on the ‘how to.’ (Participant 17)

Secondly, it can be interpreted as a way of performing leadership, in that to claim leadership as part of ourselves, it must fit with who we conceive ourselves to be:

> I want someone to be able to say or me to say to myself, I always did what was right, rather than what was easy or what was quick... And I think sometimes that jars people because they want to do something quickly or they want to do what suits them or they want to do the thing that makes them money. But I don't. And that drives everything that I do. (Participant 8)

These respondents felt that being true to values is central to their practice as a Learning Developer: “It has to come through your actions and how you kind of carry yourself” (Participant 12).

Expertise

Closely allied to personal values is a sense of expertise, and what it means to exercise that expertise in LD. Again, the responses indicated that this quality takes on a dual aspect in how it is approached: what it means for the Learning Developer as an individual, and the impact of that expertise on practice and, by extension, students. Looking first at practice, the interview participants expressed a willingness to learn and resisted the suggestion that they would reach the end of their learning. This openness to new knowledge and its potential impact is best characterised by Participant 10:

> There are still things that stretch me, but I'll take them on because they stretch me and that's how I get to fill those gaps. Part of my job involves quite a lot of researching around particular areas to make sure that I am absolutely in a position to make recommendations and write guidance and stuff like that so I will quite deliberately pick areas that I feel a bit weak on. (Participant 10)

Sometimes this expertise is recognised by the Learning Developer, for example Participant 12 “had to have that conversation” with “colleagues who perhaps haven't thought about it in the same way that I have” as they haven’t had the benefit of her longer experience. Similarly, Participant 4 drew on her own past knowledge and experience to anticipate some of the demands of the role, and enjoyed the confidence that came with that:

> I felt in the know about what the experience was of the people I was going to, you know, be presuming to offer some support to and knew a bit of the nuts and bolts...on the teaching side so felt confident in that way. (Participant 4)

The overriding impression from the participants was that the person came first and the role second; the former informs and guides the latter. For example, Participant 2, in recounting the benefits of her experience, never lost sight of the students at the heart of her practice:

> You come as a human to them and allow them to be human, allow them to be themselves and get out of this session what they want and not what I think they might need…the stronger your own philosophy of teaching your own pedagogy, the more likely you are to be successful in the room with students. (Participant 2)

Moreover, Participant 20 indicated that this expertise is offered generously and without expectation of reward, of not coming “with your hands empty, you come with something that is worth sharing and that is worth giving.**”** However, there is also the recognition that impact is two-way. As much as the Learning Developer has impact on others, there is a personal impact experienced in return that can be motivating:

> I've had to kind of internalize a different idea of who I am, because in a way, once you have a PhD, you feel, right, I need to live up to...this certain level now. I can't just take my foot off the pedal and do the absolute bare minimum because I won't be satisfied. (Participant 6)

Being Part of a Team

Collegiality

The second theme takes the work of the individual Learning Developer and puts it in the context of a team. Although some participants had a small or, in one case, no team, the sense of collegiality was paramount for all. They expressed the value they found in belonging to a group of people engaged in common work, with the opportunity to share knowledge and resources, to exchange practice, and to support and promote colleagues’ work (with the implication that team members and colleagues would do the same in return):

> What's important to all of us in working together [is] feeling able to share work, give feedback to each other without anybody being upset ... People ... know each other's strengths and each other’s areas where they maybe need some help. (Participant 18)

> Within my micro team, collaboration means co-delivering and co-designing ... Even if we do things separately, we always have a joined up thinking approach ... We will represent each other wherever we go. (Participant 17)

Signposting

Alongside the prevailing attitude of openness and sharing, some participants also reported a more active approach to teamwork in taking responsibility for ensuring others around the university were aware of fellow Learning Developers' activities and abilities "so you can go out and promote them to other people internally and externally" (Participant 1), with the wider goal of "creating structures for other people to share" (Participant 20).

Being Part of a Community

Internal Networks

In keeping with the value placed by participants on working closely with others, the central place of the wider community also emerged as a theme, with participants siting themselves within a network of connections that they actively build and expand. These connections can be organised on a number of levels, the first being within the Learning Developer's own institution and effected through taking advantage of established relationships, as Participant 2 experienced: "I started expanding our reach into the faculty that I was in … using my old channels and … the connections that I already had, my networks, to build LD in that area of the university." However, new connections are also sought, and opportunities taken of situations that might provide them:

> I casually go and present at sharing practice events but mainly I think really what I'm doing is ... joining in conversations that people are having. Whenever I get an opportunity to talk to somebody and offer somebody something and get involved with something, I generally do. (Participant 7)

These participants had a high awareness of what else was going on in their institutions, with students and colleagues, and put themselves in positions where they could leverage circumstances and conversations in favour of promoting LD. Participant 10 noted that "you have to be a really good people person generally." For these respondents, both staff and students were part of their professional networks, reflected in Participant 16's aim to "demystify processes so [students] can become integrated and ... to make university not be us and them but be us all together,' as well as to '[work] with colleagues as well" (Participant 16).

