

De-centring the leader: Using the theory of practice architectures in a postgraduate education course

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Abstract

Much of the literature on leadership within education has centred on the heroic leader. Despite more recent approaches moving away from trait and behavioural theories, the centrality of the individual leader persists. Recent practice perspectives have shifted the focus from leadership as an individual activity of a leader to leading as practices. This paper discusses how a practice perspective informed by the theory of practice architectures (TPA), has been used in the teaching of 'leadership' in an Australian Master of Education subject to challenge conceptions of the heroic leader. It explores the use of the TPA to engage students in examining leading learning practices in workplaces and as a way of challenging their often deeply-held beliefs and practices around leadership. In so doing, the approach decentres the leader and provides a lens for viewing leading learning as webs of interactions of practices rather than the traits and behaviours of an individual leader.

Introduction

The heroic leader has been the centre of research and theoretical approaches to leadership for over a century, focusing on trait and behavioural approaches. Even shifts to transformational, transactional, and charismatic approaches (Clegg, Pitsis and Mount, 2021) maintain a focus on the individual leader. More recently, a range of theoretical approaches identified as post-heroic approaches (Clegg, Pitsis and Mount, 2021) have challenged the centrality of the leader. The theory of practice architectures (TPA) (Kemmis et al. 2014) is part of this trend, providing a way in which to reframe leadership as 'leading as practice' (Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015). There has been increasing debate around post-heroic and practice-based approaches to leading and leadership and in research using the TPA (Kemmis et al. 2014). Although there has been some work on using TPA with students in higher education (e.g. Thelin 2020), there has been little discussion of how the TPA is employed in postgraduate education courses to challenge students' understandings of leadership as centred around the traits and behaviours of the heroic leader.

Inspired by the article by Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) on leading as a practice, a TPA approach was adopted as the basis for a subject, *Leading Learning*, in a Master of Education degree at an Australian university. This article provides an account of how the subject was designed and taught using the theory of practice architectures within a project-based approach to challenge student's conceptions of leadership. It provided a framework for students to understand leadership and leading beyond the heroic leader, encouraging a more nuanced and de-centred understanding of leading. The TPA has been identified as having three dimensions - theoretical, methodological, and transformational (Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015; Mahon et al. 2017). These three dimensions were used in the framing of the *Leading Learning* subject. Students engaged with the TPA through first learning about the theory and its key aspects. They then engaged with the TPA as a methodological resource to analyse the data from a project exploring leading learning practices in their professional contexts. Finally, before concluding the subject, the focus was shifted to TPA as a force for transformation in students' professional practice and in how they may theorise about leading in contemporary organisations.

This article first outlines the background of the research on leadership in management and education administration/leadership fields, TPA in higher education, and the research on leadership subjects in education courses. The article then uses the study of the designing and teaching of the subject *Leading Learning* to explore ways in which students can be challenged to understand leading beyond the heroic leader and to see potential for practising leading differently (Kemmis 2019; Kemmis 2021) in their own workplace context. Using the three dimensions of the TPA to frame the discussion of the findings, the article concludes by examining the implications for taking up the TPA as a transformative approach to the teaching of ‘leading’ in postgraduate education courses.

Researching leadership

Literature and theoretical approaches to leadership over the past century have centred on different aspects of the individual leader (Chia and Holt 2006). While the earlier emphasis on trait, or ‘great person’ theory (Barker 2001) and behavioural theories of leadership (Blake and Mouton 1982) was challenged by situational and contingency approaches (Nicholls 1985), these earlier theories remain prominent, particularly in ‘commonsense’ notions of leadership – as the ‘heroic leader’ born with certain traits. These notions of leadership also remain the basis of many current day leadership development programs (Clegg, Pitsis and Mount, 2021) in which specific behaviours of ‘leaders’ are identified and developed. Situational and contingency approaches opened conversations about the role of context in leadership (Walker and Riordan 2010), building on behavioural approaches and giving more prominence to the context and situation of the leader. Even the more contemporary transactional, transformational, and charismatic approaches to leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber 2009), highlighting issues of a leader’s power and influence, could still be considered as focused on the individual leader as the centre of these discussions. More recently a range of theoretical approaches, broadly identified as post-heroic approaches (Clegg, Pitsis and Mount, 2021) and have challenged the centrality of the leader (Antonacopoulou and Bento 2018). These post-heroic leadership approaches (Alimo-Melcalfe 2013) aim to broaden debates about leadership to include ‘the followers’ and to de-centre the leader as the core unit of study. Such approaches include authentic leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber 2009; Iszatt-White and Kempster 2019), transformational leadership (Tepper et al. 2018), complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien 2007; Hazy and Uhl-Bien 2015), and distributed leadership (Spillane 2005).

