Developing Leaders in Cyber-Space: The Paradoxical Possibilities of On-Line Learning

Donna Ladkin
(Corresponding author)
Centre for Executive Learning and Leadership
Cranfield School of Management
Cranfield University
Cranfield, BEDS MK43 0AL
Telephone number: +44 (0)1234 751122
E-mail: donna.ladkin@cranfield.ac.uk

Peter Case
University of West of England
Bristol Business School
Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY
Telephone number: +44 117 328 3401
Email: peter.case@uwe.ac.uk

Patricia Gayá Wicks
University of Exeter
Centre for Leadership Studies
Xfi Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4ST
Telephone number: +44 1392 262 569
Email: patricia.gaya.wicks@exeter.ac.uk

Keith Kinsella
University of Bath
Centre for Action Research and Professional Practice
School of Management, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY
Telephone number: +44 1865 762 505
Email: kckinsella@btinternet.com
Developing Leaders in Cyber-Space: The Paradoxical Possibilities of On-Line Learning

ABSTRACT

Whereas ‘distance learning’ has often been seen as the poor relation of face-to-face educational encounters, this paper suggests that paradoxically, this mode of delivery can offer significant advantages to those aiming to develop highly situated practices, such as leadership capability. In particular, the ‘distance’ from the delivering educational establishment becomes ‘proximity’ or an affordance in terms of where the learning is actually applied, and the constraints of the programme’s structure enable greater freedom on the part of participants as they choose which aspects of theory they focus on. The argument presented here is based on research conducted to gain insight into participants’ experience of a two-year Masters in Leadership Studies delivered primarily through on-line, web-based technology. We conclude that despite appearing to be a ‘transmission’ based learning intervention, the on-line mechanism fosters an experience similar to action learning in its engagement with participants’ contexts, and also enables a more ‘constructivist’ approach to learning about the practice, as well as the theory, of leadership.

Keywords: leadership development, distance learning, e-learning, on-line learning, transmission and constructivist modes of learning
Developing Leaders in Cyber-Space: The Paradoxical Possibilities of On-Line Learning

Introduction

Increasingly, leadership development focuses on enabling programme participants to develop ‘meta competencies’ (Linstead 1988) such as increased ability to handle ambiguity; read, reframe and respond appropriately to changing organisational contexts; or act with greater critical reflexivity and awareness (Turnbull-James & Ladkin 2008, Carter et al 2002, Day 2001). This paper considers the possibility that attributes of on-line delivery of formal leadership development interventions could by their nature, contribute to the achievement of these outcomes in ways that are distinct from those realised by face-to-face, but ‘off-site’ interventions.

The paper joins the debate about effective design and delivery of leadership development interventions, focusing particularly on the learning processes which foster positive change in individuals’ lived practices. It also draws from the growing body of literature regarding Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based learning interventions (Holsapple & Lee Post 2006, Arbaugh 2005, Frederickson et al 2005) and what factors contribute to their effectiveness. Through interweaving these two literatures and making sense of empirical data resulting from an evaluation of a leadership development programme delivered on-line in light of them, the paper contributes to our understanding of the learning processes which enable the development of
leadership practice and how ICT-based technologies might facilitate that development.

Our claims are based on an in-depth study conducted on a UK-based Masters in Leadership Studies which is delivered primarily through on-line interactions between programme participants, coaches, and course materials. Through the research we identify two aspects of the leadership development programme which participants note as key to their experience, which arise primarily as a result of the on-line delivery mechanism:

- The web-based delivery of course materials which enables participants to experiment with new theoretical ideas almost immediately within their workplaces;
- The ‘containing’ function of the course structure which combines rigidity and flexibility in such a way that participants exercise choice and discernment about how they engage with course materials.

A further feature of the programme which participants cite as essential to their experience is their interaction with their on-line coaches. Although coaching is not necessarily dependent on web-based technology, we explore the way in which the on-line medium for communication affects coaching relationships and offers distinctive opportunities not afforded by face-to-face work.

Theoretically, we turn to the literatures concerning ‘constructivist’ ways of learning (Dewey 1916, Vygotsky 1978, and Bruner, 1996), as well as action learning (Raelin 1999, Torbert 1999) to make sense of the learning experiences participants report, and explore ways in which ICT-based interventions might
actually contribute to the creation of ‘constructivist’, rather than ‘transmission-based’ (Rumble 2001) learning.

We begin by reviewing the main themes which emerge from the literature concerning the pedagogy of leadership development. Following from that, we consider current research into on-line delivery of educational programmes and questions it poses. We then examine the Masters in Leadership Studies in terms of its aims and mode of delivery. This brings us to the results of our research, and the way they contribute both to conventional assumptions about leadership development pedagogy and to the growing body of research being conducted into on-line educational programmes.