External Networks

This approach to networking extends beyond the participants' own institutions in the way that several respondents "[acted] as critical friends for the processes of other local institutions ... trying to ensure that collectively we have lots of different ears to the ground while also feeding our own practice into those networks" (Participant 14). External networks were considered by these participants to be vital for maintaining and building knowledge and expertise, with multiple channels of dissemination employed to share their work and their practice.

Taking a Wider View

Influence

While none of the participants explicitly described themselves as strategic, many recognised the need and value in cultivating certain relationships in certain ways. For these participants, having influence with colleagues was an important outcome, with influence understood here as being

directed towards changing practice, changing the culture of that practice, and modelling how things *could* be:

> Leadership for me is about trying to lead by example, trying to be a good role model for both students and colleagues ... You have to have that sort of respect from the people you're trying to lead and it has to come through your actions and how you carry yourself. (Participant 12)

Shared Vision

Despite the inevitably strategic nature of gaining and using influence, it was not expressed by any participant as being the ultimate goal, and instead served as a guide to where they should expend their energies:

> I choose where I want to have influence and if I feel I can have influence there I will invest in exercising that influence and where I don't, I try to make some inroads or just change someone's perception because that influence is a two-way street, right? Someone has to be willing to be influenced in order for you to have that influence. So it's building that relationship where you can influence people. (Participant 2)

Participant 17 saw influence as a tool to deploy primarily in the service of the field through active involvement in the bigger picture, expressed as "having the will and the opportunity to lead change ... which may be institutional [or] ... have to do with discourse ... with ideology or with ethos." Crucially, this influence may not be overt and was instead described by Participant 6 as influencing "below the line" in that rather than being recognised as a leader, this Learning Developer will focus on "developing good relationships with staff and persuading them that academic literacies are important ... showing them, involving them ... [to] be part of the teaching process."

Every participant commented on the need to share ideas and practice externally to their team, whether that was through, for example, publication, internal conferences or professional recognition. While these are valuable activities in their own right, they also provide conversation openers with colleagues for these participants and ongoing reassurance of expertise:

> Over time, I have learned that you can't rely on people's perceptions of you, on that reputation, that recognition and that sense of being valued ... you have to build it your own way for yourself, because no one can give it to you. It's all the little things that add up, that create a little picture that I can hold onto, I can fall back on whenever I doubt myself. (Participant 2)

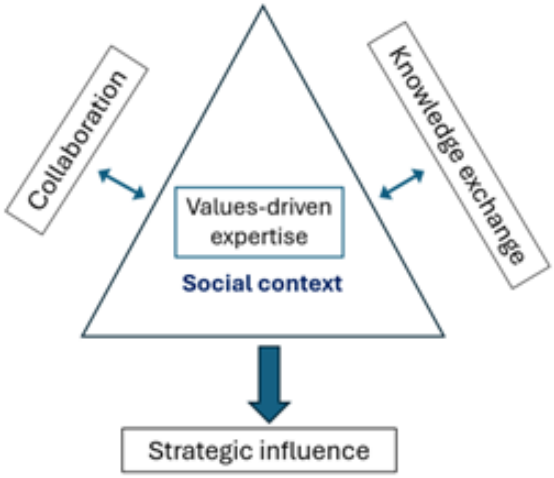
Participant 19's idea of 'critical allyship' captures the fluid relationship dynamics made possible in a contextualised, situated reading of leadership. There is no 'leader' or 'follower' in such a reading or such a relationship, rather, there are two people "coming from a place of some sense of shared objective or shared values" even whilst "having to constantly wed [a] more critical vision of what HE can and should be with what it is" (Participant 19). He sees this happening when Learning Developers, in "solidarity" with their colleagues' objectives, "push and nudge and cajole and hopefully inspire" them to embrace change.

A Model for Leadership in Third Space

The four themes that emerged from the data – 1. Being in the role; 2. Being part of a team; 3. Being part of a community; and 4. Taking a wider view – highlight the key concerns of Learning Developers when thinking about leadership, but they do not exist in isolation. Figure 1 suggests the relationships between these themes and how they might interact to create a model for leadership in LD.

