

A leadership enrichment program for Research Higher Degree Students: an experiential learning approach to leadership training.

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Abstract

Enrichment programs for Research Higher Degree (RHD) students are an endeavour undertaken by all Australian Universities. Most of these enrichment programs have in the main been centred on the generic skills required to expedite the research program, for example software skills, information gathering and collating skills, language development programs and seminars on various methodologies. There are some examples where enrichment programs have focused on leadership. These programs often assume not only that leadership can be taught, but also that a traditional seminar/lecture approaches to such a curriculum is a practical, efficient and effective approach to leadership education. This paper questions these assumptions by arguing for a more experientially-based approach to leadership education at the RHD level. This approach has demanded a consideration of pedagogical approaches outside, or peripheral, to the traditional approaches of RHD training. A specific example of a leadership program that incorporates experiential learning is presented. The paper delineates a brief overview of experiential approaches to education, followed by a more specific review of the potential role these approaches can play in leadership education.

Introduction

An analysis of Australian universities websites indicates that enrichment programs for Research Higher Degree (RHD) students are currently well entrenched. While a few of these websites do not specify what this training may incorporate, most have a detailed site that shows programs devoted to enhancing research skills (see for instance University of Melbourne, University of Adelaide, University of Technology Sydney). What these programs have in common is a centrally organised and centrally run series of lectures and workshops that cover a range of generic research skills which include software skills, information gathering and collating skills, language development programs and seminars on various methodologies. What most of these do not include are aspects of Research Training that may be considered career advancement skills such as leadership development.

This paper presents a specific example of a leadership program at the RHD level that is grounded in an experiential education approach to learning. The program called LEAD (Leadership and Entrepreneurial Development) from Swinburne University of Technology was implemented to develop the leadership potential of a select group of its RHD students. The program needed to balance the use of limited resources to benefit a small number of students against the development of this group beyond the normal Graduate Attributes (Zeegers and Barron, 2006). In particular this paper looks at how a particular version of experiential education was applied to modify the original inception of the program. Before we present how that educational theory was applied we look at how the program was conceived and by whom.

The main players in the development and implementation of the program were the PVC(R), LEAD consultants [Knowledge Teams International (KTI): Jane Lowther & Robert Marshall], the Director of Graduate Studies (DOGS) and the Program Manager (PM). A 2004 conference presentation outlines the actual program (Pratt, Barron, Prince, Lowther, & Marshall, 2004). That paper analyses student and supervisor responses to the program to make the case that the program was well received by the stakeholders. The present paper, examines the elements of the program that were not necessarily visible to the stakeholders but nonetheless provide the educational justification for that program. Of particular interest is the program imperatives required for the program to be considered experiential education

The Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research) [PVC(R)] and the LEAD consultants brought to the program:

- Industrial experience of the importance of good leadership in the research and development world;
- Experience from CSIRO of leadership — in particular those aspects of leadership they considered highly successful;
- Long experience of workplace training and its successes;
- Experience of the world of university research.

The Director of Graduate Studies and the Project Manager together brought wide practical and theoretical understanding of educational imperatives, particularly those relating to HDR studies.

The authors of this paper were involved in that project in two ways: Barron was the Director of Graduate Studies at the time and responsible for the implementation of the program; Zeegers had been brought into the University at an earlier date as one of a group of consultants who held discussions with the research coordinators from the Faculties. The purpose of the discussions was to look at what those Faculties wanted from the Office of the Director of Graduate Studies; Barron and Zeegers have continued to research in the area of RHD pedagogies and with the Project Manager evaluated the program against experiential education criteria.

The program itself was an initiative of the PVC(R) who believed that RHD graduates taking up leadership roles in Research and Development within and outside the University was an important outcome of Research Training. Support from the University was also premised on the importance to the University's image to have graduates in leadership positions but equally on an understanding that leadership could be taught. This paper then presents the perspective of the authors who looked to the educational aspects (as opposed to training aspects) that underpinned the final format of that program and, thus, the educational rationale for a program that is undertaken over a three-year period employing an experiential education approach.