Developing Leadership Capability

In his 2001 paper, Day joins Kotter (1990) and others (Zaleznik 1977, Bennis & Nanus 1985) in asserting the importance of distinguishing between management and leadership. He goes further by suggesting that because leading requires different capabilities from managing, it demands different developmental processes. For instance, Day asserts that as leading requires the ability to work with uncertainty to a degree that managing does not, leadership development interventions should focus on improving individuals’ sensitivity to context, flexibility, discernment, and emotional robustness. He further argues that these capabilities are not learned solely through cognitive models or frameworks, but through the integration of those models with experience and intelligent reflection on that experience. Others (Conger and Benjamin 1999, McCauley 2001, Turnbull & Ladkin 2008) similarly stress the importance for
leaders in the contemporary organisational environment to develop context-sensitivity, reflexivity, and to be more questioning and open to alternative ways of conceptualising their world.

Rather less apparent within the literature is how such outcomes might be achieved. Atwater et al (1999) propose that the design of leadership development programmes should take into account the leader’s preferences and attributes as the starting point for learning journeys. Others focus on the pedagogical orientation of a programme’s design itself. For instance London and Maurer (2004) emphasise that pedagogy which is process rather than content oriented should be pursued. Taylor et al (2002) concur with this, and add that designs of learning interventions for leaders should include a high degree of reflective activity in the service of increasing their self awareness. They offer six ‘principles’ upon which their ‘dynamic human systems’ leadership programme is based, including ‘the primacy of practice’ and the ‘reflexivity principle’. However, the mechanics by which their classroom-based programme embodies these tenets are not described in much detail, and the question of how this learning is embedded back in the workplace is not addressed.

Also left unexplored in the literature is the question of how ‘on-line’ interventions could contribute to developing more context sensitive, reflexive and flexible leaders. The following section examines the research which has been conducted on on-line programme delivery and the pedagogical possibilities this technology offers.
The Possibilities of On-line Technology

The research into web-based delivery of educational programmes is growing in proportion to the growth of on-line offerings themselves. An analysis of the literature reveals the following attributes of research conducted on such programmes to date:

- Much of the extant research is case study-based and conducted with undergraduate populations learning subjects such as statistics or problem solving techniques (Frederickson et al 2005, Oliver and Omari 2001).
- There are studies which seek to ascertain whether or not students who engage in on-line programmes perform better and retain more than their counterparts who aren’t involved in on-line programmes (Holsapple and Lee Post 2006, Frederickson et al 2005).
- There is a growing body of research examining how ICT supports certain kinds of collaborative discourse (Jones et al 2006, Salmon 2000) or creates particular convergences such as ‘learning moments’ (Booth and Hulton 2003).
- Within the field of manager development, there are studies which examine the impact of specific features of on-line delivery, such as Bulletin Board mechanisms (Brower 2003, Palloff and Pratt 1999) or ‘tele-learning’ (Alavi and Leidner 2001).
- Although there are evaluations of management programmes which incorporate on-line delivery (Arbaugh 2005, Lengnick-Hall and Sanders 1997) we have not been able to identify evaluation or research into any
programmes which aim to develop leadership capabilities primarily using internet technology.

Hodgson and Watland (2004) offer a thorough review of the kinds of studies which have been undertaken within the field of management education about networked learning. Focusing on the question: ‘What is the most appropriate way of researching networked management learning?’ (99) they conclude that the research to date ‘is not looking at what the new and critical issues are that are raised for learners and teachers alike when learning via technology’ (111). Furthermore, they suggest that attention to the processes by which learning occurs through web-based delivery mechanisms might yield deeper insight into learning processes themselves, thus contributing to larger issues of learning design and pedagogy.

A theme apparent in the literature which speaks to larger pedagogical concerns, focuses on the difference between education viewed as ‘transmission’ of facts and knowledge, versus the idea that learning is ‘constructed’ through an active process of sense-making involving interpretation, selection, and personal understanding on the part of the learner (Rumble 2001). This latter view is referred to in the literature as ‘constructivism’ and is based on the educational philosophies of Dewey (1916), Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996)¹. Writers such as Huang (2002) and Oliver and Omari (2001) suggest that a ‘constructivist’

¹ It is important to distinguish between ‘constructivism’ which is a theory of learning promoted by writers such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, and the notion of ‘constructionism’, which is an epistemological stance forwarded by writers such as Bergen & Luckman (1981), Latour (2005) and Gergen (1999). Although there are similarities in their meanings (both learning and reality are seen to be ‘co-created’ and resulting from the meaning making processes at the core of social interactions) they come from different theoretical literatures. Because this paper considers learning processes, the term ‘constructivism’ is used.
paradigm better describes the way in which adult learners learn than the ‘transmission’ mode. Huang links constructivism with other theories of adult learning and concludes that since adults must be highly motivated in order to undertake formal educational programmes, that which they are learning must be highly relevant and clearly applicable to the domain in which it might be applied. He argues with others (Laurillard and McAndrew 2002, Roberts 2003) that instructors of such learning interventions must act as facilitators of learning, rather than transmitters of knowledge.