Figure 1

A Model for Leadership in Learning Development



All participants described their practices from a values-based perspective and how those values informed their interactions with colleagues and students. A strong element of those values concerned a sense of ongoing learning and knowledge exchange, and a commitment to collaborating with others. These broad activities both inform and are informed by the Learning Developer's social context and contribute to their expertise. This fluid interaction with others and with knowledge, while crucial to practice in LD, is not the whole story where leadership is concerned. The networks of which the learning developer is a part, and the knowledge they deploy, are all brought to a strategic purpose. This crucial part of the model moves it from being a model for collaboration to one of leadership and is explored in the context of the literature and the broader findings in the discussion section.

Discussion

This study set out to explore two questions: 1. What does leadership look like in a collaborative, community-driven, third space field of practice? and 2. How do LD practitioners recognise leadership in themselves and express it through their practice? The findings clearly indicate that Learning Development is not a field devoid of leadership, but the collaborative, community-driven nature of the field can make it hard for individuals to recognise it in themselves and have it recognised by others.

For a field that is so strongly values-driven, it is not surprising that Learning Developers fulfil their roles in accordance with their values. The sense of integrity and authenticity that emerge from these interviews indicates that it is important to Learning Developers to follow their values in practice, negotiate where necessary, and be afforded sufficient trust to do so, in line with Newstead et al.'s (2021) virtuous leadership. As borne out in the data of the present study, leadership that is values-driven has been shown to have positive outcomes for colleagues, even when enacted without positional authority, as it is closely tied to social learning and self-efficacy (Kauppila et al., 2021). For the participants in this study, having influence with colleagues is more important than having impact per se, and was expressed as being directed towards changing practice, changing the culture of that practice, and modelling how things could be. Although in this study the exercise of influence was clearly based on the development of personal relationships, it also acted as a map to guide participants in terms of where to expend their energies. As DeMayo Pugno (2023) suggests, effective leadership combines a social network with social capital, and several respondents drew on the importance of credibility as a factor in the success of attempts at influencing: the Learning Developer must talk the same professional language as those whose cooperation or collaboration is sought and show that they belong to the same professional community.

They also need to demonstrate their expertise. Indeed, Liu (2021) reports that in an educational setting, those teachers with recognised expertise are more likely to lead. Equally, by the participants in this study, such expertise was considered as an asset that ought to be shared more widely with their teams and further beyond. Several participants took a whole-institutional approach to 'team', seeing it as separate from organisational structure and prioritising the situational context instead (Fields et al., 2019). In this research, collaboration and knowledge exchange – both internal to participants' institutions and more widely across the LD community (Roxå et al., 2011) – emerged from the data as the key activities undertaken by an expert, who participants equated with a leader. Leadership in LD is therefore experienced by the individual as confidence in their own expertise and the values that guide their practices. This aspect sits at the heart of the model (Figure 1), because it was the guiding hand for these participants.

The interview responses provided an overriding sense of connection and contact; regardless of team size, none of the Learning Developers who self-identified most closely with the concept of leadership felt that they worked alone. The findings clarify that the study participants valued the opportunity to work with others and build relationships, particularly with less knowledgeable others. Leaders in LD therefore act as "hubs ... an essential element of a social [network]' (Taylor et al., 2021, p.280), supporting connections within and across institutions and actively exercising influence (Oc, 2018). Participants' awareness of, and curiosity in, what colleagues might need or be concerned about allowed them to take a networked approach to relationship building; a tangled, many layered, organic process of sharing and exchange whereby they create meaning for themselves and others. Moreover, participants indicated that it is not just the number and breadth of connections that is important in cultivating a sense of leadership in Learning Development, but the quality of those connections and their greater purpose. The respondents in this study emphasised their commitment to dissemination of knowledge and practice, within and beyond their teams, establishing relationships and pathways for communication and, consequently, influence. As "hubs" (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 280), Learning Developers have access

to both information and social networks through which knowledge can flow. When they connect with other hubs and individuals likewise positioned in the centre of an active network (James, 2011), they gain support and kinship (Hogg et al., 2012).

A key part of the model (Figure 1) focuses on strategic influence, the outward-facing aggregation of learning and expertise, and perhaps the defining feature of leadership in this context. A leader in LD is arguably recognised as such because they take the knowledge and networks they have gathered and constructed, mediate them within their social contexts, and then actively direct them towards a goal. That goal may not be a specific output, but the solving of situational challenges (Spisek, 2020). Regardless of the ultimate goal, participant responses in this study clearly indicate that a leader in LD will make effective use of opportunities to flag an expertise rooted in and driven by a values-based community. The focus on values allows for fluidity in approach, with the spreading of the LD ethos – and its impact on the student learning experience – taking priority for these participants.