The educational administration and leadership literature mirrors some of these debates. Normore and Issa Lahera (2019), following Murphy (2006), suggest four broad eras: ‘the era of ideology (pre-1900); the prescriptive era (1900-1945); the era of professionalism/ behavioural science (1946-1985) and the emerging dialectic era (1985-the present)’ (Normore and Issa Lahera 2019, 28). More recently, researchers have taken a more ‘progressive’ and theoretical framing of research, using Bourdieusian, Foucauldian, and relational approaches, moving past discussions centred on the individual heroic leader (Niesche 2018). Thomson (2017) in a review of six prominent journals in the educational leadership/ administration field from 2015-2016, including this journal, identifies that despite some increase in theoretical framing of research, there is continuing emphasis on quantitative methods and lack of theoretical framing -

newer theory driven methods from for example Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 2007) or Practice Architectures (PA) (Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015) were also missing. Like earlier Bourdieusian and Foucauldian approaches, ANT and PA decentre the individual leader and the individual school and focus instead on investigating socially distributed practices and relationships. (224)

Thomson further suggests that the absence of these approaches is partly due to the ‘ongoing focus on “the leader” and “the school/ college/ university” ’ (225). Similarly, Eacott (2017) suggests that ‘despite trends towards post-Fordist models of management, educational administration literatures still exhibit considerable bias towards individualised narratives of great individuals who turnaround school performance’ (420).

As noted by Thomson (2017), research using the TPA forms part of the trend towards post-heroic approaches that draws on various practice approaches (for example Kemmis 2009; Schatzki 2001) to reframe leadership as leading as practice, centring understandings of leadership on the practices of leading rather than the characteristics of individual leaders (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman 2015). Recognising that leadership approaches have traditionally privileged ‘leaders as individuals’ as the unit of study, Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) suggest a shift in leadership discourses from individuals demonstrating leadership traits or behaviours to leading practices that take place within webs of interaction. Adopting a TPA approach to leading broadens perspectives of leadership to include not only the practices of leading but also the ecologies of practices of which they are a part (Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015). Such shifts in theory also drive shifts in language, using the verb leading rather than the noun leadership (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman 2015; Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015) to shift the focus from leadership as a role, to the practices of leading within a particular site. Such an approach also expands leading to include not only individuals in formal positions of leadership but also other actors within the organisation, such as teachers and students within a school setting who lead – a team, a new process or other initiatives. Edwards-Groves, Wilkinson, and Mahon (2020) highlight that the TPA has been used to examine leading as a practice in educational sites (Kemmis et al. 2014; Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015; Rönnerman, Grootenboer, and Edwards-Groves 2017), leading as a practice-changing practice (Kemmis et al. 2014; Wilkinson 2017), leading from within and beyond the middle (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman 2015; Rönnerman, Grootenboer, and Edwards-Groves 2017; Grootenboer 2018; Grice 2019), and as a democratic practice (Rönnerman, Grootenboer, and Edwards-Groves 2017; Wilkinson 2017).

