

Leading from within: Distributing leadership to enhance eLearning at Australian Catholic University

Annette Schneider

School of Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education
Australian Catholic University

Andrelyn C Applebee

Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning
Australian Catholic University

Joseph Perry

Faculty of Health Sciences
Australian Catholic University

Research on academic leaders of Australian and international higher education institutions has shown how “the broader societal change forces that have unfolded over the past quarter century have generated a set of higher education specific pressures on universities to change, which, in turn, are testing the extent to which these institutions and their leaders are ‘change capable’” (Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008, p. xiii). Australian Catholic University (ACU) which has six campuses across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, is responding to these change forces in accord with its mission to provide quality teaching, research and service. ACU has focussed on the development of policy, procedures and strategic initiatives related to eLearning. This paper reports on embedding of an initial Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project designed “to develop distributed leadership capacity in the pedagogical and evaluative dimensions of online teaching and learning” in which six academic staff members were funded for a new role as Online Advisers (OAs). The paper highlights the leadership learning which has occurred for the OAs, identifies ongoing challenges in terms of distributing leadership in a sustainable way for the enhancement of online teaching and learning (OTL) and offers eight insights and challenges into how such projects can be implemented by like institutions.

Keywords: leadership, eLearning, distributed, online, challenges, change, unknown future

Introduction

Building change capability in university institutions and their leaders is a ubiquitous and ongoing challenge (Fullan, 2006; Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). When embarking on significant change it is important for leaders to consider the environment in which the change is to be instigated. Sergiovanni (2007) notes the importance of leaders attending to the organisation’s *lifeworld* of “culture, meaning and significance” (p. 147) to energise and shape its *systemsworld* of “efficacy, outcomes and productivity” (p. 148). Organisation members need to feel their contributions are purposeful. Little is known about the impact and effects of distributed leadership on organisational change and development (Sharpe, Benfield and Francis, 2006; Applebee, Ellis and Sheely, 2004), though the increasing importance of distributing leadership in response to change forces is advocated (Fullan, 2006). Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008, p. xiii) suggest that “responding promptly and wisely to these change forces by not only formulating high quality responses but making them work consistently and effectively in practice is the central challenge faced by our universities and their leaders in the volatile environment they now face.”

ACU is facing this challenge with respect to enhancing the quality of eLearning through a distributed leadership project titled *Development of distributed institutional leadership capacity in online teaching and learning* and its ongoing implementation. (Note the terms ‘online teaching and learning’ can be interchanged within the context of ACU with the term ‘eLearning’.) The ALTC-funded phases of the project commenced in July 2006 and concluded in December 2007; Phase 3 in 2008 has been funded by ACU. Table 1 outlines the project phases and timelines.

Online advisers as part of ACU landscape

Academic staff were invited to apply for the role of OA in early 2006. Appointees were announced in May/June and included three staff from the Faculty of Education, two from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and one from the Faculty of Health Sciences. Phase 1 provided specialised training seminars for the OAs, most of whom did not know each other prior to their appointment, and ongoing support from the Project Team and the Project Support Group. Shaping the ACU landscape commenced in 2007 when the OAs carried out an environmental scan and SWOT analysis of OTL and presented their results and recommendations to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Affairs) and the Faculty Deans. The shaping continued with the introduction of the *Byte-Size Program* (regular lunch-time drop-in sessions for staff on each campus), and Faculty-specific tasks related to online teaching and learning. A snapshot evaluation of OTL academic staff needs conducted by the OAs has assisted them in their membership of University committees and working parties and their leadership roles at Faculty and University-wide levels. They are also involved in special projects, staff development and training and liaison with Schools.

Table 1: Three phases of the ACU distributed leadership project

(Source: Applebee et al., 2007, p. 3)

Phase 1 July-December, 2006	Phase 2 January – December 2007	Phase 3 2008 - onwards
• OAs attend three specialised training sessions focussing on the pedagogical, leadership and evaluative dimensions of online learning and teaching	• OAs assess University needs and prepare customised plans and strategies • OAs participate in academic staff training and planning • OAs carry out pilot evaluations of the processes and impacts of online teaching and learning and of the associated training and support mechanisms	• OAs lead involvement in planning, conducting and evaluating training for Faculty staff • OAs lead in Faculty strategic planning for online teaching

Evidence of landscape changes

Hargraves and Fink (2006) suggest that emerging models of distributed leadership, networks and communities of practice regard organisations more as ‘living systems’ that are much less amenable to top-down regulation. They also acknowledge the tension around the degree to which distributed leadership models are able to harness people’s energy and motivation to secure sustainable innovation. This tension is reported anecdotally by one OA as part of a regular review process. “This is what we are doing with every training, *ByteSize*, or assistance session. Even the ad hoc spontaneous discussion regarding eLearning we have in the corridor on a regular basis is motivating colleagues to develop their skills and confidence. This is the essence of distributed leadership. It is by virtue of the OAs cross-university contact that these innovative developments are shared with the broader ACU community.”

