

# Leadership As Capacity Building In Online Teaching And Learning

*Dianne Forbes*

School of Education,  
The University of Waikato, Hamilton

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses effective leadership in online teaching and learning involving capacity building, so that leadership occurs at multiple levels in order to sustain and transform learning. Literature conceptualising leadership as capacity building is examined. The paper considers practical examples of leadership as capacity building in online teaching and learning, and poses questions for further investigation.

Effective leadership in online teaching and learning must involve a significant element of capacity building, so that leadership occurs at multiple levels in an organization in order to sustain, renew and transform teaching and learning for the future. As Lambert (1998, p.75) points out, "increasing leadership capacity over time is the most productive way to bring about improvements that can be sustained".

Building leadership capacity in online teaching and learning is an issue because it does not always happen. Individuals who have taught online may leave the organization and capacity is thereby lost. Online learning and teaching is affected, as finding staff to teach in online papers can be a challenge.

Paradoxically, online teaching and learning may hold the solution to its own dilemma, as the key to learning to learn and lead in online teaching and learning lies within the online settings: one builds capacity for leadership in online teaching and learning by engaging in learning and leading with a mentor or team within these settings.

Leadership obligations in online teaching and learning therefore include the need for those who teach and learn online to work together, ensuring benefits to students, reciprocal learning for teachers involved, as well as a measure of accountability, and ultimately building of leadership capacity.

## WHAT IS LEADERSHIP AS CAPACITY BUILDING?

There are various strands of literature around the notion of leadership as building capacity among a wider group of people. Related terminology and concepts include notions of leadership density through expansion of leadership capital (Sergiovanni, 1992); distributed leadership, systemic leadership (Harris, 2003b); teacher leadership (Harris, 2003c); relational or post-heroic leadership (Sessa, 2003); shared leadership, dispersed leadership, collective leadership, parallel leadership, or a leader-rich culture (Frost and Durrant, 2003). Raelin (2003) also refers to “creating leaderful organizations”. The salient idea shared by these notions of leadership is that leadership is no longer purely an individual matter, but is spread throughout an organization with leadership roles and functions being performed by various people who do not necessarily hold formal leadership positions.

The work of Lambert (1998) redefines leadership as constructivist learning. Constructivist learning entails actively creating knowledge (Le Francois, 2000). In particular, social constructivism emphasises that learning occurs when people interact in order to construct knowledge, within collaborative learning environments (Barker, 2001). When leadership is viewed as constructivist learning, “leadership is about contributing to, learning from, and influencing the learning of others”(Lieberman in Lambert, 2003, p.vii). Leadership is about creating opportunities for others to learn. Leadership is about learning together toward a shared purpose or aim. “Learning and leading are deeply intertwined,... Indeed, leadership can be understood as reciprocal, purposeful learning in a community” (Lambert, 2003, p.2). By defining leadership as constructivist learning, Lambert (1998) emphasises that

“The key notion in this definition is that leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. Such is the core of leadership” (pp.5-6).

A number of other well known writers in the field of leadership also make close links between leadership and learning, particularly as it occurs collectively and within a community. For example, Senge (1990) regards leadership as collective learning, and leaders as responsible for learning. He argues that organizations in the knowledge era should be “communities of leaders and learners” (1997). In a similar vein, Sergiovanni (1992) also takes a constructivist view of leadership and learning, asserting “In communities, leadership and learning go together. So does leadership and sense-making” (pp.40-41). This is further supported by Harris (2003c) who

suggests “that leadership is part of the interactive process of sense-making and creation of meaning that is continuously engaged in by organisational members.... Taking this view, leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (p.314). Fullan (2002a) argues that learning in context helps to produce leaders at many levels within the organization. There is strong support for the notion therefore that leaders must be learners (Robertson and Strachan, 2001).

In accordance with Lambert’s (1998) definition, “leadership capacity” refers to broad-based, skilful involvement in the work of leadership.” (p.3). In order for leadership involvement to be broad-based, there must be many parties involved in leading. This means that a significant number of teacher-leaders are present within the organization. In addition to the teacher-leaders, leadership is the domain of students. This view of leading as a shared endeavour aligns capacity building with democratic ideals, involving shared purpose, action and responsibility, and a realignment of power and authority (Apple and Beane, 1999; Frost and Durrant, 2003; Fullan, 2002a; Lambert, 1998). In Senge’s terms “leadership in the future will be distributed among diverse individuals and teams who share responsibility for creating the organization’s future” (1997, p.30). Similarly, Harris (2002, p.22) concurs that “school leadership is a function that needs to be distributed throughout the school community”, so that it is “devolved across the whole school rather than located in a single individual” (Harris, 2002, p.22).