While there is increasing debate around post-heroic and practice-based approaches to leading and leadership, as evidenced by the research discussed above, there has been less focus on how the TPA is used in universities to challenge education students’ often long held views of leadership as being about individuals possessing or developing defined leadership traits and behaviours. Again, while the TPA has been used in higher education to explore such disparate areas as feedback literacies (Tai et al. 2021), doctoral studies (Rönnerman and Kemmis 2016), the nature of university life over time (Kemmis and Mahon 2017), practices of a research group (Mahon, Francisco, and Lloyd 2018), and initial teacher education (Sjølie 2017; Sjølie and Østern 2021),

the focus has been on the use of the TPA as a theoretical or methodological tool for the exploration of facets of higher education. Gardner, Goldsmith, and Vessalas (2016) used the TPA at a university subject-level as a way in which to investigate similarities and differences between two consecutive offerings of an engineering subject and to reflect on the learning and teaching practices in their classroom. Also in higher education, Thelin (2020) has used TPA as a lens through which to explore the creation of reflective spaces for school principals attending a higher education course in Sweden. However, within the literature to date, less consideration has been given to teaching the theory itself as a way in which to transform student conceptions of leading and leadership and their consequent approaches to leading learning in their own professional practice.

Even using other theoretical approaches, there have been few studies examining educational leadership courses in universities. Bates and Eacott (2008), in this journal, investigated the teaching of educational leadership and administration in Australia, examining the resources used in 53 subjects across 15 universities, such as textbook, chapters, journal articles. It identified 10 key themes and concluded that, although there was substantial Australian research, little of this research was used in the courses. More recently, Normore and Issa Lahera (2019), reviewed how the educational leadership development and preparation programs in the USA evolved, highlighting the historical contexts, challenges to implementing graduate programmes, and international perspective and reform efforts. Rogers' (2019) research on teaching educational leadership in a classroom with a high proportion of international students, while not using TPA, takes a critical stance. She examines processes of teaching educational leadership *with* international students, suggesting reconceptualisations to challenge the prevalence of Western-centric views of leadership and the heroic leader.

Theoretical framework: TPA and leading as a practice

The TPA is a site ontological approach (Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015) in the practice tradition that holds that practices are enabled and constrained by the practice architectures present, or brought into, a site. Practices are enabled and constrained by intersecting combinations of arrangements that form practice architectures that prefigure practices (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008; Kemmis et al. 2014). Practice architectures are the combined cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that enable or constrain practices that are composed of the sayings, doings, and relatings that hang together in the project of a practice (Kemmis et al. 2014). The cultural-discursive arrangements enable and constrain the sayings in a site; the material-economic arrangements enable and constrain the doings in a site; and the social-political arrangements enable and constrain the relatings in a site (Kemmis et al. 2014; Mahon et al. 2017). 'In various kinds of combinations, these three different kinds of arrangements can together form practice architectures that enable and constrain the ways practices unfold' (Sjølie et al. 2020, 86).

Used in the context of leadership and leading, work using the TPA generally adopts the verb 'leading' rather than the noun 'leadership'. Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) note that this is part of the site ontological approach and acts as a way in which to view leading as constituted of webs of practices rather as a fixed state or role. Edwards-Groves, Wilkinson, and Mahon (2020),

in their systematic review of leading in the literature of the Pedagogy, Education, Praxis (PEP) network, identified six characteristics of the TPA in exploring leading in educational sites. These are that the theory of practice architectures:

- foregrounds practices (Kemmis et al. 2014; Wilkinson and Kemmis 2015)
- provides a way in which to understand the architectures that enable and constrain leading practices in educational sites (Kemmis et al. 2014).
- foregrounds the importance of understanding what enables and constrains leading to transform conditions (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008)
- considers the happeningness that locates the site as central to leading (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer 2017)
- leading is co-created in practices that are always social (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman 2015)
- informed by the theory of ecologies of practices foregrounding the interconnectedness of practices (Kemmis et al. 2012)

Method

In developing this account of how conceptualisations of the heroic leader were challenged in the teaching of leadership in a postgraduate education course, an analysis was conducted by the two authors who were the subject's teaching team. Data were gathered, with university ethics approval, from the first five semester-length offerings of *Leading learning* between 2016 – 2020, totaling around 100 students. Data included student assessment submissions, learning portfolio posts, in-class activities, and online discussion board posts and was analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2019). The qualitative data from the student artefacts was coded using NVIVO software, focusing on how students' understandings of leadership and leading may have changed over the duration of the subject and how the students had engaged with the TPA as part of their changing notions of leading and leadership.