The study we are presenting here locates itself vis-à-vis existing literature in two distinct ways. Firstly, it is the only study the authors have been able to identify which examines how leaders might be developed primarily via on-line technology. In doing so, it highlights the role context plays in embedding leadership learning and extends work such as that conducted by Atwater et al 1999, London and Maurer 2004 and Taylor et al by suggesting that web-based learning enables the integration of theory and practice in ways formal leadership development activities held ‘off-site’ can not. Secondly, rather than evaluating outcomes, it examines in depth the processes which contribute to students’ experience, an approach suggested by authors such as Hodgson and Watland (2004). We believe our study develops these conversations further by exploring the particular attributes of on-line learning which somewhat paradoxically enable, rather than detract from the kinds of processes which are key in the learning of situated practices such as leadership. We turn now to describe the programme in more depth, before presenting the findings of our study.
A Map of the MA in Leadership Studies

The Masters in Leadership Studies is a part-time, modularly presented programme delivered on-line to participants throughout the world. All participants have at least five years of leadership experience in a range of private and public organisations and institutions including the armed forces, high-tech companies and the health sector. The majority are in their late thirties and forties. Although students can undertake the entirety of the course through web-based technology, there are also face-to-face optional workshops held for each module—and in this way, the course could be seen as more of a ‘blended’ (Gray 2006) offering. However, it must be noted that the majority of students undertaking the Masters do not attend each of the workshops, and many based outside of the UK successfully complete the course without ever meeting their colleagues or coach face-to-face.

One of the primary objectives of the programme is to encourage critical engagement with the theory and practice of leading and leadership. By ‘critical engagement’ we intentionally invoke a range of pedagogical practices. Firstly, the programme curriculum encourages the development of generic critical skills—along the lines described by Cottrell (2005), Quinton and Smallbone (2006) - by requiring students to acquire an ability to delve beneath the surface claims of texts produced by leadership theorists and practitioners. On-line access is given

---

2 One of the definitions of ‘criticism’ offered by the OED is, ‘…expressing or containing an analytical evaluation of something’. In an academic context, critique entails coming to a reasoned judgement based on some form of analysis.
to a range of written materials on a given topic (for example, ‘Transformational Leadership’) which contrasts the views of advocates with those of their detractors. At several points in the curriculum, participants are exposed to comparatively radical viewpoints articulated in materials drawn from the field of Critical Management Studies (as defined, for example, by Fournier and Grey, 2000), so that the assumptions of mainstream leadership theory – ends as well as means - are exposed and alternative possibilities considered. This constitutes the kind of questioning of ‘received wisdom' licenced under Section 202 of the 1987 Education Reform Act. The purpose of this pedagogical strategy is to enable participants to come to their own reasoned judgements about the contrasting views to which they are introduced.

Secondly, while critical textual engagement of the sort just described, forms a central part of the programme curriculum from day one, it is augmented by coaches making pedagogical interventions based on their assessment of a given participant’s readiness to be challenged on a given leadership topic or in relation to personal practice. The programme encourages a strategy of pedagogical differentiation insofar as individual and group coaching permits sensitivity to the particular developmental needs of participants. We will consider the extent to which the programme achieves its aims in these areas when we present the findings of the study.

The programme is delivered via a customised version of WebCT, a virtual learning environment used widely in universities across the world. The
programme takes place over two years, running over seven ‘study phases’ delivered in seven-week blocks as outlined in Diagram 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Leadership and You</th>
<th>Understanding your own preferences as a leader, incorporates psychometrics such as the MBTI.</th>
<th>On-line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Leadership Perspectives</td>
<td>Exploration of the ‘Leadership Canon’, from Plato to contemporary theories of Distributed and Relational Leadership</td>
<td>On-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Leadership Exchange</td>
<td>Participants observe one another ‘in situ’ for a period of 3-5 days, with the objective of improving understanding of ‘How leadership is accomplished’ in practice</td>
<td>Experiential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4: Leadership, Strategy and Change</td>
<td>Examines the notions of strategy, culture and change, looking at the particular role leadership plays in initiating organisational change processes</td>
<td>On-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5: Leadership Interventions</td>
<td>Participants ‘put into practice’ what they have learned about change strategies by undertaking an organisational intervention, either in a consulting team or by coaching a leader in an organisation.</td>
<td>Experiential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 6: Contemporary Leadership Debates</td>
<td>Introduces contemporary debates within the leadership studies fields, such as gender and leadership, leadership in a global context, and considering leadership from different cultural perspectives</td>
<td>On-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 7: Rediscovering Leadership</td>
<td>Prepares participants for undertaking their Dissertation by introducing the philosophy of social science research and a range of research methods</td>
<td>On-line</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diagram 1

Participants are awarded the Masters degree on completion of a dissertation focusing on a topic of their choice.

