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Abstract:

This paper explores some of the issues and challenges faced by a small team of Western academic staff who were involved in a project to develop leadership practice amongst higher and further education teachers and administrators in China. These issues and challenges arose as soon as the project commenced and meant that the Australian teachers involved had to come up with solutions acceptable to a different cultural context. The paper discusses how these issues and challenges were perceived by both the Western and Chinese teaching staff and how they were jointly solved to develop more resourceful teaching practitioners. This case study illustrates how the underlying assumptions about teachers' development need to take account of the pervading culture in which the educational change is to occur. With care and sensitivity, Western style educational leadership theory, research and practice can be applicable to higher and further education teachers' in a different cultural context.

Introduction:

One issue worthy of examination and research is whether Western educational research and theory outcomes about 'good' educational practice, for example, in the leadership field, can be successfully translated to an Asian cultural context. Certainly in the western democracies, the effectiveness and efficiency of institutions of higher and further education was seen as an emerging crisis in the late 1990's, which was related to failed practices in the past (eg Eddy, Murphy, Spaulding & Chandra, 1997). Educational leaders, both academic and administrative, remain today as they did then: the critical means by which other students and staff can be influenced to achieve organisational and academic goals (Robbins, 2002). Leaders help to set the tone of their organisations (Kouzes & Posner, 1995) as well as attempting to unite disparate individuals and groups to achieve their own and the organisation's goals. At the same time, they try to improve teamwork and achieve increased productivity in their institutions (Scott, 1998).

Effective leadership at all faculty levels, in this sense, is just as critical in the early twenty first century as it was in the twentieth. This state of affairs however, is not only the case in the Western world. It is the case in parts of Asia and certainly the case in China. The importance of effective tertiary educational leadership was discussed in the literature over 10 years ago (eg Cao, 1991) and writers in the field even then, reflected the Chinese Government's increased interest in developing educational leadership in higher and further education institutions and of endorsing the principle of faculty training in this important area. Now, even greater autonomy has been given to these institutions in China to develop their staff in this area. Establishing networks for relevant faculty, both teaching and administrative, has become a Chinese characteristic as it has become in the west.

In the past, the Chinese have sent some faculty to study abroad in the past and continue to do so but increasingly, overseas institutions in the West with

specialisation in the educational leadership field, have been invited to visit China to provide courses for Chinese University staff in situ. This article describes and discusses one such instance as a case study. It focuses on the issues, problems and attempts to find solutions to those problems by a small group of faculty staff from an Australian University. They were invited to provide a course on educational leadership as part of staff development for a further educational institution in Central China.

The course requested and provided to the Chinese was a Masters level course, involving formal study (subject based rather than thesis based). A small group of Australian staff travelled to Central China to teach each of the leadership subjects. The relevant Chinese staff (referred to as "faculty" in this paper) were also provided with distance type materials for each subject. The Australian staff taught each subject over a 10-day period, and lived and worked in China for four separate periods, over the space of about two years. The following represent their perceptions of the type of issues and problems found as well as their attempts to find solutions to these problems.

The Course Participants

The group chosen to participate in the course were selected from the staff of the Chinese institution and nominated as being either a current, or a potential 'future educational leader'. They were generally from senior teaching ranks but the group did include some educational administrators and managers. Included were also a small number of teachers from a school attached to the institution. The age range was from late 20's to early 50's with all participants having at least 5 years experience within their current role at the university. All had at least one undergraduate degree with the exception of a small number who had been excluded from formal tertiary study during the "Cultural Revolution". These individuals, who all had qualifications obtained over many years of study by distance mode not recognised by most Western universities, were given special entry to the course because of their circumstances. Nevertheless, in practice, the lack of an undergraduate degree was found to be no hindrance to their ability to successfully complete the program.