Subject overview

The semester-long *Leading Learning* subject aimed to address the complexities of leading learning in contemporary organisations through taking students on a journey through traditional leadership approaches, which were then contrasted with a practice approach to leading. Subsequently, the subject design used a practice-based project to engage students with gathering and analysing data from a leader of learning as a way of focusing on leading practices, rather than the behaviours or traits of leaders. The subject concluded with students considering the implications of their findings for their own leading practices.

Unlike many postgraduate education courses, the student cohort was diverse. Students came from a wide range of professional backgrounds including school education, higher education, vocational education, health education, and learning and development in corporate, government and non-government organisations. The cohort included both domestic and international students and ranged from those early in their careers to more senior professionals, with only some in

formal leadership roles. Such diversity required an approach to teaching and learning that allowed all students the opportunity to engage with ‘a leader of learning’ and to reflect on their own leading practices, as well as a sufficiently robust theoretical and methodological framing from which to consider broader issues around leading. A key approach to meet the needs of the diverse student cohort, as well as to challenge the discourses of the heroic leader, was to use a practice approach to frame the subject. Inspired by Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) and their approach to leading in educational organisations, the theory of practice architectures was adopted. The three dimensions of the TPA proposed by Wilkinson and Kemmis (2015) - theoretical, methodological, and transformational dimensions - was a useful way to structure the subject. Although the subject was named *Leading Learning*, it focused on the ‘leading’ practices in broadly defined educational settings, rather than the ‘learning’ aspect, which was taken up in other subjects.

1. *Engaging students with TPA*

The first part of the subject activities were structured to engage students with traditional theories of leadership and then to engage with TPA, to question the underlying assumptions of these previous theories. Students were provided with online activities, structured readings, videos, and discussions online and in workshops. Students learnt about the TPA and its key aspects.

2. *Using TPA as a methodology*

Secondly, the TPA was used as a methodology in the practice-based project. Teachers scaffolded and supported students through their project, with the aim of gathering data and analysing it using a practice lens to highlight the leading practices rather than the behaviours and traits of the leader.

The ‘*Leading learning project*’ involved students choosing a ‘leader of learning’ to interview. As the subject took place over an 11-week semester, gathering data through common practice-based methods such as observations and shadowing was unattainable. The Interview to the Double (ITTD) method (Gherardi 1995, 2019; Nicolini 2009) was therefore chosen as a way to gather day-to-day practices within the tight timeline. In the ITTD, the interviewer asks the leader of learning to instruct them on everything they do in a day so they will not be discovered as their ‘double’. Therefore, the student interviewer asked for detailed descriptions of the day-to-day practices rather than using a more traditional interview protocol of interview questions or topics. Such a method is particularly useful in capturing rich data around practices and with regards to the concerns that underpin the practices (Nicolini 2009). The ITTD was selected for the student project as it provided an accessible way in which to gather rich narratives of the experience of leading and without prefiguring topics (e.g. decision-making). Moreover, it guarded against leaders articulating what they believe are the ‘right’ answers with regards to elements of leadership.

The teaching team facilitated a process whereby students worked in groups using interview transcripts that they had transcribed. In a whole day, face-to-face workshop students analysed the transcripts, using teacher prepared templates and Google docs to collaborate in small groups to build up the analysis using TPA. With support from the teachers, students first reviewed the

transcripts to identify three to five leading practices for which they then identified the sayings, doings and relatings before moving on to explore the cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political arrangements and practice architectures (Kemmis 2019) that enabled and constrained the leading learning practices they identified. Students worked first on their own transcripts and then worked as group to explore commonalities and differences across the 3-4 data sets. The diversity of the student cohort made for lively classroom discussions. Some of the international students chose leaders of learning from their home countries, translating the transcript to share with other students in their groups. It provided a rich international perspective on leading learning in countries such as Russia, USA, China, Vietnam, Middle Eastern countries, Pacific Islands, as well as Australia, highlighting many cultural and gender issues.

