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## Developing voluntary sector leadership through Open Educational Resources: a practice perspective

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## **Developing voluntary sector leadership through Open Educational Resources: a practice perspective**

### **Introduction**

In this practice paper we describe and reflect on our experience of providing open access online leadership development. We address the potential of this form of leadership learning for widening access to development opportunities in a sector with limited resources, recognising that more traditional models of delivery are costly in both human and financial terms. We reflect on the pedagogical approach that has informed this learning offer – specifically, reflexive learning that is both practice-based *and* rooted in academic research, creating a dialogue between course participants and academics. This builds on Terry et al.'s (2020) argument that the sector needs leadership development opportunities that are accessible, and that build on conceptualisations that extend beyond the traditional focus on skills, personality and position. We start from a view that leadership is a practice that can be attributed to individuals and groups with and without formal leadership position as they interact in and with a specific context to 'make things happen' (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). This view of leadership as a practice that is open to anyone is inseparable from our pedagogic strategy and social mission of making high-quality leadership learning accessible for all. The paper offers insights that are useful for leadership development practitioners, but also for voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) reflecting on how to develop thoughtful and inclusive leadership throughout and beyond the organisation.

Our approach to learning adopts a 'practice' perspective in three ways. First, we intentionally explore the link between academic theory and what practitioners do, what Argyris and Schön (1974) described as 'theories-in-use' rather than 'espoused theory' (what individuals say they do). Surfacing 'theories-in-use' through reflection can enable practitioners to make better sense of everyday practice. Second, we adopt a 'practice' approach to the concept of leadership as explicated below (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2011; 2016a; 2016b; 2020). Third, our practice approach is in the tradition of 'reflexive' learning (Afolayan, 2016), in which the participant brings their experiences, feelings and motivations to the exploration of key ideas and concepts, in a continuing process that modifies thinking, discourse and activity. This engages participants in a developmental process that enables them to 'expand the horizons' (Engeström, 2001) of what is possible in their particular context. For example, in a section on 'Leadership as Ethics', learners are asked to reflect on the purpose of their organisation in ethical terms and to post a photograph that reflects that purpose in the online discussion forum. They are asked how the photograph makes them feel, and what it makes them want to do for their organisation. They are then directed to ask other people on the forum about their photographs. This activity, together with a short introduction to ethical theory, provides a framework through which learners juxtapose espoused organisational purpose with experience to reflect on the challenges of leading ethically. Our purpose as educators is not to assess how ethical an organisational purpose is but rather to encourage learners to reflect, ask questions and review their own practice.

The paper draws on a continuous process of evaluation and review through collation and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. These include monthly summaries of online activity; three internal evaluation reports and a parallel project to capture impact. These in turn draw on two

surveys of online participants, starter and exit interviews, insights from online participant discussion forums, observation of learning clubs, and extended interviews with course alumni.

### **The learning offer**

The learning offer began with the creation of two online leadership development courses in 2016. The courses are open access (free and with no qualification requirement) and hosted on the OpenLearn platform. Since their launch, the course webpages have been visited by over 20,000 people. In early weeks of the UK's first Covid-19 lockdown, daily visits increased to over 250, including people furloughed from jobs in the sector. Because of our commitment to providing the courses as openly as possible, we do not require participants to provide information about themselves and therefore have only limited demographic information from the small number of learners who choose to enrol or input into the discussion forum. This suggests that forum participants work in small VSOs or as middle managers in larger organisations – primarily in the welfare field. Below, we identify key elements of these initial courses, then describe how the team develop a spectrum of learning resources around the courses.

#### *Key elements:*

- *Open access*

The two leadership courses take the form of Open Educational Resources (OERs) hosted on an open access online platform. This makes it possible to offer free learning at scale, with Creative Commons licensing allowing re-use of content. Learning is available to anyone with an internet connection, and can be wrapped around busy lives, removing barriers of price and permission (Hyllen, 2007). Rather than being 'distant' from the student, online learning can be experienced as 'close' (Paton et al, 2007), as it is accessed from within the participant's context and immediately applied to that context. OERs are generally non-accredited, but participants can download confirmation of course completion, providing evidence of professional development. Furthermore, OERs can act as a bridge from informal to formal accredited learning (Law and Perryman, 2017), contributing to the widening access agenda in higher education.