Structures and Systems

During each week of a seven-week phase, participants download and engage with a variety of course materials including readings, sound and video recordings, questionnaires and inventories. Text-based materials include web-links to more detailed articles which often pose contrasting viewpoints on a given topic area.

At the beginning of the programme, participants are each assigned a personal coach. Coaches and participants communicate through weekly Learning Log entries which invite participants to reflect on course materials and make relevant linkages to their own experience and organisation. Coaches
comment on these reflective writings, offering further challenges or questions. Although within each week of the study phase participants can work to their own pace, Learning Log entries are ‘due’ at the end of the week and coaches respond to them during the following week. This schedule provides both flexibility and a firm structure through which participants navigate the programme.

A further feature of the programme is the on-line ‘Discussion Forum’, a standard ‘bulletin-board’ feature of WebCT which enables students to exchange views with their peers about course materials or any other aspect that is relevant to them. As mentioned previously, in addition to the on-line aspect of the programme, participants can elect to attend one or two-day workshops which occur at least once during each phase. These workshops provide students with the opportunity to meet and discuss issues that have arisen during a phase’s work with one another and a facilitating coach. Interestingly, our study revealed that the workshops are not experienced as contributing significantly to participants’ learning, a finding which echoes other research which discovered a surprising level of dissatisfaction with face-to-face briefings among students undertaking primarily on-line based courses (Arbaugh 2005).

Researching the Masters

In describing the research process, it is important to note that all of the authors have been involved with the Masters in Leadership Studies by E-learning in some regard, either by way of design, tutoring, or formal evaluation. The programme was launched in the autumn of 2003. At the time of conducting this
research (at the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006), one of the authors had held the role of Programme Director for approximately two years, while another had been significantly involved in its original design. A third had served as an online coach since the programme’s inception. At this early stage, only one of the authors was unaffiliated with the programme, and this person’s involvement was prompted by a desire to incorporate an outsider’s perspective in the research.

As the second cohort of students approached its final phases in the autumn of 2005, the Programme Director, together with programme coaches, decided to investigate in more depth the process participants experienced. Such a formal evaluation, we believed, would provide insights beyond that which could be gleaned from the ‘evaluation reports’ completed by participants at the end of each programme phase. All of the participants from the first two cohorts were invited to contribute to the study. Just under half were able to take part in the hour-long, in-depth interviews (eight in total). The interviews with the participants focused on three areas:

- What did programme participants believe they had learned as a result of the Masters?
- To what aspects of the programme did they attribute that learning?
- Could programme participants make linkages between aspects of the programme and their leadership performance in their organisations?

All four of the programme’s on-line coaches, as well as the programme’s manager, were also interviewed to gain insight into how their intentions were
translated into participant experiences. The interviews with coaches focused on the following key areas:

- What did coaches see as the aim of their coaching relationship with course participants?
- Were coaches conscious of any models and/or frameworks which informed how they engaged with their coachees?
- How did coaches make judgments about the effectiveness of their coaching engagement?

The transcripts from interviews with course participants, the on-line coaches, and the programme’s manager were supplemented by analysis of all sixteen of the students’ learning log journals as well as assessed essays, in an effort to build a rich picture of programme participants’ experiences. These qualitative data were then subjected to content analysis within a narrative studies tradition (Czarniawska 1997a, 1997b, 2001) and key themes identified.

Despite our direct involvement in the programme, we have strived to be transparent and self-critical in our assessment and to give a ‘warts and all’ representation of our learning and teaching experiences. Each of us is committed to a mode of research which evidences ‘critical subjectivity’ (Reason and Rowan 1981) and ‘reflexivity’, or the ‘self-critical consideration of one’s own assumptions and consistent consideration of alternative interpretative lines’ (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 112-113; see for example Case 2003 and Ladkin 2005). We are all also committed to investigating questions of pedagogy, and to developing a critical understanding of the ways and the extent to which
educational programmes and interventions contribute to the development of leadership practice. Throughout the research process and the data analysis, and through the writing of various drafts of this paper, we have reflected, both individually and collectively, on the ways in which we frame and make sense of our pedagogical practices in relation to this programme. In doing so, we have sought to challenge and deepen our understanding of what is enabled (and simultaneously, what is constrained) through such an approach to leadership development.

Of course, the perspective we offer here is necessarily partial and limited, as is the case with every social science perspective (see for example Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Undoubtedly, it would be folly to generalise conclusions on the basis of such a small sample. However, we present our findings here because the strong themes we have detected offer interesting challenges to conventional thinking about how leaders learn through programmed educational interventions.