Following the class seminar, students continued to work in their groups to explore similarities and differences between the data from each site, identifying the ways in which the practice architectures enabled or constrained leading practices in particular sites, which they presented as a group in the following workshop, receiving feedback from both teachers and their peers.

3. *Engaging students in the transformative dimension of TPA.*

The third dimension, the TPA as a tool for transformation, was taken up in the final assessment task. Students analysed their own and other group members' transcripts, to critically discuss the implications for leading learning in contemporary organisations and for their own leading learning practice. The last workshops became filled with rich discussions through the group presentations and what students could draw from them about practising leading differently – in organisations more generally as well as in their own practice.

Decentring the leader: students engaging with the TPA

Framing the *Leading Learning* subject using the TPA, was part of an attempt to decentre the leader in discussions of leadership and shift focus to leading practices as well as to align with the practice focus of the overall Masters course. Class work, assessments, and reflections of students across the five-year cohorts indicated that many students shifted their thinking from heroic assumptions about leadership towards practices of leading learning. The discussion below addresses the two key questions:-

1. How did the subject challenge students' conceptions of leadership and the centrality of the 'heroic leader' ?
2. How was the theory of practice architectures helpful theoretically, methodologically and transformatively, in this process?

In answering these questions, the analysis of the data drawn from the subject suggest three key strengths in using the TPA to frame the *Leading Learning* subject: as a **theoretical** tool to move the understanding of students, as a useful **methodological** way in which to structure data collection and subsequent analysis in a short, semester-length subject, and a **transformative** framework for analysing the practice architectures and particularly the socio-political arrangements across diverse professional contexts. The following discussion is framed using TPA's three dimensions.

Changing conceptions of leading learning: TPA as a theoretical tool to de-centre the leader

Based on the analysis of student artefacts, there were indications that students had shifted their conceptions of leading and leadership from a focus on leadership as the action of an individual leader to appreciating the practices of leading through the use of the TPA to unsettle the idea of the heroic leader.

While it is challenging to make assumptions about student conceptions and understandings of leadership at the outset of the subject, there were clues found in class activities and early discussion board posts that reflected heroic, trait, and behavioural assumptions about leadership. In preparation for the first workshop of the subject, students were asked to reflect on their views on leadership and leading on an online discussion board. Student comments provided insights into their pre-subject views on leadership. Student comments overwhelmingly reflected a focus on the leader as an individual who needed to display certain traits or behaviours in order to be considered a “successful” leader. Students also tended to focus on a single leader as an exemplar of leadership. For example, a student who was a teacher in the 2017 cohort commented,

I think the different leadership theories all try to describe leadership under various banners or ideas in one way or another....but with a specific focus on the situation or the person as the leader..... I think leaders innate vs their learned behaviours can have an impact of the way they lead.

Students were also asked to articulate how they adopted these approaches in their professional practice in more specific terms. A student from the corporate sector in the 2018 cohort commented on how they observed other leaders in order to build their own leadership ‘repertoire’.

Reflecting on my working life so far, the trait and behavioural approaches to leadership are ones that I subscribed to for a long time, without even realising it. When I encountered senior staff who I admired/respected, I had a sense in my mind that they were just spontaneously like that, “born that way”, with those certain traits, behaviours, and way of being and relating to others. At the same time, I also made a conscious decision to learn how to “be like them”. In a sense, if I followed their behaviour, then I would do well. Later, I attached myself to a mentor because I thought she had strengths in certain behaviours/skills/ abilities which I lacked but wanted in my “repertoire”.

Through class activities and assessments, students were challenged to think of leading as practices. From the assessment submissions, there emerged indications that students were beginning to engage with leading rather than ‘heroic’ leadership, and appreciate leading learning as ‘socially-established, cooperative’ practices (Mahon et al. 2017, 7). For example, presenting their analysis to the class, one group in the 2017 cohort likened leading practices in contexts of learning to an orchestra where *‘leading learning is not directed by a sole person, it requires social cohesiveness and coordination (the orchestra at work)’*. Similarly, a group in the 2019 cohort noted that,

You can't transport [practices] - you can translate practices of leading learning, awareness of time, space, and influences of where the practices and learning are enacted. There are leaders and followers - however this is not always linked to hierarchy, you cannot be a leader in isolation.