We produced the courses as OERs in order to reach people in organisations with limited resources and enable them to access leadership development. This emphasis is inseparable from our understanding of and approach to leadership as something that can be widely practiced. Staying true to this ethos, our focus initially was on smaller UK-based VSOs. However, open access learning has a potentially global reach and around 20% of online users come from outside the UK. This internationalisation in turn has the potential to contribute to wider outcomes, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Lane, 2017; Law and Perryman, 2017). For example, Target 4.7 of Sustainable Goal 4 commits to ensuring "all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles" (UN, 2015, p.21). Leadership can help to achieve that change. Engaging with this increasing breadth and diversity of participants also influences the team's ongoing research and development of further learning resources.

- *Research-informed*

In contrast to standard academic papers that present research in theoretical terms, from behind paywalls, and following a lengthy publication process, OERs provide participants with quicker and easier access to research insights. They are a mechanism for academics to disseminate research findings beyond the higher education community (Downes, 2007; Means et al, 2009). A key aim for

the team was to produce courses that provided insights and illustrative examples from *both* current and published research. In addition to the practice approach outlined above, the courses drew on research that conceptualises leadership as ‘collaborative’ (Carroll and Smolovic-Jones, 2018; Jacklin-Jarvis, 2015; Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Smolovic-Jones *et al.*, 2018; Vangen, 2017; Vangen and Huxham, 2003) in that it takes place between people and across departments, organisations, sectors and communities, rather than simply within a single organisation. The course authors also contributed insights and examples from our ongoing leadership-practice-informed research. This enabled us to share, test and extend research ideas still in development and to engage participants in current intellectual debates, whilst also enabling participants to experiment with current ideas in their own practice:

*‘That was really key to me, throughout the whole thing, whether I was reading it or was in the actual sessions, being really key was that I wanted to be able to apply what I was learning to my team, to my job’ (LCP 13).*

A hallmark of our approach is to acknowledge questions of power within leadership practice. Power is usually passed over in leadership studies and in leadership development practice. This manifests in two ways. First, by assuming that leadership (collective or individual focused) is an inherently positive practice without a dark side (Collinson *et al.*, 2018). Second, in operating an unspoken hierarchy of who is deemed capable of practicing leadership. Our approach is to help participants situate themselves within a highly politicised context where some actors are better resourced and more powerful than others. We support participants to develop knowledge of the power they do possess to enact change, and how that may be leveraged effectively. This is partly a matter of supporting participants through the embodied and uncertain process of grappling with leadership practice in a context of power imbalance (Carroll and Smolović Jones, 2018); it also concerns developing tangible practices that can identify power and disrupt it towards emancipatory ends (Smolović Jones *et al.*, 2016).

- *Generating dialogue*

A criticism of open access learning is that it is too often static and monologic rather than dialogic. Furthermore, OERs generally offer limited insight into how participants receive and respond to learning content, as online visitors are free to roam through, download and re-use the resources without enrolment. To encourage a dialogue between academics and participants, our leadership courses offer a dedicated online discussion forum, initially monitored by a team member who promoted peer discussion. During the UK’s Covid-19 lockdown, our monitoring and contributions to the forum intensified, responding to increased use. We found that enthusiastic participants often posted on the discussion forum in multiple places at one time, rather than working through the courses sequentially. Genuinely dialogic engagement depended either on other participants being on a similar timeline in their study, which is difficult to ensure in an open access context, or on proactive facilitation from the academic team. The team has responded by allocating resources to course facilitation, but sustaining this resource poses a challenge over the longer-term.

In an endeavour to further develop dialogue between academics and participants, in 2018 the team piloted the facilitation of small groups of participants - initially meeting face-to-face as they progressed together through the online courses; later meeting virtually due to Covid-19 restrictions. These ‘Leadership Learning Clubs’ (LLCs) are similar to action learning sets, with the online course providing a structure for regular interactions between learners – either face-to-face or online – and at times with academics. These interactions allow learners to expand on the reflexive elements within the courses as they share their endeavour to apply course ideas to challenges from everyday

practice. LLCs have four key elements: first, facilitation from the course team; second, an element of local co-facilitation to bring participants together; third, peer engagement and support; fourth, an opportunity to hear from academics whose research contributed to the courses:

*“coming to the club and attending and answering the question and listening to the other participants and their opinions is always valuable... Because we all have a certain way of thinking and dealing with things, but it’s always, always beneficial when you listen to more ideas and more understandings. It definitely widens your perspective...” (LCP 15).*

*“discussions always take different turns and definitely enhance the understanding...” (LCP 15).*

