



The nature of leadership

Technologies of Leadership

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Research Summaries Notices

Research Summaries

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Centre for Excellence in Leadership

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Introduction

As educational institutions in the United Kingdom embrace new managerial and business approaches, they have simultaneously adopted a range of new technologies. This research summary reports on how information and communication technologies (ICT) are used to support aspects of educational leadership.

This paper explores two particular aspects:

1. How such technologies are utilized to support decision-making and the practical difficulties of obtaining, manipulating and representing data.
2. How such data is turned into credible and verifiable accounts of everyday practice and organizational performance for the benefit of a range of stakeholders.

Surprisingly, the everyday usage of ICT in the accomplishment of work is curiously absent from most studies of organizational settings. Our interest lies in understanding how technology is used to facilitate leadership work in the learning and skills sector. In the context of educational leadership, the 'nuts and bolts' of ICT include email, electronic diaries, MIS, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint. It is how these seemingly mundane technologies are integrated into, and perhaps shape, leadership work that we are seeking to explore. For example, Principals participating in our study told us:

"... we have too much detailed information on our MIS (Management Information System) – we don't always pick out the important bits" ... "all you do with stats is identify more stats you want to look at " ... "the quality of discussion has declined to figures and numbers – no vision ..."

"We have digital photos taken for our ID passes and they're also loaded into our intranet telephone directory so that when you call up someone's number onto the screen you get a photo of them as well. They also appear on the induction notes you get from, for example, HR, telling you who does what."

With information systems appearing to be a key organisational tool our concern is to explore their contribution to various forms of leadership work.

Audit Culture as a Context for Leadership

The overflow of more general managerial philosophies into the education sector in recent years has included the need to demonstrate competence, compliance and effectiveness to a variety of audiences. Our study would suggest that this need for visible competence is now a dominant theme in FE, driven by external inspection, funding and governance mechanisms as well as the service culture expectations of users and other stakeholders. Such 'audit cultures' (Strathern) are increasingly common in both public institutions and private enterprise, reflecting the need to perform a new kind of accountability based around the twin goals of economic efficiency and good practice. The concept of the audit, previously constrained within financial applications, has now expanded to become a ubiquitous element of daily life, with the learning and skills sector being no exception. The result is a raft of 'technologies of accountability'. So, for example, a post-Ofsted college newsletter proclaimed:

"Ofsted inspectors identified: outstanding leadership and management; overall, students achieving GCE grades higher than those predicted by their GCSE results; very good specialist resources; thorough monitoring of student progress; excellent advice and guidance; excellent attendance and punctuality; highly effective promotion of a multicultural ethos; and safe and secure environment."

With only one of these identified achievements relating to 'first order' outcomes – i.e. student results – this supports the argument that audit is often about the *control of control*. Being seen to be in control is at least as important as actually having control.

Technology also serves to shape the manner in which leadership work is delivered. Certain technologies, with their particular capabilities and limitations, can be seen to determine the format of what is made visible and what is accepted as evidence. For example, lesson observation forms and formats are computer generated; funding criteria are linked to the categories of learner for which data can be gathered, and visible proxies (e.g. schemes of work and lesson plans) are substituted for qualitative assessments of the standard and relevance of curriculum provision. In this sense, users of technology can be seen as valuing what can be measured rather than measuring what should be valued.

Technologies of Accountability and Calculation Work

At the heart of these 'technologies of accountability', or 'technologies of leadership', is the calculation work undertaken in making leadership work visible to a range of audiences. It is through this performance that organizational information and accounts of everyday practice are rendered visible. Much of what counts as everyday leadership work within UK FE colleges appears to consist of producing, sharing and manipulating accounts of events, producing a number of subtly different versions designed to accomplish different work or to satisfy different audiences. These versions of events are constructed to conform to the new accountabilities of audit. At the same time, they can also serve as forms of organizational communication and accountability that allow other kinds of 'ordinary' work to be done within the college. For example, the components of a successful Ofsted inspection may be recycled as the justification for a Beacon Status/premium funding application. The same material might also be used as an indication of quality provision to entice students to apply to the college, an opportunity for the public praise of staff and as the motivational basis for exhortations to further achievement. In each case, the mode of delivery and the specific choice of content will serve to construct a version or account suited to the leadership work it is required to perform.

In focusing on the complexities involved in the use of ICT in the provision of management information, our interest is on documenting the actual work that principals do. Meeting the practical difficulties of determining which figures are required for which purpose and knowing how to manipulate and present them. The leadership work here consists in the selection and calculation through which activities on the ground, as understood through the management information collected concerning them, are made to visibly fit the requirements imposed upon the organization by external agencies such as Ofsted. As one Principal told us:

“...the data’s clean, but in terms of can you use it, is it good enough to use, would you rest your life on it today? – that’s more tricky ... it’s so complex, in a way you have to manage that ambiguity ... I know how many students I need to achieve overall at the college ... but that’s probably got no relationship to enrolments because, you know, somebody can be enrolled on 8 things, or you can break the course up into four.”