Issues and Problems:

Relevant Support Materials

Lack of relevant contextual support materials was one of the first issues to arise on commencement of the program. Once the Australian teaching staff (termed "facilitators" in this paper) began the program, it was found that the type of teaching support materials used in the Australian context, which largely dealt with Western leadership issues in the public and private educational sector, were lacking in China. Whilst these materials were relevant to Western students, they were of considerably less relevance to the Chinese faculty members. This was because most were only in English and not Mandarin. It was found, that relevant texts in standard Chinese by contrast, tended to be too narrowly focussed on regional Chinese issues. The local library contained a dearth of books on Western educational leadership. Other support materials were not learner centred.

The solution adopted for this problem was to build up sets of resources based on Western educational leadership literature but linked to the Chinese higher education context. This process needed the help of the local faculty. Our existing resources helped to provide the relevant theory and research of Western theories of leadership but the facilitators had to involve local faculty in developing the skills and practices needed for educational reform in their particular teaching or administrative workplace.

Presentation Style

Another relevant issue concerned the expectations of the Chinese faculty about subject-matter presentation. They expected the course to be presented in a didactic, teacher-centred fashion. This approach was expected because of their previous educational experiences.

In an attempt to make the course a more learner-centred experience, the facilitators utilised some of the following strategies: basic educational leadership concepts tended to be covered initially by using an expository approach. Then to gain more faculty involvement and critical analysis, the facilitators attempted to develop case studies based on obtained information from the faculty, which was linked to local relevant issues and problems. These case studies formed the basis of the faculty's focussed study and were chosen to bring out important concepts and issues about educational leadership and to link these with Western-type leadership theory and research. The facilitators attempted to draw out from the faculty what particular leadership skills and practice would be needed in to solve the issues raised by the case study scenarios developed and presented.

Learner-centred issues

The case study approach was hampered by the faculty's reticence to discuss controversial issues. The reticence was brought about by factors such as the cultural reluctance to become engaged in learner centred activities and also the presence of senior institutional and Communist Party hierarchy in the class. This meant that most of the faculty felt somewhat constrained in offering their opinions about their organisation's leadership issues. The facilitators found that it was culturally inappropriate to direct questions to individual class members because of a possible "loss of face" by the Chinese faculty, as well as the possibility of their comments being perceived by others in the cohort as not appropriate for their lower level of authority. One solution was to persist in asking more general questions to allow for the more reticent members to begin engagement and interaction with the facilitators and with the rest of the group.

Curriculum

The initial expectation of the Chinese faculty was that the leadership course curriculum would be set by the facilitators, who would teach it in the manner they chose. To encourage analytical thinking and reflection on practice, the facilitators gave the faculty the opportunity to choose the subjects that made up the course from a bank of existing subjects. While the choice was limited by the existing offerings, they choose 8 subjects from a possible list of approximately 30 subjects. This freedom to actively choose a needs-based curriculum was given to try to ensure the potential relevance of the course to the institutional and participant needs.

Assessment

The faculty initially had an expectation concerning assessment that they would be asked to basically memorise a set work such as a text and quote this extensively in their assessment tasks. This approach largely meant that the cognitive learning outcomes were at a surface, recall level and hence, faculty did not engage in application, analysis and synthesis. The facilitators attempted to overcome this issue by utilising leadership hypotheticals, based on their own contexts, which required the application of academic leadership theory and research.

The use of leadership self-assessment questionnaires was adopted in order to gain awareness and involvement in reflecting on leadership theory and practice as well as to help them gain confidence. It was an attempt to link the theories and research evidence discussed in the course so that it was all more relevant to their work and social context. They were able to use this self-reflection to gain a knowledge and understanding of how others saw their leadership styles and practices. They appeared to be unable to gain this knowledge from their sub-ordinates (followers) as upward feedback is not really a common practice in this part of China. It was also envisaged that a process of self-reflection on professional issues would lead to changes in their practices as educational and administrative leaders.