With leading redefined as learning, it follows that there must be broad-based involvement in constructivist learning processes. Both teachers and students, as leaders, should be involved in learning together within a professional community, engaging in practices such as inquiry-based decision making and practice, collaboration, and reflection. Again, there is a great deal of support for these elements of constructivist learning within the leadership literature. The importance of inquiry as a basis for decision-making is widely emphasised (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Fullan, 1995; Harris, 2001; Harris, 2002; Harris and Hopkins, 2000; Raelin, 2002; Robertson and Webber, 2002; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1998). Collaboration is seen as crucial for learning and for organisational improvement (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Fullan, 1995; Fullan, 1996; Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2000; Harris, 2001; Harris, 2002; Harris, 2003a; Raelin, 2002; Robertson and Strachan, 2001; Sessa, 2003 ). Reflection is also viewed as essential (Harris, 2001; Raelin, 2002; Robertson and Webber, 2002; Senge, 1990). The three elements of inquiry, collaboration and reflection can be combined in reflective practice that seeks to inquire about the most fundamental assumptions behind our practices. Reflective practice occurs not only individually, but also in concert with others so that we subject our assumptions to the review of others, and participate in collaborative reflection (Raelin, 2002).

Leadership as capacity building can thus be regarded as a form of distributed leadership, which is closely aligned with distributed learning. There is more than just one source of both leadership and learning. Just as the teacher is not the holder of all knowledge, so are there many avenues of leadership. Building leadership capacity involves creating conditions and opportunities that are conducive to this collective, reciprocal learning. This entails bringing people together so that they can construct and negotiate meanings, and arrive at shared purpose.

The goal of building leadership capacity is to enable more individuals to build their own informal authority and demonstrate leadership behaviours (Lambert, 1998). On this account, therefore, leadership is not focused on one person in a position of formal authority, and neither is it about leadership traits, charismatic or heroic leadership. Such traditional conceptualisations of leadership are regarded by commentators like Lambert (1998) as limiting, as they allow some people to abstain from the work of leadership, abdicating both responsibility and opportunity. "When we equate the powerful concept of leadership with the behaviors of one person, we are limiting the achievement of broad-based participation by a community or society" (Lambert, 1998, p.5). Instead, according to Harris (2003a, p.20) "a new model of leadership is emerging, one that recognises the limitations of an approach to organisational change and development premised upon the efforts of just one person".

Building leadership capacity is regarded as a worthwhile endeavour because it is a way for an organization to achieve and maintain "a momentum for self-renewal" (Lambert, 1998, p.3). That is, with this type of leadership the organization or community can keep moving when current leaders leave, and improvement within the school can be sustained. In Senge's (1990) terms, this would constitute an organization in which continuous learning occurs, or a "learning organization". Sustainability is therefore a key advantage of this approach to leadership (Fullan, 2002a), and "sustainability depends on many leaders – thus, the qualities of leadership must be attainable by many, not just a few" (Fullan, 2002a, p.20). "The commitment necessary for sustainable improvement must be nurtured up close in the dailyness of organizational behaviour, and for that to happen there needs to be many leaders around us. There needs to be leaders at many levels" (Fullan, 2002b, p.417).

In terms of current practice, there are a number of encouraging initiatives that can be interpreted as embodying notions of leadership as capacity building in online learning and teaching. Examples to be outlined briefly here are the University of Waikato's Mixed Media Programme (MMP), the FLLinNZ project (Flexible Learning Leaders in New Zealand), the Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework (Ministry of Education, 2004), and the Ministry of Education's e-Learning Fellowships.

The University of Waikato's Mixed Media Programme (MMP) began in 1997 as an alternative way of teaching the three year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary), and was initially designed to meet pre-service needs in the more distant areas of the University's region. Over the years it has extended to include students throughout the North Island. The programme is designed to cater for students whose commitments prevent them from participating in a traditional on-campus programme (<http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/mmp>).

MMP entails multiple levels of capacity building because offering a Bachelor of Teaching programme online requires tertiary teaching staff to learn to teach online. This is accomplished by encouraging staff with online experience to mentor other staff who are new to teaching online (Campbell, 1997). Professional development programmes offered at the time of the inception of MMP aimed to "facilitate the participants' activity, inquiry and problem-solving" (Campbell, 1997, p.42), and helped lecturers to establish both formal and informal networks for sharing information about online teaching and learning (Campbell, 1997). Campbell's study of the process of building capacity in online learning and teaching within the MMP at Waikato "highlighted the need for changes in values, strong leadership and vision, and a commitment to academic staff support structures in tertiary education" (Campbell, 1998, p.3).