**Participant Experiences of Key Learning Processes**

The next part of the paper examines two aspects of the programme which were reported as being central to participants’ experience:

- The on-line delivery mode which enabled course content to be delivered close to where it could be applied;
- The course structure, including the design and delivery of the course materials.
**The Role of Web-based Delivery**

Our study showed that the web-based delivery mechanism itself enabled participants to apply ideas and theories directly within their workplaces, creating a learning experience which was more situated and context-based than could be afforded by off-site programmes. For instance, they reported:

'It's not like 'doing a course', where you learn some stuff and then forget most of it and every once in awhile you think about it when you’re back in the office but it usually doesn’t fit. With the MA, it's always around, and because I’m encountering new ideas every week, it’s constantly prompting me to think about what's going on in my workplace differently.'

'I'm not just studying leadership, I’m doing it. Issues about leadership effectiveness seem to be on my mind much of time - It crops up all over the place… while driving in my car, when I'm at home after supper, and so on.'

'Because of this alignment between my role and the area of study, I can use lots of programme ideas directly at work where there are many ready opportunities to try things out and get feedback. And because the material is coming to me, where I work, I don’t have to wait until I’m back to try things out. I usually forget so much of the stuff I learn on courses.'
These responses seem to challenge a strand of literature which is sceptical about the potential for on-line technology to equal or surpass the educative outcomes offered by face-to-face teaching and learning relationships (Arbaugh and Stelzer 2003, Brower 2003, Easton 2003). In contrast to these studies, our students reported that the on-line delivery mechanism itself facilitated their ability to test out ideas very soon after encountering them, thus enabling them to ground theoretical knowledge in the place where it could be put into practice very readily, as illustrated by the following quote:

‘I was able to implement the development plan I did in Phase 2 right away…and set up a special 360 degree feedback process with my staff.’

Batteau et al (2006) have coined the term ‘close learning’ to describe the kind of process whereby students may be ‘distant’ from the university, the programme tutors and even each other, but ‘close’ to where they actually implement and experiment with new ideas. They write:

‘We refer to this design as ‘close learning’ because it is close in time and place to where the work gets done, the participants’ leadership practice…close learning is concerned with knowledge that exists primarily in the mind-body relationships of the learner...’ (8)

Our research reveals that programme participants found the on-line environment key in enabling this kind of ‘close’ or ‘situated’ learning. Paradoxically, the
apparent ‘distance’ between participant and university, allows for ‘closeness’ between participant and work context.

In this way, our participants indicated that the web-based aspect of the course itself enabled the kind of situated learning vital for a context-dependent practice such as leadership. Furthermore, whereas there are studies evaluating web-based programmes which simulate ‘authentic’ tasks to which learning might be applied (see, for instance, Oliver and Omari’s 2001 study of undergraduates enrolled on a distance-learning problem-solving course). in this programme the problems to which participants apply their learning are not simulated. Rather, they are real, fuzzy and open-ended, located in lived organisational contexts. This immediacy is only possible because of the on-line delivery mechanism. Reflecting on this aspect of the programme, one coach commented:

‘What we are trying to achieve with ‘close learning’ is to facilitate relevant learning/development close to the situation of action – so the ‘transfer gap’ between ‘learning/applying’ is minimised. In the optimum position, as in improvisation where ‘composing/playing’ becomes simultaneous, this gap is eliminated. By definition this involves encouraging students in attempting to use new ideas to inform their behaviour-in-context i.e. in action, and then to learn something about themselves and effective practice from these experiences – both in the now and later in reflection and questioning with their online coach and colleagues.’
We will explore in more depth the link this particular coach is making between his pedagogical intent and action-learning oriented educational strategies later in the paper. First however, we consider the second distinctive feature of the on-line programme which contributed to participants’ experience in ways we did not expect.

The Role of Curriculum Structure and Delivery

The means by which programme participants engage with the MA seems to belie a transmission mode of learning, in that the programme’s content is packaged and delivered in pre-written, ‘chunks’. However, contrary to what we expected, programme participants reported that the routine of receiving weekly ‘packages’ of material to read and respond to served in itself to demonstrate the contingent nature of ‘truth’ within the leadership field and similarly encouraged their critical engagement. One participant reported:

‘Every week there was a new idea, a new theory, and I started getting it—that there really IS no one right answer here. I have to figure out what works for myself.’

As another explained:

‘Because of the structure of the course, I could never linger too long with one idea—every week there was something new to be getting on with. At first I felt very uneasy with this—it was like I could never learn something ‘properly’. But then I realised maybe that was part of the point—there
never is ‘one’ solution—the course structure made me have to keep moving on...

Interestingly, although the on-line environment necessitates knowledge being delivered in a pre-determined format, the sheer volume of material offered, as well as the weekly download of materials, meant that participants had to become more self-reliant learners, as indicated by the following responses:

‘Although it can seem like a real grind, about half way through the second phase I realised it was up to me how I engaged with the work. Because I could never linger too long with one topic, I found I had to be really alert to the ideas that I could apply—the structure keeps me on my toes.’