The OAs see themselves as a University entity which translates into how they function. They work with staff within and across Faculty boundaries and draw on expertise and exemplars from across the Faculties. Research projects being undertaken by the OAs includes surveying staff and students’ experiences in eLearning to establish 2008 baseline data, which will then inform University and Faculty decision-making. The Faculty -supported student project explores campus-based students’ experience of web-based teaching and learning environments. The staff project explores staff experiences of eLearning through a survey and complementary focus group interviews. In addition, in-depth discussions with 6-12 selected staff engaged in online teaching and learning are planned. The project is a significant attempt to measure the impact on staff and students of the distributed leadership in eLearning provided by the OAs. The ability to harness staff energy, motivation and professional learning in order to secure sustainable innovation and improvement will also be measured by the outcomes of an informal evaluation of the OAs’ role. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Affairs) has requested this information as part of deliberations into the future of the OA role beyond 2008. The findings of the Australian University Quality Assurance review conducted in August 2008 may also provide additional insights into the impact of the OAs’ distributed leadership role.

Methodology

The authors of this paper are two OAs and the Director of Flexible Teaching and Learning at ACU National. The OAs have extensive and diverse experience as lecturers at University level along with extensive experience in online education. One of the OAs is a foundation member of the OA team while the other has been in the role since January 2008. The Director of Flexible Teaching and Learning has a long history in flexible teaching and online education at ACU National and other tertiary institutions including involvement in educational change management projects. The experience of the authors has facilitated an insightful investigation of the concept of distributed leadership and the role of the OAs in this process.

The authors undertook a qualitative review of documentation kept by all OAs in the course of their duties. A content analysis was undertaken of documentation including monthly journals kept by all OAs, minutes from weekly video conferences between the OAs, records of interactions with fellow staff and minutes of meetings attended. This analysis, coupled with reflection on personal experience, has provided the authors with insight into the challenges faced by the OAs, solutions developed in response to these challenges and the impact of their distributed leadership within the university community. Consequently this paper presents the views of all OAs involved in the project since its inception.

Challenges of sustaining distributed leadership in a dynamic landscape

Leading from within, as the OAs perceive their role, has particular challenges for those involved and for the sustainability of the change being undertaken. The reflections of the OAs identify leadership occurring at many levels. Using Fullan's (2006) eight elements of sustainability for change and the findings of the recent study on change leadership in higher education within Australia (Scott et al, 2008) as a framework, the following insights could help other institutions undertaking comparable leadership initiatives.

Insight 1: Aligning change with the organisation's moral purpose

Both Fullan (2006) and Scott et al (2008) highlight the need for organisations to focus on *moral purpose* as a crucial element of sustainable change. If a proposed change cannot be aligned with the vision, mission or goals of the organisation then the collective commitment of organisation members to the change may be difficult to obtain. ACU's *Strategic Plan for Online Teaching and Learning* and relevant Faculty policies and procedures outline the requirements for OTL, enabling Faculties, Schools and other organisational units to link the proposed changes with the organisation's core purposes. In their role of supporting staff in pedagogical aspects of OTL, the OAs respond to a range of levels of staff knowledge, understanding and implementation of the relevant policies and procedures. Institutions need to provide multi-level entry points for change support so that staff members can access 'just in time' support for specific pedagogical or technical issues as well as appreciate the broader educational framework underpinning the change.

Insight 2: Encouraging commitment to changing context at all levels

Fullan (2006) maintains that structures and cultures form the organisational contexts in which work takes place. The insertion of OAs into the organisational structure occurred at a number of levels. Officially, reporting procedures were developed and a time frame established for the project. To meet these structural commitments, the OAs had to establish what Scott et al (2008) identify as space within the organisational culture where they had room to lead. This required not only role legitimacy (given by those in positions of authority) but the development of a professional confidence on the part of the OAs and an enhanced credibility for the new role within the ACU community. Embedding such development in the existing culture takes time and focused energy, made difficult perhaps by competing demands on the OAs to establish credibility in a new role and meet the multiple demands of their other commitments. Given that the OAs do not have authority to provide resources, but have resources allocated to them, to effect change they rely substantially on their influence as leaders. Institutions need to recognise the amount of time and level of resource commitment needed to embed a change as significant as this one so that it remains sustainable.

Insight 3: Building lateral capacity through networks

The OAs have established a strong and effective professional network amongst themselves and their immediate colleagues. Their different skills, knowledge and leadership expertise have been used in purposeful interactions to produce a variety of outcomes. Regular weekly videoconferences and frequent email have provided the core communication structure, with limited exploration of other web technologies also contributing to the effective networking. The challenge is to capitalise on such effective

networks by maintaining and strengthening them and ensuring that the innovative ideas and practices developed within them translate into a positive, sustained impact on the quality of OTL.