Since those early days, the MMP has strengthened the practice of capacity building. From 13 staff involved in 1997 there are now over 40 teaching a range of papers (School of Education, University of Waikato, 2003). In 2002 MMP was recognised by the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards, for excellence in innovation. (Acknowledgements to Nola Campbell, Merylyn Taylor, Bill Ussher and Russell Yates, members of the team that initiated and developed the MMP).

While the contribution of MMP to the local community in terms of building capacity is striking, there has been a parallel contribution to building capacity within the academic community involved in teaching in the MMP. As a new lecturer joining the MMP team to learn to teach within the programme, MMP has been a training ground for the development of expertise in online learning, teaching and leading. MMP has offered the opportunity to team-teach online with experienced staff, and to be continuously involved in inquiry, collaboration and reflection within the online context itself. While teaching online with experienced lecturers within MMP, I have engaged in continuing conversations about learning and teaching online. These conversations have taken place within shared spaces within the online forum itself, and face-to-face, both formally and informally. I have been able to inquire about and generate ideas together with colleagues and students, and we have sought to reflect upon and make sense of our work together online in light of shared beliefs and understandings. The beliefs and understandings have further evolved during our work together online. We have then endeavoured to act on these new

understandings. Through these processes, my experiences have closely corresponded to Lambert's conception of leadership as "purposeful learning in a community" (Lambert, 2003, p.2).

Flexible Learning Leaders in New Zealand or FLLinNZ (<http://www.FLLinNZ.ac.nz>) is a national project focused on building leadership capacity in online learning and teaching, throughout a variety of tertiary education organizations in New Zealand.

FLLinNZ embodies leadership as capacity building because the project aims to fund, guide and support the "leadership and professional development" of the participants, and thereby "enhance the capability of a significant group of people who have the potential to make a difference in the tertiary e-learning landscape in New Zealand" (<http://www.FLLinNZ.ac.nz>). The project aims to establish a national mentoring network, to provide access to opportunities for research and inquiry, and to provide opportunities for leaders to visit other institutions in order to share a range of different models of e-learning innovation (<http://www.FLLinNZ.ac.nz>). Overall, FLLinNZ is focused on "the creation of a pool of leaders in the field who are committed to sharing their expertise nationally" (<http://www.FLLinNZ.ac.nz>). It is readily apparent therefore, that FLLinNZ is about leadership as capacity building in online teaching and learning.

The Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework (MOE, 2004) is intended to provide a national direction for tertiary e-learning. It is intended that this framework be eventually superseded by a pan-sector e-learning strategy encompassing early childhood, school and tertiary sectors.

In the meantime, the Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework embodies leadership as capacity building because the principles of the framework are focused on learning, sharing of good practice, and collaboration. Once again, the recurring theme of communities through which "practitioners are able to share e-learning information and experiences in a collegial manner" is evident. The framework emphasises research and professional development, just as MMP and FLLinNZ do.

Finally, the e-learning fellowships are aimed at helping teachers to expand their teaching and learning through ICT. Some \$4.02 million has been earmarked for these year-long fellowships over the next four years (<http://www.beehive.govt.nz>).

The e-learning fellowships embody leadership as capacity building because they are intended to lead to focused inquiry or research opportunities, and to the development and sharing of new approaches to teaching and learning through ICT. Once again, the support from an online learning community is an inherent part of the fellowships, as is professional development and mentoring.

All four examples outlined here – MMP, FLLinNZ, the Interim Tertiary e-Learning Framework, and the e-Learning Fellowships – are working examples of leadership as capacity building in online teaching and learning. This is because, in each case, the initiatives described satisfy a number of conditions. These conditions are outlined below:

- In each case, learning is seen as the central purpose, and the content of leadership generated by the initiative;
- All of the initiatives support research and inquiry in the field, especially action research;
- In each case there is an emphasis on the importance of building networks for information sharing and community. For example, interactive online communities of learners are integral to the endeavours; as is the belief that one learns to learn and to teach online by working through the medium (Campbell, 1997; Salmon, 2000);
- In each instance, there is an emphasis on professional development and reflective practice.

Taken together, the literature conceptualising leadership as capacity building, along with the examples of capacity building in online teaching and learning, imply that there is an observable trend toward distributing leadership in order to sustain improvement in e-learning. With this in mind, key leadership obligations in online teaching and learning are likely to focus on learning and creating opportunities for others to learn; to emphasise inquiry and research, in terms of continuous experimentation, feedback and improvement; and to involve essential collaboration between members of online learning communities. There are a number of leadership questions that arise however. These are worthy of further investigation and research, within and between institutions. Leadership questions include:

- How can we ensure there are leaders at many levels in online learning and teaching?
- How are opportunities for others to learn created in relation to teaching and learning online? What are the structures and processes for participation and opportunities to become skilful participants?
- To what extent do teachers share ideas and know what is going on in each other's classes online?
- Do we have a shared vision about our online learning and teaching? What are our underlying beliefs, values and norms?
- How did we arrive at these and how do we re-examine them?
- How does our instructional practice connect to our vision?
- How do we make time for inquiry, collaboration, dialogue and reflection? What "feedback loops" are in place? (Lambert, 1998, p19).
- To what extent is decision making within our organization shared?