‘The sheer volume of reading we were asked to do in Phase 2 led to a mini rebellion. We were surprised to be told that it was up to us to decide what was important – and that we should become critically engaged!’

‘At first this [not being able to keep up with all of the reading] caused me a lot of worry, but soon I discovered that the weekly rhythm of the thing actually helped me cope.’

What we found interesting about the way participants experienced the ‘overload’ of course materials, was that it seemed to assist the development of critical engagement as well as helping them become more self-reliant learners.
The weekly ‘grind’, as many course participants referred to it, seems to serve an important role in containing and supporting their learning experience over the extended seven-week period of each phase.

A third aspect of the programme which is not entirely dependent on the on-line technology, but which did influence participants’ experience was their relationship with their on-line coach. In particular, the way in which coaches enacted their roles seemed to be pivotal to participants’ learning experiences. We explore this relationship in more depth in the following section.

*I The Role of the Personal Coach*

Coaching is increasingly recognised as a key leadership development intervention. Writers such as Goleman et al (2002) note the particular role it plays in aiding the development of reflexivity, in that it can provide a safe space in which leaders or managers can explore their motivations and assumptions as well as consider options for action. Within the MA programme, coaches combine academic tutoring with developmental coaching. The way in which coaches strike a balance between these two orientations played a significant role in participants’ experience. In particular, participants mentioned how coaches encouraged them not to accept theoretical ideas, but to test them out against their own experience. For instance, students commented:

‘I feel the discussions with my coach help me validate my own thoughts and ways of self expression…and orient me towards a more personal development journey, [helping me to] figure out how I can apply the ideas in my working practice.’
‘The learning logs and essays are opportunities for me to demonstrate my own understanding of ideas and how I’m trying to implement them at work. My coach continually reminds me that the programme is about me and not just about the content of papers and so on.’

‘The feedback from my coach [reminds me that] ‘I don’t have to buy into these theories’ I need to make sense of them for myself and the way I can use them in practice.’

Similarly, coaches talked about their engagement with students in ways that reflect assumptions about the contingent nature of knowledge creation. For instance, when asked to speak about the assumptions which informed his mode of engagement with his students, one coach replied:

‘One of my roles is to continually challenge any easy acceptance of ideas and theories the students are reading about. When I see this happening I often recommend they read up on a contrary theory. I also encourage them all the time to value their own experience and the personal theories they’re using.’

Another reflected on his aim of helping his students to think about the role of leadership within the larger frame of their lives, as indicated by the quote below:
'I’m trying to adopt a more existential, philosophical approach rather than a hard-nosed, diagnostic, ‘this is the answer’…What I mean by existential is: what does it mean to you to be a leader? What might the consequences be in terms of what does it do to you when people do what you suggest, or propose, or tell them to do; where does it leave you when they don’t do that?’

Consistently coaches talked about their assumptions in taking up their role in terms of ‘practical application of theoretical knowledge’, ‘the interplay of theory informing practice, and practice informing theory’, and knowledge being ‘co-constructed, something that happens in the doing of it’, especially for a situated practice such as leadership.

What is interesting about these responses from the point of view of current research is that although the literature indicates that such a constructivist view is a preferred way of operating with adult learners, educators are not always able to bring this mode of engagement to their role. For instance, Roberts (2003) argues that instructors working within on-line environments should preferably enact a constructivist pedagogy, rather than one grounded in ‘transmission’-based assumptions, in order to enable learners to gain maximum benefit from ICT-based programmes. However, her study (based, admittedly, on an undergraduate population and undergraduate lecturers) indicates the prevalence of a ‘transmission’ view of education being enacted by the instructors she surveys. She goes on to suggest that the underlying assumptions of instructors
involved with on-line programmes can sabotage the more constructivist opportunities afforded by this delivery mode.

In comparison to her study, ours indicates that MA coaches seemed to purposefully apply a more constructivist, action-learning approach to their interaction with students. Reflecting on why this might be the case, we notice that although all of the coaches who work on the programme are academically qualified either to Masters or PhD level, none of them are actually trained as ‘teachers’. Additionally, all of them operate as management consultants or executive coaches, and are therefore immersed in the practice arena as well as being interested in theoretical perspectives and frameworks. The orientation they bring to facilitating reflection and the development of personal insight with consulting clients seems to transfer itself to the on-line arena. This finding reflects the importance of engaging coaches who already hold a predisposition to working in ways which foster co-created learning experiences, especially given the outcomes we are hoping to achieve through the programme.

An aspect of how the inherent properties of on-line technology can further support a more constructivist approach to the coaching relationship is reflected in how both students and coaches reported they worked with each other’s written comments. Because of the asynchronous nature of student and coach exchanges, both parties reported that they were able to read what the other had written, mull it over, and then respond to it in a reflective and thoughtful way. This advantage of asynchronous communication afforded by ICT-based programmes is supported in other studies (Garrison and Anderson, 2003,
Lipponen 2001) and is another indication of the distinctiveness of working in an online environment and the benefits it affords participants in developing their reflexive capacity in a way that is different from other face to face types of coaching.