The leadership work entailed in constructing the data available to tell a story which supports organizational objectives, is further illustrated by the following fieldnote extract:

“Fieldwork extract: *Principal is finalising update paper for LSC (re: progress against strategic targets) ‘thinking on screen and playing around with content’... Has found a way of using the numbers re: student recruitment and retention selectively to strengthen their case for premium funding. Needs to disguise the fact that they are 31 down overall. Can say that 16-18 has grown in each of the last three years and numbers here are only 13 off target. The biggest shortfall was in 19+ which is counted in a different category..”*

Here, the Principal is observed selecting and manipulating management data to consider how best to present important information to their funding body, the UK Learning and Skills Council or LSC. The existence of various categories within which colleges can calculate recruitment, retention and results, and the differing funding formulae provided by official bodies, mask the way in which reasoning is shaped by contingencies and the ‘skill’ that goes with recognising, identifying and addressing such contingencies. These circumstances influence how the ‘formula’ is applied in specific cases, what determines the extent or limitations of its applicability, and the requirements for making any formula ‘work’ and, perhaps more importantly, be seen to work.

Similar processes and activities were observed to underpin various areas of decision-making through which the successes and failures of educational work were benchmarked and made available for calculation and comparison. For example, the following fieldwork extract is taken from an English teaching moderation meeting, in which those involved in lesson observations for English teachers meet to discuss their qualitative observation reports and allocate quantitative grades for each individual across the department:

“Fieldnote extract: Participants read each other’s observation notes; reach a consensus on grades to be allocated; check evidence in reports support grades; moderate across reports for whole department. Take learning outcomes very seriously in ‘scoring’ performance, but also consider ability of students to start with. Sue (VP-Curriculum – previously taught English) provided in-depth, subject-specific questions to observers without a background in English to clarify distinctions between different grades.”

The process undertaken by those involved in moderating observation grades can be seen to involve a number of activities designed to delineate and calibrate the attributes of successful English teaching in a visible, rational, accountable way. Thus transforming the activities of people into numbers that can be measured, audited, and shared. The use of detailed, context specific criteria from the VP-Curriculum, the comparison across teaching methods, course content, student groups, etc, all serve to demonstrate the calculability of the resultant grades. In the course of the meeting a situated framework of benchmarks was constructed by the participants. The application of the framework was embedded in the shared meanings and understandings negotiated in the course of the discussions, in relation to the people and circumstances under discussion. It was through the local accomplishment of this work, that the resultant grades were accepted as being fair, appropriate and rationally arrived at.

This small observational study clearly demonstrates that leadership decisions, despite the proliferation of technology and the proliferation of “hard” data, are the products of socially organized accounting work and as such are ‘accountable’. The calculations and documents on which decisions are based are available as objects of debate and re-interpretation. Decisions are effectively ‘displays’ of the methods used to produce them - and in these circumstances the principal must keep in mind exactly what others might make of his or her interpretation of the information. Thus the documents produced and the accounts that underpin them also represent ‘gambits of compliance’. The process through which decisions are made can be seen as “extending to the rule the respect of compliance, while finding in the rule the means for doing whatever needs to be done.” (Bittner, 1965:273) As one Principal said:

“...you play the game, you see, y’know ... You see, theoretically what happens is you should put all the figures in and out the end pops what level of support you need. But the reality is you never bloody win! We were told actually if we try to get a thirty-five percent grant that we would never get it, so what we did was we made the figures show that we could just do it on thirty-five, but it is a very tough squeeze. We first of all asked for fifty percent...”

In this way, the work of principals and senior managers when they engage in decision-making and analysis of management information involves a continuous (and often ingenious) struggle with the technology and the data. In the process, information is not so much ‘uncovered’ or ‘given’ as continuously reconstructed. The principals and senior managers in our study appear to view the construction of such accounts, and the manipulative role they themselves play in the application of the management information available, as an integral part of the leadership work required to achieve organizational goals.

Conclusion - 'Control Through Communication'

The rise of an emerging managerial philosophy of efficiency, system, and process is evident in the FE sector, and is reflected in the forms of internal communication that serve as mechanisms for managerial coordination and control. These have developed as a product not only of changing organisational needs but of the technologies available to support them. Forms of organizational communication can thus be organized into specific and recognisable 'genres' such as letters, memorandums, meetings, agendas, proposals etc. These technologies as used by principals and senior managers within colleges not only to account for, but also to promote and disseminate, specific leadership visions and objectives..

"Our Quality Team met in December and produced an action plan to build upon our existing high standards. By any benchmark, our college has state of the art facilities and excellent accommodation. Its support for students is outstanding. Nevertheless, we realise we need to work hard to maintain the high standards and to respond to emerging problems and 'hotspots'."