The Program

The Program

The program took two years to complete and comprised four residential components of 2 to 3 days duration each, and a selection of non-residential modules. Each program group stayed together over the two years. The residential components of the program were held at a Regional Conference Centre. The focus of the residential workshops was highly experiential and action learning oriented. Participants learned through engaging in activities, reflecting on their experience both privately and in group discussion, and drawing conclusions and lessons for themselves based on their experience and the models and concepts introduced.

Residential Workshops

1. Preparing for Life, Career and PhD Study

This workshop focused on the links between leadership and self-awareness. Participants have an opportunity to reflect on life journeys to date and explore individual similarities and differences through exposure to the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or other similar questionnaires. Opportunity was given for participants to build on fundamental communication and interpersonal skills, which they would draw on in subsequent workshops. Participants discussed their experiences with respect to the challenges and successes of the PhD process. This workshop was designed to encourage a cohesive and supportive cohort. Between the first and second residential workshops a joint meeting of participants and supervisors was arranged to assist participants and supervisors to discuss and clarify their mutual expectations of the PhD and supervision process.

2. Leadership, Influence, Creativity and Networking

The second workshop focused on developing skills in influencing others and developed their conflict resolution skills. Participants engaged in a major outdoor exercise which provided an opportunity to put these skills into practice. The workshop also explored the concepts of creativity in an R&D context asked participants to reflect on the implications of this for their PhD.

3. Building Effective R&D Teams

The third workshop explored issues associated with building and working within teams generally and particularly in an R&D environment. Participants were exposed to a range of models and concepts around working in teams. During the

3-day workshop, participants worked in teams on a task while simultaneously experiencing the stages of team formation and development and issues around team dynamics and processes. Again participants were given the opportunity to debrief and give feedback to each other with the intent of deepening their personal insights and learning

4. Careers after the PhD, the Next Great Leap

The final residential workshop prepared participants for life after the PhD. It explored the new organisational realities and issues around career stages and transitions, assisted individuals to explore individual career preferences and core values and to begin the process of preparing a practical and concrete career and life plan.

Intensive Modules

In addition to the residential workshops, participants participated in a range of intensive modules held at Swinburne University. These modules were delivered by both external and internal expert consultants. The subjects for these modules include: Intellectual Property Management □ Project Management □ Business Decision Making; Understanding and Managing Innovation; Entrepreneurship and Enterprise; Foresighting and Scenario Planning; Marketing and Communications; Organisational Dynamics; Globalisation and International Business; Risk Management; Diversity Management in organizations.

What type of leadership?

In designing this leadership program the first question to address was: Can leadership be taught? At the same time another question suggested itself: What kind of leadership do we wish to develop? In addressing the first question (Bennis & Goldsmith, 1977, Gardner, 1990 and Wren, 1995) would suggest that there is some academic debate about whether it is possible to teach leadership. The proliferation of leadership programs, at least in Australian organisations (Day, 1999), would suggest that management theorists have concluded that leadership can indeed be taught and that the question is really a matter of how best to teach it. At the time of the development of the program in 2002 we were unable to find evidence that there was a link between leadership and leadership development programs. Our literature review is supported by (Muijs, Harris, Lumby, Morrison, & Sood, 2006) who report that current research has not been able to make a clear link between leadership development programs and their influence on leadership practices. Rather, they argue, leadership programs are developed on the assumption that leadership can be taught and that leaders coming out of these programs will make a difference to the organisations in which they work. These authors go on to tell us that where universities teach leadership the curriculum is developed around inspiring students to personally transform into leaders.

Sandler, (2002) and Thomson, Mabey, Storey, Gray, & Iles, (2001) identify activities that dominate leadership development in commercial organisations . These can be categorised under the broad headings of seminar-type approaches (where an external or internal ‘expert’ presents information to participants) and experienced-based approaches (mentoring, job rotation, and scenario based learning sessions). In our analysis of Australian universities we found these same approaches were used in student leadership development programs. Because there is no research that can be drawn on to establish that either or indeed a combination of these approaches has any effect on leaders the choice of approach was based on educational philosophy. The objective from the perspective of Barron, Prince and Zeegers was, then, not: Can leadership be taught, but: Can a program construct leadership experiences that enable students to understand the consequences of particular ways of being a leader?