Insight 4: Establishing new vertical co-dependent relationships

Balancing appropriate measures of accountability to higher authorities and sponsors with systematic self-reflection and peer-evaluation has been often discussed among the OAs. While agreed reporting frameworks have been determined amongst the OAs and their immediate supervisors, there is understandable pressure to provide additional evidence of success to current project sponsors and thereby justify ongoing resourcing of a distributed leadership project. This remains a tension for most institutions seeking to establish cultures of evidence for desired outcomes while also encouraging creativity and innovation at 'grass roots' level. Scott et al (2008, p. xviii) highlight the importance for institutions of setting up "agreed and clear expectations of what needs to be done, by whom, and with what support and against what tests at the outset" and of referring back to this "as implementation proceeds."

Insight 5: Facilitating deep learning

Fullan (2006, p. 119) maintains that sustainability "requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising." To achieve this in a data-driven context, Fullan suggests that organisations need to overcome fear of failure, to establish transparent means of collecting data on which to base their strategies for future action and to ensure that all levels of leadership can learn from their experiences. The OAs have enabled staff to embrace new ways of engaging with OTL and have initiated research projects to establish baseline data for OTL while providing a forum where people can reflect on their experiences of OTL and inform developments in policy and procedures. While this reflection process is not yet organisation-wide, the research findings will enable ACU to have a clearer picture of its situation and what is needed for its future development. Institutions with a culture of collaboration and supportive relationships, with effective mechanisms for knowledge sharing, problem-solving and distribution of leadership may be better able to facilitate this deep learning than institutions which do not have such cultural characteristics.

Insight 6: Committing to short-term and long-term results

Fullan (2006) notes the importance of achieving short-term and longer term successes on the journey towards sustainability. The successes experienced in the short-term by the OAs (e.g. conducting an internal scan and SWOT analysis, producing conference papers, journal articles, guidelines for professional learning seminars, research applications and new online resources for ACU staff and students) have given them increased professional confidence and credibility within the university and highlighted the importance of achieving the longer-term institutional vision for OTL. As their understanding of the university context and change processes developed, so did their ability to work strategically within the system and thereby develop their leadership capabilities. This experience suggests that those charged with the implementation of change initiatives need to be provided with opportunities to achieve results in the short-term and be provided with development opportunities to enhance their understanding of 'systems' thinking and strategic leadership needed for successful longer-term outcomes.

Insight 7: Allowing for cyclical energising

Fullan (2006, p. 121) suggests institutions need to give quality time "to investigate, learn, experiment and develop better solutions if they wish to become effective learning organisations". Managing personal and professional energy levels remains an issue for the OAs, possibly more from the competing demands of two part-time, but ever-present, roles than from the emerging nature of their role as OAs. For projects to remain sustainable, the energy/time issue needs monitoring. Space and time need to be created for high level personal and organisation-wide reflection to occur regularly as a part of 'core business' so that solutions to emerging issues can be developed collaboratively. The OAs' experience suggests that institutions should carefully consider the development of role descriptions, selection processes, support mechanisms and ongoing professional learning opportunities for those appointed to new roles, while allowing the flexibility for the roles to be adjusted as implementation proceeds.

Insight 8: Embedding multi-level leadership as the energising force for sustainability

Scott et al (2008, p. xvi) suggest that academic leadership includes "policy formation, managing relationships, working with challenging staff, involvement in various aspects of planning and attending meetings." Being able to understand change processes and to successfully implement initiatives and sustain them are also seen as important aspects of effective change leadership. The OAs have enhanced their 'middle-level' leadership capabilities and exerted their influence in each of these areas while developing avenues for communication and collaboration on the project with other leaders within the university. Institutions which focus on enhancing the change leadership capabilities of all staff can tap into a wealth of potential sustainable responses to the issues which emerge in challenging times.

Sergiovanni (2007, p. 120) suggests that “collegiality and intrinsic motivation are both powerful and practical... improvement strategies” designed to bridge the gap between present practice and possible futures. ‘Leading for unknown futures – who leads and for what purposes?’ is an ongoing challenge for ACU but one that is bearing fruit in the OTL landscape. The evolving nature of eLearning at ACU and elsewhere means that more research into the impact of distributed leadership on organisational change and development is needed.

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Authors: Annette Schneider, School of Educational Leadership and Online Advisor, Faculty of Education, Australian Catholic University. Email: Annette.Schneider@acu.edu.au
Andrelyn Applebee, Director of Flexible Teaching and Learning, Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, Australian Catholic University. Email: Ann.Applebee@acu.edu.au
Joseph Perry, Lecturer in Nursing and Online Advisor, Faculty of Health Sciences, Australian Catholic University. Email: Joseph.Perry@acu.edu.au

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