"Lollipop ladies Lillian and Leslie have been busy brushing up their computer skills at the local Learning Centre. Between seeing children safely across the road, the crossing patrol ladies have been visiting the centre on - street. The ladies visit the centre twice a week between 11am and 1pm which fits around their job. They have already completed some qualifications."

The first example reflects the use of internal bulletins to instil values through text, both reinforcing those assumed to exist and exhorting staff to further improvement. The second demonstrates the chatty, approachable style of an external newsletter produced by an open access college seeking to adapt its written style to that of its target audience.

Our study showed principals and their senior management teams using the medium of technology to make their activities visible to each other (and to staff in general) and to receive and incorporate the contributions of others within the group in the construction of accounts and the accomplishment of shared activities. The following fieldnote extract relates to a Powerpoint presentation for a staff briefing, which had been drafted by the Principal and circulated to his two Vice Principals for the incorporation of their sections:

“Fieldnote extract: *Principal asks VPs to come into his office to review this evening’s presentation on screen. VP1 corrects the grammar and spelling and questions the content, based on the earlier version she had printed out and annotated. Much humour between the three of them when the Principal loses the formatting, and when VP1’s suggested amendments result in her assuming a bigger role in the actual presentation. VPs leave Principal to do the final tweaks, sort out slide transitions, and copy to Memory Stick for transportation to the briefing.”*

As this example illustrates, there is an integrated weaving of social interaction and technological mechanisms through which the three people involved in preparing the presentation make visible and accountable their contributions in order to produce a coherent whole.

We suggest that leadership in education consists of complex, but ultimately mundane and ordinary, practices. The practical accomplishment of educational leadership work is crucially supported by the utilisation of an array of technologies. Traditionally leadership and technology have remained separate fields of study and yet, as this paper has demonstrated, their consideration in combination has much to contribute to an understanding of the social organization of educational leadership. Our discussion illustrates the ways in which leadership work and technology are inextricably linked in the doing of the everyday calculation and accountability work which leadership entails, and how specific technologies such as ICT play a central role in its practical accomplishment.

References

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List of Research summaries

A central theme in our research has been the role of storytelling in daily leadership work. Leaders tell stories to followers, and followers tell stories to and about leaders. Such stories communicate ideas, share knowledge, vent frustrations and deal with conflict. In a sector where learning from experience is more common than formal training, the documenting and analysis of storytelling is an important way for us to better understand the daily challenges facing educational leaders. We therefore decided to present the initial findings from our research in the format of short stories. Listed below are the other titles in this series:

SHORT STORIES OF LEADERSHIP FROM THE FE SECTOR

- 1 Explicating Leadership
- 2 Storytelling and Leadership
- 3 Leadership as Mundane Work
- 4 Technologies of Leadership
- 5 Meetings and Leadership
- 6 Leadership and Emotional Labour
- 7 Bureaucracy and Leadership
- 8 Leadership and Audit Cultures
- 9 Patterns of Leadership
- 10 Game Playing and Leadership Development
- 11 Understanding the Success and Failure of Leadership
- 12 The Language of Leadership

If you have found this short paper interesting, please have a look at the longer version, or other papers on our project website:

<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/computing/research/cseg/projects/explicating>

Further information and contact details

This project is investigating the nature of leadership and the everyday challenges of leading. Our project focuses on what it is that educational leaders really do, and document in detail the everyday practices of leadership in the learning and skills sector. Our understanding of the practical accomplishment of leadership is achieved through shadowing and studying education leaders from various institutions over long periods. The research will be central to revealing the nature of leadership, relations between leaders and the led, risk-taking and entrepreneurship. Our research began in November 2003 and a significant amount of fieldwork has been carried out in colleges from different geographical areas. Four colleges have been chosen for more detailed long-term study.

Our findings show that leadership in the learning and skills sector is less about the work of a few talented individuals and more about the successful organization of a complex network of distributed leadership practices involving staff from across the organization. Our research clearly shows that leadership is neither mystical nor heroic, but consists of relentless attention to relatively mundane tasks and much of leadership is management. Leadership depends on doing the 'grunt work' before any form of vision kicks in. In turn, improving the experience and culture of a college comes through attention to everyday mundane details. Our research evidence also shows the importance of technology (including management information systems and email) in their work, for example, in providing new ways of presenting data about colleges. The importance of the 'audit culture' on everyday leadership work is also evident in our research. This raises issues of how a concentration on external audits can lead to a neglect of more broad educational matters. We will be reporting the final results of the research to the DfES in March 2006. In the meantime we would be very pleased to receive any comments or suggestions in relation to the initial findings or any aspect you think is relevant to the research. All responses will be treated in the strictest confidence.

If you would like more information about the 'Explicating Leadership' research project please contact:

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