The issue of what kind of leadership do we wish to develop was complicated by the lack of agreed definition in management theory as to what constitutes leadership (see Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 2001; Vroom, 2000). Even Keller (1992) who wrote specifically in the area of research and development leadership did not clarify this contentious issue. Discussions with the people charged with the development of research within the Faculties indicated that different disciplines framed leadership differently. This may be an aspect of the particular disciplines, but as only academics in the Faculty of Business had engaged with management theory in any sustained manner it is more likely that leadership was framed by individuals, albeit influenced by their experiences in their own disciplines, rather than this being discipline specific. Rather than look to developing a particular style of leadership, or indeed work within one particular framework of leadership theory we looked instead to make a list of attributes which Faculty leaders and the main players in the LEAD program agreed were beneficial leadership attributes and skills.

The main players (identified earlier in this paper) agreed that the skills to be focused on during the program were skills which would be required if they were to be able to work effectively within an organisation in leading and managing team projects or in starting their own company. These skills were identified as those that industry regarded as lacking in most graduates drawing from Department of Education Science and Training, (2002) and information drawn from our own industry partners. The skills agreed on were:

- Creativity and flair
- Effective communication skills

- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills
- Team skills
- An understanding of business and industry practices
- An international outlook.

Despite the difference in intent all agreed that if the program was to give students particular leadership experience than hands-on experience was appropriate. The third question then became: What approach to education was appropriate? The answer to this was seen to be Experiential Education.

Experiential Education

The Association for Experiential Education (2002) gives a broad definition of Experiential Education:

Experiential education is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values

Experiential Education is drawn from a philosophy of experiential learning first put forward by Dewey (1997). Dewey argued that knowledge was ‘individually and communally constructed by people...’ as they experienced the world and ‘reflected on the world around them (National Society for Experiential Education, 1988). There are many variations of Experiential Education. Smith (2001) outlines a number of these including models proposed by Kolb and Exeter. Kolb (1984) draws on Dewey to generate a 4-stage model of learning: 1) Concrete experience 2) reflective observation, 3) abstract conceptualisation 4) active experimentation. Exeter (2001) adapts Kolb to generate a slightly altered 4 stage model of learning: 1) Experiencing 2) reviewing, 3) concluding 4) planning which leads to transfer learning. 5 stage models have been proposed by Joblin (1981) and Pfeiffer & Jones (1975). The range of models and situations to which these models are applied demonstrates that experiential education is taken up in various ways by educators, however, as Elwood (2004:56) tells us all approaches share an understanding that experiential learning pedagogies are underpinned by strategies of ‘...interconnected cycles of experience, reflection and experimentation and evaluation based on the understanding that such approaches to learning and teaching will enhance student learning. Transferring knowledge based on child development is risky as adults will have matured and conceptual thinking will be more sophisticated in adult learners than in children. However, models of experiential learning have been taken up in universities across the world. An analysis of the websites of universities shows that experiential programs have been manifest in programs such as, apprenticeships, internships, cooperative education, service learning, practicum, student teaching, volunteer experiences and project work.

Experiential Approaches in Leadership Development

The LEAD program was designed to provide HDR students with a deeper understanding of how their leadership approaches would impact on a team and an understanding of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of leadership. The use of an experience based approach in leadership training for research students had not been reported in publications. The limited range of programs that we were able to access employed traditional pedagogical approaches that "tend to give primary emphasis to acquisition, manipulation, and recall of abstract symbols" (Kolb, 1984: 20). We took up a version of experiential education where abstract principles are interwoven with worldly experience, allowing people to bring theory and practice together. We are not talking here of Glassman's (2001) argument of bringing everyday activities into the classroom but rather Vygotsky's (1987, 1978) notion of the instrumental act, that is emphasis is placed on a learning approach where the problem to be solved, the mental process directed towards the solution and the tools that dictate the mental process are paramount.

Our approach was underpinned by the fluid and dynamic approach offered through the model of Legitimate Peripheral participation, or LPP (Lave & Wenger, 1994). Using this concept to inform our own practice, we have drawn on its focus on staged participation of newcomers being brought into a particular professional practice, certainly (Barron & Zeegers, 2002; Zeegers & Barron, 2000). There is a difference, though, in that LPP is a constantly evolving framework for professional engagement where a number of more experienced others work with newcomers at various stages of their participation, virtually on the edges of professional practice in such ways as to legitimate that peripheral engagement. Thereby newcomers are drawn more securely into the knowledge and practice fields to which they aspire. LPP goes well beyond designated and marked stages and the characteristics of these; rather it is an holistic approach to newcomers in a field ultimately becoming informed, skilled and knowledgeable practitioners themselves. Even as they are developing in such ways, they also work with new sets of newcomers, helping to draw them into the field as well.