The role the Learning Log plays vis-à-vis the essays students write at the completion of each phase offers a further aid to reflection inherent within our on-line programme. Through their Learning Log exchanges participants create a confidential artefact to which they can refer later. In fact, in order to fulfil the requirements of each phase’s final essay, participants must cite Learning Log entries to support any claims they make about insights gained or learning they have implemented. Our study supports the work of Garrison and Anderson (2003) who suggest that the creation of such ‘threads of discussion’ fosters a further cycle of reflection and integration which is significantly enabled through the on-line, written, nature of the programme.

Reflections on Our Findings

The on-line delivery mechanism of the MA in Leadership Studies would seem to preclude anything but a ‘transmission’ mode of learning whereby knowledge is ‘delivered’ through weekly pre-packaged materials and ‘learned’ by students. However participants’ experience indicates that learning occurred for them in an emergent manner which was responsive to their own context. The importance of situatedness in enabling learning through active testing-out in actual contexts resembles so-called ‘action’ strategies that have been used with
some success in the development arena. In order to develop a deeper understanding of how action informs the learning processes afforded participants on the MA, it might be helpful to examine action learning and its pedagogical assumptions in greater depth. For instance, Raelin (1999) offers a useful summary of six main approaches in this area as well as a set of criteria by which to compare and contrast these. He writes:

‘The common basis for most of the strategies is that knowledge is to be produced in service of, and in the midst of, action (Peters and Robinson, 1984). Their emphasis is on the interplay between enactment and feedback in real time with the purpose of developing more valid social knowledge, more effective social action, and greater alignment among self-knowledge, action, and knowledge-of-other’.

(Raelin, 1999, p 117)

He identifies further similarities between these approaches as being ‘…inherently participatory’ with a ‘…considerable focus on re-education and reflection…’, ‘…interested in conceptualizing their experiences in a way that is meaningful and valuable to the members of their research community…’ and taking a direct interest in the ‘…role of context and feelings in the inquiry process itself.’(p. 117)

Though students are studying for a higher degree on this programme, our approach in all other respects is aligned with these principles: the participation aspect does tend to be mainly between student and coach, but there is significant emphasis on reflection and changing thinking patterns, directing attention to
matters of context and emotion, and, through the dissertation process, seeking to
generate new knowledge for the practitioner community.

We single out two of the six strategies offered by Raelin (1999), action
learning and developmental action inquiry, as perhaps offering the closest
comparators to the approach offered by the Masters:

- Regarding similarities to ‘action learning’ (Marsick and O’Neill, 1999), we
  identify the attention to problem ‘framing’ (as well as problem ‘solving’), the
  emphasis on learning from experience/tacit knowledge, and the focus on
  ‘cycles’ of framing/action/reflection/re-framing as being important parts of
  the learning process.

- In relation to ‘developmental action inquiry’ (Torbert, 1999) we select the
  role played by working through multiple ‘levels’ or territories of
  experience. This might include engaging with Torbert’s
  ‘outcome/behaviour/strategy/intention’ framework, Marshall’s (1999)
  suggestion that development requires noticing both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ arcs
  of attention, or Rudolph et al’s (2001) Learning Pathways Grid, which
  seeks to identify incongruities between intention and practice.

From the general characteristics identified by Raelin mentioned above, and
these kinds of connections, there does appear to be some justification for
claiming that the Masters’, despite its location in a higher degree programme of
leadership ‘studies’, is at heart an ‘action’ strategy, meeting to a large extent the
criteria identified in the Raelin quote. However there are also quite marked differences to the strategies he identifies which should be noted as they are likely to alter the learning pedagogy and hence the focus and nature of the learning that does take place.

For instance, the ‘communication process’ used in the Masters programme is rather different:

- In action learning, communication takes place primarily in face-to-face verbal interactions in the here and now of group meetings. In contrast communication in the MA is primarily written, asynchronous, and flows in the ‘virtual channel’ of the web based system between a coach and programme participant;

- The potential for real time social construction of everyday meaning (Gergen, 1999), face-to-face with a group of colleagues in the action learning set, is replaced by the potential for a slower paced more reflective and creative process of cycles of meaning making over a longer period - supported by the more pointed, demanding and varied questioning and/or encouragement from the online coach - who is also always there, but ‘in the background’;

- This ongoing reflection process is further stimulated by an ever-present flow of challenging academic readings offering models, theories, and cases, an associated regime of thinking/reflecting exercises, the regular writing of learning logs, and responding to coach feedback;
In this more 'spacious' process, students have the opportunity to explore and contrast the value of learning through the parallel processes of writing/coach critique and experiences at work. They also seem to have more creative discretion to decide what particular meanings to value most in the face of their own experiences in the context of their work. In this sense, and despite the HE ‘teaching’ context, mature students seem to have a greater possibility of accessing and realising the value of their own ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polanyi, 1958) as it gets challenged/supported by the study process;