To date, we have delivered LLCs through voluntary sector networks, in individual organisations and online. Moving from face-to-face to online made it possible to deliver LLCs with participants located around Africa and another with participants across Europe. It also enabled us to partner with a disability organisation to engage participants with considerable lived experience but little prior formal leadership training:

*“thinking about an inclusive learning and development process across the organisation, and ... wanted something that provided consistency, supported everybody but was differentiated ... something generative and developmental” (LCP 1).*

LLCs generate debate and peer learning but are also ‘rehearsal spaces’ for trying out ideas encountered in the courses:

*“using more stretch questions; allowing more space and time to colleagues and other stakeholders to share their ideas; I am a more active listener; more confident in saying that I don’t know all the answers; and more reflective on the need to gain trust” (LCP 7).*

For example, The Black Lives Matter movement and its call for racial equality led to discussions on Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (Reduce inequality within and among countries) during an LLC meeting in the summer of 2020. In another LLC, participants reflected on their lived experiences as people with disabilities and how shared leadership could help in amplifying their voice, rather than reliance on issue-based campaigns. Participants have also reported that their engagement with LLCs enhanced collaboration between longstanding charities and black and minority ethnic communities through relationship-building.

### *A spectrum of learning*

While continuing to manage, monitor and update the two leadership courses, we have also developed a portfolio of leadership learning resources and opportunities around the courses. In addition to the pilot LLCs, these include an annual conference, webinars, blogs, and curated resources accessible via our website:

Figure 1 below represents the portfolio of learning that developed over time.

*Insert Figure 1 here*

This spectrum developed iteratively and by no means constitutes a comprehensive leadership development programme. For example, while the courses and other written and video resources are available to all, access to LLCs has been limited to pilot groups to date. However, the diagram highlights two key elements of our learning. First, it illustrates that participants find different ways

into an open access learning offer. For example, ‘Testimonials’, in the form of video interviews, were taken as part of our impact assessment process. Hosted on a website, they now provide an important resource for sharing the learning offer and leadership practice perspective. The open access approach enables enquirers to continue on to the courses, without any barrier, or to continue to explore other resources curated onto the website (e.g., webinar and workshop recordings). This opens up the potential for a pathway of learning that can be accessed flexibly to meet participants’ needs and time constraints, but it also suggests that a ‘pathway’ must be multi-directional, with multiple entry and exit points – rather than making assumptions about a characteristic learning journey. Second, while the courses and other resources can be accessed individually, other elements promote group learning. Indeed, a key longer-term aim is for participants see themselves as part of a community who are together developing and extending the discourses and practices of voluntary sector leadership.

## **Reflection**

### *Reach and accessibility: opportunities and challenges*

Our experiences have affirmed the potential for an open access learning offer to reach participants without the resources to engage in costly accredited programmes, including smaller VSOs and international participants. However, for such an approach to work, it is necessary to be driven by a sense of mission to make leadership practice open to all and not to approach ‘free’ leadership development as *simply* a gateway to paid-for content. Likewise, the approach to leadership theory needs to match the mission and pedagogic approach. Aligning free and open learning with a practice approach to leadership offers consistency, with theory and practice co-constitutive of one another. As OERs, the courses can be re-used, with appropriate acknowledgement and in multiple contexts – for example offering a resource for leadership development as part of the support provided by local infrastructure organisations. With growing access to technology, accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, the technical barriers to online learning are reducing across the world.

However, our experiences and evaluation processes indicate that access challenges continue. This is first because participants encounter continuing difficulties, in the UK and beyond, in accessing internet connections that enable video streaming, downloading and interactivity. There is a potential mismatch between the possibilities that technology brings to learning design and the realities of accessing technologically-enabled activities from, for example, a small isolated rural community or a city reliant on outdated infrastructure.

Second, language matters in the challenge to make academic research accessible. OERs are attractive to the institution as a mechanism of knowledge exchange from academia to practice. However, entering a dialogic space involves listening to participants, finding a shared language, and creating space for mutual exchange. For reasons of speed, we produced the leadership courses from within the academic community, albeit by academics with a practice perspective and practice experience, and drawing on practice-oriented theory and engaged research. However, co-produced OERs could build in practitioner/academic dialogue from the initial design (Downes, 2007 citing Stephenson, 2005). We have begun to explore this potential through shared production of further courses with practitioner organisations. However, we have much more to learn if we are to develop learning resources that genuinely both generate and are a product of academic/practitioner dialogue.