In the student reflections in which they 'wrapped up' the subject in light of the subject goals they had set for themselves, many students indicated the ways they had changed their understandings of leadership. For example, a nurse educator in the 2019 cohort commented,

I have developed an understanding of a new approach on how to lead learning. Moving on from the individualised 'heroic' depiction of a leader to a practice theory lens. ... My comparison of practice theory and traditional leadership models allowed me to realise its true depth as a theoretical lens of leadership and specifically leading learning

Another student from the 2020 cohort identified a major shift in their understandings,

Before delving into the concept of practice architecture, my opinion of leadership reflected the traditional assumptions of the position, which included qualities that the individual would possess, their behaviour and purpose.... It is remarkable to discover how my perception of leadership has shifted after reading back on my subject learning goals for Leading Learning. Examining the concept of practice architecture has matured my viewpoint of leadership and led me to appreciate its nuances. This contemporary framework enlightened how practices shape and are shaped by conditions or agreements which extend beyond an individual agent and are entwined in a location of practice Suddenly, it wasn't about the leader's attributes or leadership style in influencing others. Leaders' actions are just as likely to be affected by pre-figured conditions that exist within practices architectures.

While an international student in the 2019 cohort reflected that,

It has been a great shift from my initial understanding of leader and leadership. Looking back at my goals I realise that I had a very traditional view of leader/leadership that's why in my goals there are questions such as 'who is the leader' or 'what leadership is'. I guess I asked the wrong questions because what I ended up learning is that leadership and leading is not all about the leader and knowing how to lead. Leading is situated, contextual and emerging. The role of the modern leader is more about facilitating and creating an environment for learning, and develop relationships with people, as opposed to hierarchical order making leader according to earlier leadership theories.

Engaging with the TPA as a theoretical approach had helped students to problematise their previous understandings of leadership and start to think about how leading learning could be useful in their professional practice. As a student from the 2016 cohort commented,

I feel practice theory to be the way I am going to best understand leading learning. While it may not be as easily transferred to traditional work practices, I do think it is a useful way to rethink how I and others lead learning

Engaging with TPA as a methodology: How students used TPA as a method

A key challenge in asking students to conduct a practice-based project during an 11-week subject was time constraints, particularly in relation to the analysis that was conducted in class and followed by group work in student's own time. The TPA provided a systematic and accessible way for students, within a restricted timeframe, to structure their analysis and generate interesting insights into the practice architectures that enabled and constrained leading practices.

An additional benefit of using the TPA to structure the analysis was in providing common concepts and language to discuss the findings in their groups, across the different sites in which their interviewees worked. As outlined earlier, students interviewed 'leaders of learning' from a wide variety of cultural and professional contexts. The interview transcripts were analysed both individually and collectively while acknowledging and working with the differences of the specific sites, the arrangements, and practice architectures.

Using the TPA as a methodological approach, students were able to analyse the sayings, doings and relatings of the practices they identified in the interview transcripts and then the types of arrangements that is, the cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political arrangements in each site that prefigured and sustained these practices. This took the focus of the analysis away from the traits and behaviours of individual leaders to practices, arrangements, and practice architectures as well as the connections to other practices found in their sites. By working in groups, students were able to see that some practices that appeared similar were embedded in practices differently in each site. For example, a group of teachers from public and private primary and secondary schools, identified a common practice of 'supporting staff'. However, the cultural-discursive arrangements in the sites (schools) reflected different cultural and philosophical language – some about empowerment while others about rules and processes. Similarly, the material-economic arrangements were very different. In one site there was an informal area with homey furniture to support professional learning conversations while in another site there was a much more rigid and '*authoritarian structure to the office space*'. The analysis of social-political arrangements in each site illuminated the different influences of national and state government structures in the forms of national teacher standards, national curricula, state-based standards as well as directions from state departments for government schools and boards for private schools. What also emerged were some broader trends in policy and political directions which were impacting on these different professional contexts - if translated in different ways. One example that emerged in the class discussions about the analysis of the interview data was the prominence of compliance arrangements that significantly constrained leading practices in multiple professional fields including primary and secondary schools, nursing, finance, food services, media, and child protection. Uncovering compliance practices and arrangements opened a class discussion about the effects of compliance policies, practices, and arrangements – different in each site but with common patterns of the constraining effects, many linked to increasing compliance and regulatory frameworks across these domains.