Developmental issues

It was found that the faculty lacked academic writing skills in English. Therefore, the idea of an assessment using a major essay as an assessment activity was not seen to be appropriate. Therefore, the facilitators decided to use a developmental-type approach. Firstly, in each subject, the facilitators used a series of short focussed questions to elicit appropriate responses in English, then gradually introduced a series of questions requiring extended answers that went beyond comprehension of concepts, to application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

This also led to the issue of utilising the literature as extensively as was possible in that Chinese context, for researching and completing assignment work. Many of the faculty were used to a single-source approach where a single piece of literature is quoted extensively, without regard to reading widely across the field and presenting the views of various authors. This issue was linked to the use of extended answer assignment work. These needed to incorporate a multitude of information sources from the published literature, which the facilitators provided to them directly. This process was applied because of their general lack of access to information technology.

Curriculum support

The facilitators for curriculum support was that Chinese faculty would have access to full library facilities, including interlibrary loans as well as on-line journals and the Internet. This expectation was not the case and in fact, they had only limited library access and virtually no Internet access, except where they had private access at home. Our solution to this problem was the provision of limited written resources directly to them. This meant that these had to be relevant to their assessment tasks and really had to be seminal works only.

The local teaching environment

The teaching environment was another area where our expectations and the reality of the situation were not congruent. The facilitators had expected university classrooms with the usual range of electronic teaching resources. As an example, the facilitators found that there were no overhead projectors available, no whiteboards and no facilities for using presentation software. Indeed, the only resource available often was a small chalkboard and sticks of chalk. While this was a challenge to the usual methods of presentation in an Australian context, the facilitators had to adapt to these conditions and turn them to best advantage. This was attempted by limiting what was written on the board to point summaries and schematic representations and then utilising handouts and other printed materials.

Learner-centred group work proved to be more difficult than expected, because of the fixed nature of classroom furniture. This precluded some eye-to-eye contact and the easy use of a discussion based pedagogy.

English language

One of the main challenges for all concerned was the language barrier. The Australian team, however, was composed not only of leadership subject matter experts but also contained a lecturer whose expertise was in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language. This proved to be of greater advantage to the subject-matter specialist's work than hitherto had been envisaged. This was because the ability range of the Chinese faculty represented in the group, in terms of written and spoken English, was extremely wide.

It was necessary, therefore, to develop a very quick and precise snapshot of the faculty's English language proficiency levels. This was completed through a task that asked the faculty to give a brief outline in writing of their careers and academic backgrounds. As a group, several young female teachers were relatively fluent in English and were able to follow lectures in English. The majority of the group, however, were in the range of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) 4.5 – 5.5 (a measure of English language proficiency, where a written score of 6.5 is seen to be sufficient to undertake an undergraduate study program in English). As this group included some very senior academic and administrative staff, it was clear from the outset that sensitivity would be required in expecting individual faculty members to comment on or answer questions in English or in initiating any class discussions in that language.

Following the initial assessment of the faculty's English language proficiency levels, it was decided to structure the classes so that, on any given teaching day, the two subject lectures would be given with a translator present. This developed into a kind of consecutive translation. The facilitators also were fortunate in having a senior member of the organisation's Foreign Affairs Department present, who was familiar with many of the concepts dealt with in class. Translation was not just a matter of translating individual items of subject-matter vocabulary. Concepts such as 'task oriented', 'charisma', 'reliability', 'validity' and 'leadership styles', had to be discussed through examples that were relevant to the faculty's experience and feedback regarding the faculty's grasp of these concepts was not always immediately available. The translator was also invaluable in acting as a channel of communication between the facilitators and the class participants. The translator was able to anticipate

difficulties might have in relation to published texts and explanations. He became the voice of the Chinese faculty in advising lecturers that particular concepts or the relevance of particular explanations had not been grasped.

In addition to the two lectures each day with a translation, the third and final lecture on each day of the teaching blocks was 'English for Academic Purposes'. The English language lecturer for this subject sat in on the previous lectures and used this content as the basis of the English support lecture. No translation was provided during this lecture. The emphasis was on making sure that the faculty had an active grasp of the ideas that they had been presented with earlier in the day. They also needed to be able to be assisted to generalise these concepts and apply them to new contexts.