The rider to experiential learning, of course referred to earlier with Vygotsky's notion of the instrumental act. This is also taken up in the critique offered by Laurillard (2002) as to experiential learning limiting the knowledge generated in such ways to particular experience, constraining the possibilities of application to other experiences, different contexts,

and wider field situations. Laurillard (2002) suggests that experiential learning is simply not enough; part of everyday learning, certainly, but divorced from theory. She argues that academic knowledge as an abstracted form of knowledge formally represented enables generalisation and is therefore more generally useful to students. She goes on to canvass a number of possibilities for achieving that wider scope, focussing, as we have, on experiential learning based on the work of Lave and Wenger (1994). She examines two possible aims of what we do as academics in universities: an elitist one of academics imparting specialized knowledge to students who may or may not be capable of receiving it; and according to Ramsden (2003) one of making student learning possible. The former constructs academics as capable of imparting their acquired knowledge with the implicit understanding that no teaching qualification is required and that the student is responsible for the success or otherwise of the transfer, thereby invoking deficit models of learners and learning.

Taking Ramsden's (2003) position, of making student learning possible, has quite a different impact, suggesting mediation in the teaching and learning experience, with more responsibility on the part of the academic staff. Laurillard (2002) suggests that it is this second sort of perspective that has superseded the elitist one, and it is a position that we have taken up in our own research undertakings (Zeegers, 2005). The understandings generated by Vygotsky (1978, 1987) in relation to the place and link between theory and practice are ones that academics have been grappling with for a number of years in their professional work, in particular in relation to supervision of HDR students as part of regulatory requirements aimed at securing successful completions. Having embraced the principles as well as the practice of experiential learning, academics have nevertheless to consider tensions emerging from the roles of theory and practice in their work, and the levels of abstraction and generalisability required to prepare future professionals in the field. The academic program associated with the sorts of programs exemplified by LEAD has specifically focussed on just those levels of abstraction that Vygotsky (1978, 1987) has identified. It is impossible to gauge the effectiveness of the LEAD program in terms of leadership in an organisation as it will be many years before graduates of the program would be in leadership positions, and then evaluating the impact of the program would be tenuous at best. What we did evaluate the program against was student and supervisor satisfaction and the results of that were very positive (see Pratt et al., 2004)

Conclusion

There is pressure on Universities to play a significant role in the skilling of Australians to produce new knowledge in the globalising economy. While education was the primary focus of the LEAD program, we were cognisant and responded to a national shift to performance-based allocation formulas for funding of universities in Australia. Within these new funding models institutions are rewarded, among other things, for 'providing high-quality research training environments and support excellent and diverse research activities' (Kemp, 1999:1) and national investment:

Knowledge is fast becoming a key factor determining the strength and prosperity of nations. Research - as a key source of knowledge and new ideas - is central to success in the new 'knowledge economy'. Those nations with strong research systems will be well placed to prosper both economically and socially (Kemp, 1999:1).

The LEAD program referred to in this paper is an intensive program designed to develop attributes that are deployable in a wide range of workplaces including academia, government, and major national and multinational corporations.

Three issues confronted us at design phase of the LEAD program: (a) the possibility of teaching leadership and (b) what kind of leadership would we and c) how to use experiential education models. Working from guidelines offered by Gardner (1990) we developed a program that offered 'opportunities for students to experience the shared responsibilities of group action' (Gardner 1990:168). Students were then required to test their judgment, according to Gardner this helps future leaders cope with changing circumstances. Students were then exposed to new constituencies; according to Gardner (1990:168) this provides the opportunity for students to develop ethical leadership skills. Finally, scenario based activities were used to expose students 'to the untidy world, where decisions must be made on inadequate information,' and as the decision maker they were immersed in ambiguity. We took up Gardner's (1990) advice that the teaching of leadership must have an experiential component.

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