### *Conceptualisation matters*

We began creating the courses from a shared understanding that leadership is a contested concept (see for example Grint, 2010; Alvesson, 2019), and with a commitment to explore a practice perspective, rather than the traditional senior executive-centred approach – focusing on *leadership*, rather than *leaders* (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2016). We explicitly frame the challenge of developing leadership practice as one that is relevant to people both with and without formal hierarchical position, and invite participants to debate the meaning of the term ‘leadership’. Participants tell us that this approach to conceptualising leadership is different from that adopted in other learning they have experienced and that this challenges and changes their thinking and their everyday practices:

*“I think, with the course that I’d done before, and I think that it’s that traditional point of view that everyone thinks leadership is, you know our senior leadership team, our CEO or director of fundraising or our director of our particular team or whatever...actually, I think this just really helped to firm and move me forward, that leadership is at every level, that it doesn’t matter where you are in the organisational hierarchy. You can still display leadership and that you should have the courage to display leadership...” (LCP 13).*

### *Sustainability*

The OER literature acknowledges challenges regarding sustainability, reuse and resourcing (Downes, 2007; Lane, 2017). Open access learning constitutes an enduring resource to overstretched, under-resourced VSOs as courses can be hosted indefinitely and accessed directly through the platform, without interactions with educators. However, there is a significant challenge to update the content, sustain the dialogic approach described here, and nurture the creation of communities of leadership learning, without a costly support system. In practical terms, for example, debate in the discussion forum drops off when not regularly facilitated, and participants in LLCs value direct engagement with academics. To address this, the team has developed further online resources, including downloadable facilitator and participant packs to support self-facilitated groups, and curated video and bite-sized written resources. The aim is to encourage self-directed learning that grows and extends the voluntary sector leadership community in its different parts and places, drawing on a continually refreshed repository of accessible research-led resources - without building dependency. LLCs piloted initially in one town have gone nationwide and international. However, increasing reach has its own challenges, including participants’ identification with the content of the course material. While the concepts in the OERs might resonate with participants worldwide, local adaptation is essential for international reach.

### **Conclusion: insights for online leadership development practice**

In conclusion, we offer three insights from our experience of online open access leadership development that may be useful for practitioners wrestling with the challenge of providing affordable and accessible leadership development.

First, our experience indicates that there is an opportunity to extend the reach of leadership development beyond the more obvious ‘market’ of positional leaders (i.e. individuals in senior management positions), thus extending the voluntary sector leadership community and opening up new possibilities for voluntary action. Re-thinking leadership as a practice that ‘makes things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000) is particularly pertinent for smaller voluntary and community organisations in the UK and beyond because of their focus on ‘bottom-up’ or ‘grassroots’ activity (Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2021). It makes leadership development relevant to the many project and

street-level workers, lived experience leaders, and activists endeavouring to make a difference through listening, questioning, influencing and crafting new spaces to work with others on increasingly complex societal issues. Open access online learning has potential to reach these actors more successfully than traditional models of leadership development, and to do so with relatively limited resources.

Second, although individual participants successfully engage with and are impacted by the courses, there is evidence that the potential for challenging, engaging with and influencing everyday practice may be greater when groups of participants are supported in a partnership between academics and 'local' facilitation. The latter may be local to an organisation, place or community of interest, but involves someone with close links to the field and/or locale in which participants are working, and who is able to undertake the task of convening participants. In our experience, this facilitation can be successfully undertaken either online or in person, but it extends beyond the group sessions to keep participants engaged, respond to practical queries, and signpost to intellectual resources.

Third, all learning takes place in a context that enables certain practices and constrains others (Lane, 2017). Within a traditional higher education institution, learning context is relatively bounded and accessible to the educator. In open access learning educators have limited awareness of the influences, structural constraints and enablers, people and processes that impact on how participants interact with learning content. LLC participants have shared with us some ways in which course ideas have brought them to question, or even into conflict with, some elements of their context, as their leadership practice develops. We cannot, however, know how this impacts individual online-only participants. There is therefore a vulnerability for open access online participants, particularly those tackling complex societal issues, which requires consideration in learning design.

The team continues to offer free online resources and to carry out research on leadership development. One current focus is on developing our understanding of 'Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Leadership' (including the use of the term BME leadership itself) and on expanding our support for LLCs in diverse contexts. This focus emerged from discussions in LLCs, as well as the external environment, and we continue to develop learning resources to address these needs.

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