For these reasons it was not really possible to develop a fully learner-centred approach to teaching. As much as possible, interactivity and pair-work was built into the lectures, but group discussion was not really possible. The faculty also needed time to prepare themselves before making a contribution in English and it was always better to give them a chance to write down some ideas before asking for oral contributions. Each day they would be given a small writing task for homework and those with higher levels of English proficiency were called on a great deal. However, care was taken not to embarrass individual faculty by calling on them too often or calling on those faculty who did not have the English language skills to formulate answers with short notice.

There is no doubt that the development of English proficiency was a huge priority for these teachers and administrators. It was apparent from the course evaluation that English proficiency is seen as a vital resource for career advancement in the "new China" and indeed, in some cases, career survival. One of the main expectations of the faculty was that their English would be enhanced as a result of taking part in this course. At the end of the course, in response to a general question about the ways in which the course might enhance their career prospects, most of the faculty commented that the development of English their language skill was one of the most important benefits of the course.

The English proficiency of many of the group and that of the translator was adequate, given the fact that very few of the group had travelled outside China and none had spent any length of time in an English speaking country. Their English had been learned in formal, grammar-translation classrooms, through self-tutoring and through radio and television. As a result, despite their often impressive levels of fluency, they were focussed on form rather than on meaning and on getting a message across and this sometimes meant that they tended to want lists of relevant vocabulary, rather than discussion of the specialised meanings or the application of particular concepts. An attempt was made to reduce this through a student centred approach that validated individual contributions when they were made and encouraged group solutions to conceptual challenges that the faculty faced.

There appeared to be a link between the pedagogical expectations of the faculty and their experiences in learning English. The more proficient of the faculty were more at ease with what could be described as an inclusive pedagogy. The less fluent seemed to adopt a more authority oriented learning style. They preferred single, unambiguous answers and explanations to be given by the lecturer. The mix of personalities in the

group and the meetings between Australian staff and class participants that were arranged in informal settings around lunch and tea helped to reduce this divide. These meetings helped to establish trust between course participants and lecturers and this, in turn, meant that faculty were prepared to engage pedagogical strategies that may have been unfamiliar to them or which, because of their own academic backgrounds, may have initially seemed pointless. In any case, the course evaluation showed that a large number of the faculty stated that the course had introduced them to new ideas about leadership and related fields such as evaluation and that they would attempt in the future, to apply some of these ideas in their own areas of expertise.

Challenges

One of the main challenges for the course facilitators came about because the facilitators were forced through Chinese contextual factors to make changes to ways of thinking and traditional styles of presentation. It became a type of self-development for the facilitators because of these changes. Firstly, it encouraged them to reflect on their usual Western practice and to think about the various assumptions that underpin this practice.

One of these assumptions is that Western approaches to educational leadership are somewhat non-cultural and have universal applicability to most contexts. Current Anglo-Saxon theories of leadership and leadership rhetoric, place high value on empowerment by calling on leaders to act as coaches and facilitators, rather than using the power of the position or their persona to exert their influence (Mellali, 2000). They also emphasise rationality by being logical, objective and consistent as well as delegating and sharing power with subordinates. As well as this, leaders are supposed to be visionary and create a strategic direction for the organisation and then communicate this vision also inspiring, motivating and aligning people to this vision.

Research in Asian leadership, however, provides extensive evidence of an acceptance and legitimisation of more autocratic and directive leaders (Whitely, 1992, Blunt & Merrick, 1997). They also reported the authority of a leader is accepted as right and proper and subordinates must show respect and obedience to superiors.

These contrasting assumptions meant that the facilitators had to present Western theories as being a product of Western assumptions, in the hope that may serve to enrich the leadership styles and practices of the Chinese and not as models to be rigidly adhered to.

Ethical principles and practices

Some might question the ethical issues involved in attempting to teach Western style leadership theory and practice in a Chinese educational culture. It should be noted, however, that the Chinese faculty themselves were anxious to learn about Western educational leadership theory and practice and were interested to see how they could take and perhaps, adapt relevant aspects of it to enrich their own professional educational practice. Fortunately, the summative course evaluation indicated that indeed, participation in the program had developed them as leaders and potential leaders and had introduced them to new ways of thinking about leaders and leadership in their own context.

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