The findings from this study reveal leadership in LD to be networked and situated, responsive to context, and distributed in terms of power. It has a lateral, multidirectional trajectory that spreads, rather than an upward trajectory that climbs. In that sense, it echoes the collaborative and emancipatory values of LD, highlighting the centrality of those values to LD work. However, even as this speaks positively of the LD ethos, it does not allow for easy recognition of leadership within LD, especially by those outside of, and unfamiliar with, the field. The priority then becomes for the would-be LD leader to retell the story – to themselves, as much as to others – and broaden the narrative. As active agents, the Learning Developers in this study are able, as Derrida suggested (Ford et al., 2008), to bring a form of leadership into being through its repetition. It has only to be named as such.

Conclusion

Although students and their learning experiences may sit at the centre of LD work, this study has shown that leadership in LD goes far beyond the students and focuses much more on how the Learning Developer performs the role, collaborates with colleagues and manages the wider learning environment. LD, as a third space profession, is predicated on fluidity, boundary crossing and negotiated meaning (Whitchurch, 2008), negating the more traditional ‘Great Man’ theory of leadership. Its leadership style must, therefore, be similarly reflexive, representing a joint and networked endeavour that concurrently recognises and prioritises expertise.

The role of identity is vital. To fully realize the potential of third space, practitioners must become “third space professionals” (Whitchurch, 2023, p. 24) who thrive on exploring new connections and activities, and expanding learning spaces. For this to occur, Learning Developers’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be satisfied (Veles, 2023). In this study, the importance of personal values, including in the exercise and development of expertise, is evident in the emphasis placed on growing collaborations and partnerships and helping others to develop similarly, with a sense of integrity and collegiality. This values-driven practice is therefore situated and social in its focus on knowledge-sharing and practice exchange within a wider, networked community that often extends beyond the Learning Developer’s team and institution. Each of the four themes that surfaced in this analysis indicates a specific characteristic of leadership in LD. The themes combine to provide a distinctive proposition for leadership in this field that does not

depend on position, structure or authority. Instead, it is values-driven, social, networked and critical.

Moreover, the social context is an active zone in three important respects: team, community, and field. Engagement in these areas takes the form of collaboration, knowledge exchange, and strategic influence, respectively. Together, they create a vision for leadership that is flexible and responsive, and grounded in the relationships and networks through which the Learning Developer actively operates. What makes this distinctive is the element of criticality, which is inherent in the building of influence in order to have the most meaningful impact. Where a 'traditional' model of a leader keeps the individual and their career progression in focus, leadership as practiced in LD is more concerned with raising the field and improving the learning and teaching experience for everyone.

Implications

The emerging challenges to higher education make it ever more vital that the capabilities, expertise and connections of those who work within it are effectively harnessed. As higher education faces an ongoing series of challenges – practical, financial, existential (Field, 2024) – the capacity of institutions to harness latent leadership abilities, and make full and effective use of everyone's potential, will become ever more vital. The danger of not doing so is that traditional notions of leadership, and of who leaders are, are no longer fit for purpose (James, 2011, p. 8).

The model of the transformational leader no longer fits an environment that needs to be agile and responsive to changing needs. Instead, collaboration and participation increase organisational capacity (Liu, 2021) and create shared accountability (James, 2011). Leadership in LD is held to be a joint endeavour rooted in identity and professional development. It implies a shared sense of purpose, derived through information flow, relationship building, critical influence, and the recognition of expertise. Although these can be experienced and interpreted by individuals in a variety of ways, the perception of their presence or absence is a key driver in how far each practitioner feels able to traverse institutional, disciplinary or conceptual boundaries and engage in collaborative activities. In this sense, then, the value of third space has been articulated by Veles (2023) in relation to collaborative capital, the "actual and potential resources used in the creation of social structures and networks of actors, and relations among them, within the institution" (Veles, 2023, p. 7). As such, this study highlights that all Learning Developers have the capacity to be recognised and valued for their leadership, to influence the direction of the field, and to avoid functional outcomes that don't serve students or address their needs. These outcomes will broaden the opportunities of the field for its practitioners, equipping them with greater confidence, establishing a stronger foundation of professionalism, and supporting the robust development of practices that are valued, in LD specifically and third space generally.

While this study is limited in its focus on one field of practice, these concepts are unlikely to be unique to LD and one useful route for expansion would be to explore whether these characteristics guide the leadership practices of other third space professionals. If so, these findings could provide a map for professional development and advancement within those professions that do not enjoy the same progression routes or recognition as their academic and professional services colleagues. In so doing, the findings from this and future research will

actively enhance the capabilities of higher education institutions to adapt creatively to the current threats faced by the sector by tapping into this growing sector of the higher education community. Liberated from the bounds of traits and attributes, hierarchy and management, the findings of this study suggest a form of leadership that is truly open to anyone.

Conflict of Interest

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