Though it is likely that in the early days of a new student cohort, the direction of the learning process will tend to flow from theory (I read this idea…) to practice (I then tried the technique out…), many students soon begin to reverse this process, and, as in some forms of action research, ‘pull in’ theory/models from what’s on offer, to help them with the problems they are facing at work (Winter, 1989);

Despite these significant differences, and despite its location in a university, the web-based Masters appears to foster an action oriented pedagogy indicative of constructivist learning similar to other more obviously action-oriented methods. We turn now to consider the further questions which our study raises.

Areas for Future Research

A number of issues arise from our study which are ripe for further research and inquiry. We assume that even though the MA seems to offer important benefits, its method of delivery will not suit every learner. Further research could
usefully be conducted about the learning profiles of participants who have found the programme most beneficial, compared with the profiles of those who have not found it as productive an experience.

Identifying the factors which contribute to a positive experience of the masters would be helpful in advising students about their suitability for the course. For instance, we know that the interaction between programme participants and their coach through writing favours those with a facility in expressing themselves through written text. Are there ways in which this could be compensated for? Would telephone coaching suit some participants better, or would the benefits of time for reflection be lost in such an immediate encounter? Are there steps we could take to make the programme even more interactive, and would that be of benefit to participants?

A further question raised by this study pertains to how the best ‘fit’ between a course participant and their coach might be achieved. For those engaged in this study, the matching of students to coaches had been done in a fairly informal way, based on the interest or experience coaches had of participants’ industry sectors. Given the importance of this relationship, perhaps examining the attributes of the most productive coaching relationships would be a helpful further line of inquiry.

Another question about the coaching relationship worth exploring is the extent to which the style coaches take in their interaction provides a role-model for a critically engaged, reflective mode of leadership. Participants in our study did not comment about this aspect of the coaching relationship, but it would not
be surprising if modelling did play a part in participants’ development through the programme.

One of the interesting results of our study is the relative unimportance participants saw the Discussion Forum playing to their overall learning experience. Given the number of studies which focus on web-based bulletin boards or discussion forums as potent tools for fostering collaborative learning, (Brower 2003, Palloff and Pratt 1999) this is perhaps a strange finding which warrants further investigation.

The literature also suggests there could well be gender differences between how women and men approach learning through on-line delivery programmes (Arbaugh 2000). Our present study is too small to draw any conclusion about how students of different genders engage with the programme, however this again would be a fruitful area to pursue further. Likewise, as the MA is delivered in a larger variety of cultural contexts, it will be important to monitor how those of different cultural backgrounds experience and learn from the programme.

To Conclude

Three apparent paradoxes present themselves as we consider this programme and the way participants experience it. The first is that of ‘distance’ versus ‘closeness’. On the Masters, participants are indeed ‘distant’ from their tutors and the university, as well as being geographically distant from co-participants. However, they are ‘close’ to the context in which the learning can be put into practice, tested out, and actually embodied. Learning occurs not just
through the transmission of key ideas, but through constructivist processes of interaction between theory and theory testing in relevant contexts. Whereas many leadership development interventions suffer from ‘transfer of training’ difficulties (Belling et al 2004), our small-scale study indicates that participants use their organisations as the ‘classrooms’ for experimenting with the ideas they encounter. Implementation occurs in a situated, rather than hypothetical manner.

The programme’s outward appearance as being based on assumptions around ‘learning as transmission’ gives rise to the second apparent paradox. Although the MA comprises ‘knowledge’ delivered in weekly ‘chunks’, through the challenges presented by coaches, and participants’ own experimentation with ideas, learning is experienced as emergent and ‘knowledge’ experienced as contingent.

The third paradox our study highlights is the interplay between rigidity and flexibility. Many students are attracted to the programme in the first instance because of the flexibility on-line learning offers. However, the weekly demands of engaging with materials, reflecting and commenting on them produces a fairly rigid ‘containing structure’ which supports participants’ learning. Furthermore, the routine afforded by the on-line mechanism was seen to support the development of self-reliance and critical engagement for our study’s respondents.

In these ways, our research produced findings we were not quite expecting. However, they seem to indicate pedagogical possibilities for on-line programmes which because of their very mode of delivery offer substantial benefits to participants of leadership development programmes.
REFERENCES


Centre for Leadership Studies Working Paper Series, University of Exeter.
Organisations Can Improve Their Support for Management Learning and


Penguin.

study of learning in a web-based discussion.’ Instructional Science 31:
65-86.

OBHR course: Creating an on-line learning community’, Academy of

Press.


and S. Clegg (eds) Debating Organization: Point-Counterpoint in

develop the next generation, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.