Supporting the use of the TPA approach through the ITTD method was also important in providing sufficiently detailed data for students to gain a sense of the complexity of day-to-day practices in each site. Having interview participants talk about their days in detail highlighted the multiplicity of what people are doing in 'leading learning' and the amount and complexity of

their work. Students commented on how tired they felt just from reading the transcripts! The detail in the interview transcripts partnered with the TPA as the methodological approach, showed students the range and importance of the relationships and cultural-discursive arrangements for contemporary leading learning practices.

Engaging students with the methodological dimension of TPA to analyse the ITTD transcripts individually and in small groups encouraged the focus on the arrangements that enabled and constrained leading practices in each site across a range of professional contexts. This was an important part of working with a professionally and culturally disparate cohort of students. This process reinforced the de-centring of the leader in class conversations about contemporary contexts of leading learning through highlighting the multiple influences on leading practices and arrangements.

Engaging with TPA's transformative dimension: Reflections on professional practice

The TPA also has a transformative dimension, focusing on leading as a 'practice-changing practice' (Edwards-Groves, Wilkinson, and Mahon 2020, 120). In the subject, the teaching team used this transformative focus of the TPA to scaffold the final part of the assessment tasks in which students reflected on the implications of the class findings for contemporary leading learning practices and their own professional practice. These assessments indicated both how students had shifted in their understandings about leading and leadership as well as provided insights into how they planned to shift their own professional practice following the subject. As an overseas-based teacher from the 2018 cohort noted,

Practice Architectures theory has changed my perspectives on what leadership is about. I now can see leadership in different contexts where I feel empowered and I can empower my colleagues. I also can look at different practices in a different light to be able to see which factors enable or constrain the practices. By doing so, I will be able to make changes in particular areas by enhancing factors that enable the practices whilst limit or eliminate factors that constraint those practices. The most important thing is that, because leading does not have to come from top leaders, I am empowered to make a difference at my workplace and other places by making small changes to improve our practices at my school.

A student from the corporate sector in the 2017 cohort also reflected that,

Perhaps this ability to adjust and adapt practices within the constraints or enablers of the practice architectures is the sign of an effective leader – one that implicitly or explicitly understands the practices architectures at a site.

Similarly, another student from the corporate sector in the 2017 cohort noted the focus of leadership and leadership development in their work context was on leaders as individuals but that this is insufficient for affecting change,

When reflecting on my organisation and the environment that I and my team need to work within, the practice architectures lens foregrounds the complex environment and that web of interrelated and interdependent practices that constitute day to day work for myself and my team. Leading learning effectively in this environment,

cannot be reduced to enacting corporate values and behaviours without denying that values and behaviours are an element of leading learning. What the practice architectures lens also highlights when reflecting on the environment that I work in is that leadership behaviours and skills in isolation may not be enough to affect change and that consideration of the practice architectures and arrangements are critical to effecting change.

Some students suggested ways that they may take it up in their own practice – to practice differently. For example, a student from a professional association commented,

being able to use examples from my own workplace was a great way build my awareness of how this theory applies to my own context. ... I am particularly interested in looking into how people are “stirred into” a practice and how this can be used to help people better adapt to new roles.