- How are students included in the development of leadership capacity? What student acts of leadership are evident?
- To what extent do wider policies and practices support leadership capacity building?

Questions like these will require continuous reassessment if we are serious about increasing leadership capacity in online teaching and learning, in order to sustain improvements over time.

## REFERENCES

Apple, M. W., & Beane, J.A. (1999). *Democratic schools: Lessons from the chalk face*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Barker, M. (2001). How do people learn? Understanding the learning process. In C. McGee, & D. Fraser. (Eds.), *The professional practice of teaching*. Second edition. pp.35-66. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press Ltd.

Campbell, N. G. (1997). *Learning to teach online: An investigation of practice in teacher education*. Unpublished Master of Education, The University of Waikato, Hamilton.

Campbell, N. (1998, 14-18 October). *Staff support for online teaching*. Paper presented at the Fourth Biennial New Zealand Conference on Teacher Education, University of Waikato.

Frost, D., & Durrant, J. (2003). Teacher leadership: Rationale, strategy and impact. *School Leadership and Management*, 23(2), 173-186.

Fullan, M. (1995). The school as a learning organization: Distant dreams. *Theory into practice*, 34(4), 230-235.

Fullan, M. (1996). Professional culture and educational change. *School psychology review*, 25(4), 496-500.

Fullan, M. (1998). Leadership for the 21st century: Breaking the bonds of dependency. *Educational Leadership*, 55(7), 6-10.

Fullan, M. (2002a). The change leader. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 16-20.

Fullan, M. (2002b). The role of leadership in the promotion of knowledge management in schools. *Teachers and teaching: Theory into practice*, 8(3/4), 409-419.



Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2000). Mentoring in the new millenium. *Theory into practice*, 39(1), 50-56.

Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2000). Introduction to special feature: alternative perspectives on school improvement. *School Leadership and Management*, 20(1), 9-14.

Harris, A. (2001). Building the capacity for school improvement. *School Leadership and Management*, 21(3), 261-270.

Harris, A. (2002). Improving schools through teacher leadership. *Education Journal*, 59(Jan), 22-23.

Harris, A. (2003a). Combating disadvantage? Successful leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Leadership*, 18, 11-22.

Harris, A. (2003b). Introduction: Challenging the orthodoxy of school leadership: towards alternative theoretical perspectives. *School Leadership and Management*, 23(2), 125-128.

Harris, A. (2003c). Teacher leadership as distributed leadership: heresy, fantasy or possibility? *School Leadership and Management*, 23(3), 313-324.

Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity for lasting school improvement*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Le Francois, G.R. (2000). *Psychology for teaching*. Tenth edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Ministry of Education. (2004). *Interim tertiary e-learning framework: Draft v0.5*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2002). *Excellence: Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards 2002*. Wellington: NZQA.

Raelin, J. A. (2002). "I don't have time to think!" versus the art of reflective practice. *Reflections*, 4(1), 66-79.

Raelin, J. A. (2003). *Creating leaderful organizations: How to bring out leadership in everyone*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Robertson, J., & Strachan, J. (2001). Teachers taking leadership. In C. McGee, & D. Fraser. (Eds.), *The professional practice of teaching*. Second edition. pp.320-334. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press Ltd.

Robertson, J. M., & Webber, C.F. (2002). Boundary-breaking leadership: A must for tomorrow's learning communities. In K. Leithwood, & P. Hallinger, (Ed.), *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration*, pp.519-553. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Salmon, G. (2000). *E-Moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page.

School of Education University of Waikato. (2003). *Co-ordinating teachers in the Mixed Media Programme: Handbook*. Hamilton: School of Education, University of Waikato.

Senge, P. M. (1990). The leader's new work: Building learning organizations. *Sloan Management Review*, 32(1), 1-17.

Senge, P. M. (1997). Communities of leaders and learners. *Harvard Business Review*, 75(5), 30-31.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992). Why we should seek substitutes for leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 49(5), 41-45.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1998). Leadership as pedagogy, capital development and school effectiveness. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1(1), 37-46.

Sessa, V. I. (2003). Creating leaderful organizations: How to bring out leadership in everyone. *Personnel Psychology*, 56(3), 762-765.