Further, a teacher from the 2018 cohort commented,

I believe that through studying practice architecture and leadership within my own context I was able to identify areas of importance, specifically around the way that practices hang together. ... As a result of this I have unpacked some of my own environment and looked at what hangs together to create various situations and how I can make changes to enhance these situations. I believe that this has led to some successful shifts within my context

There are also some indications that the *Leading Learning* subject has had a longer-term impact on how students view of leading, which persisted after the subject was completed. In students’ reflections on the Master of Education overall, students made specific comments pertaining to what they learnt in the *Leading Learning* subject and how it impacted their understandings about leading learning. Some of these comments were made at the end of their course - one or two years after completing *Leading Learning* - suggesting that the impact of framing leading using the practice architectures approach was maintained over time, supported and reinforced by the overall practice-focus of the Masters course. As one student from the higher education sector in the 2019 cohort reflected,

My perspective of the role of the leader has also changed from a heroic, self-centred and top-down approach to other-centred and participatory and emergent way of leading, immersing in the context and involving people in the process of change. The leader is not the centre but a crucial part of the ecosystem in which his/her role is not to provide answers but to facilitate, coach, and enable meaning-making, self-regulated and collective learning as well as problem solving in people. Leading learning moves beyond knowledge transfer to promoting co-construction of knowledge, individual and collective reflection and “way-finding” forward.

While we were not able to follow up students after they graduated, it does appear that many students saw the transformative potential of TPA in practising differently and for many of them they shifted from a focus on the leader’s traits and behaviours to their practices in complex webs of interaction. – de-centring the leader in their approaches to their own professional practice. As educators in higher education, the TPA has been a way for us to take up a transformative dimension with our students.

Conclusion

This study contributes to discussions around de-centring the leader in leading learning and shifting the focus away from trait and behavioural conceptualisations of leadership focused on individual leaders to the more complex and nuanced concepts of leading as practice, with its complex arrangements, practice architectures, and ecologies of practices. It highlights how a university subject on leading learning for postgraduate education students, framed by using the TPA and its theoretical, methodological, and transformative dimensions, enabled diverse students to engage with the practices of leading learning and shift their understandings of leadership.

A common element of the transcripts discussed by students about the practices of the leaders of learning was the number and complexity of their practices, the complex webs and interactions with multiple other people, things, policies, procedures. What came through to students was that leading learning wasn't the simplistic process often portrayed in the literature - of the heroic leader who is either 'born that way' or exhibiting pre-defined behaviours that can be learnt. In taking students through the theoretical strengths of the TPA as a way of reconceptualising leadership as leading practices and getting them to discover the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements of 'real' leaders of learning, it challenged them to see past the behaviours and the individual focus of much leadership literature. It provided a unique opportunity for students to uncover and discuss the conditions that enabled and constrained leading learning across a variety of professional and cultural contexts (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman 2015) and provided students with a way in which to interrogate their own assumptions about leadership and their ongoing development as a leader of learning.

Using the TPA in the university subject challenged students' views of leadership and provided tools for them to reflect on their own professional practice – to see leading as a practice within the everyday happeningness of their role. It provided a strong theoretical, methodological, and transformational basis for considering leading learning and allowing for the de-centring of the leader as the primary focus of leading learning. Together with the ITTD method, the TPA was an accessible way for students to engage in a practice approach in a 11-week subject. It opened up opportunities for new conceptions of leading learning that are better suited to students' fluid and dynamic contexts of professional practice (many of whom were not then in a designated leadership roles). Focusing on the practices of leading learning provided a unique opportunity for students to appreciate the conditions that enabled and constrained leading learning across a variety of contexts (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman 2015), providing students with a robust framework to analyse data about leading practices and their own professional experiences.

As university educators of educators, a contribution to the ongoing moves towards 'de-centring the leader' is through the nature of the courses in which we engage our students. If we want to encourage educators to take up leading learning in a critical and transformative way and see beyond the heroic leader, one way is through formal postgraduate education courses. It opens the transformative possibilities for the TPA to be used in education leadership courses - to help

students to problematise the taken for granted and develop new understandings so that they can indeed lead as ‘practice-changing practice’ (Edwards-Groves, Wilkinson, and Mahon 2020, 120).

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