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Strategically strengthening learning and teaching leadership in the creative arts through the createED network

Abstract:

In 2009, the createED network, a network for leaders in learning and teaching in the creative arts disciplines, was born. The disciplines included art, architecture, creative writing, design and performing arts (dance, music and theatre). Establishing the network was enabled by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded grant. The aims of the network were to strengthen learning and teaching leadership through the provision of opportunities for leaders in learning and teaching to engage in collaborative professional development activities and share knowledge and resources that inform and validate practice, individually and collectively; to address contemporary issues of pedagogy and viability through identifying, researching, reviewing and scoping activities that focus on current resources, strengths, gaps and challenges; and to foster scholarship in learning and teaching leadership and strengthen the teaching-research nexus through peer review of practice-based outcomes. In this article, we build on the reflections presented in a previous special issue of *TEXT* on leadership in the creative arts (de la Harpe, Mason & Peterson 2011), providing an introduction to the createED project – ‘the network idea’, its aims and aspirations – ‘the network ideal’, what transpired on the ground – ‘the network reality’, as well as where it is currently at and where it is headed – ‘the network evolution’

Biographical notes:

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Keywords:

leadership – learning and teaching leadership – creative arts – strategic networks – Associate Deans Teaching and Learning

The network idea

Leaders in learning and teaching positions within Higher Education institutions have a growing responsibility for ensuring high quality educational programs for students ‘in the new transnational, IT-enabled, volatile and competitive environment’ (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008: vii). These leaders often find themselves grappling with very ‘complex activities that take place in complex contexts’ (Radloff & de la Harpe 2007: 132).

In the creative arts, one challenge learning and teaching leaders face is to how to lead and support those in the disciplines to: *re-imagine pedagogy* within a constrained budgetary environment, especially the studio environment; *rethink curriculum designs* including the assessment of creative work for a mass educational context; *maintain high quality programs*, including induction and support given the increasing reliance on sessional teaching staff; and, *increase the scholarship of learning and teaching* in the excellence in research era (Caglar & Uludag 2006, Ehmann 2005, Eilouti 2006, Ellmers 2006). For these leaders, addressing these issues is often difficult due to the nature of the positions. Rather than having clear management reporting lines, their roles are often situated within a matrix organisational structure model underpinned by a collaborative paradigm that requires the use of persuasion and trust in order to bring about change. Learning and teaching leaders are also often working in isolation in tertiary institutions. As a result, there may be limited opportunity for the sharing of ideas or collaborating with others either within their own institutions or across institutions on critical leadership issues such as managing change and fostering pedagogical innovation (Reid 2002, Elvidge 2004, Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008).

Addressing issues such as these requires urgent and concerted leadership, and what could be characterised as ‘collective clout’. Scott et al conclude that research in the area has ‘repeatedly identified how unsure learning and teaching leaders are about what they might best do to lead in such a context to ensure that essential change takes hold [that is] sustainable and consistently [applied] in daily practice’ (2008: vii). The literature suggests that such leaders may need support to develop their leadership capabilities so that they can, in turn, persuade academic staff to embrace new practices. One way to support leaders in learning and teaching to develop their leadership capability is to ‘develop an active community of scholars to resolve dilemmas’ (Marshall 2008: 7).

With this in mind, a proposal was developed for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) to fund the ‘createED’ network (Australian government Office for Learning and Teaching 2009). The animating idea was to provide a means for those in learning and teaching leadership roles to discuss collectively, in an integrated and informed way, issues of critical importance to educational practices within their disciplines. An aim of the network was to provide an opportunity for learning and teaching leaders in the creative arts disciplines to engage in cross-institutional, cross-disciplinary discussions and in line with Marton (2005:184), to expand ‘knowledge derived from working in a multidisciplinary [or interdisciplinary] group and learning other disciplines’ perspectives and methodologies’. The proposal thus built on the pioneering work of the Deans of Business group, who initiated the

Australian Business Deans' Council Teaching and Learning Network (ABDC Teaching and Learning Network) that facilitates a national and strategic approach to developing learning and teaching leadership in the Business discipline. The idea of creating the network received enthusiastic support from a large number of Senior Executive University leaders (Deputy Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors and Deans). In addition, an email survey resulted in significant backing from learning and teaching leaders from the majority of universities where creative arts programs are offered. The ALTC proposal was successfully funded for two years, beginning in 2009.

The network ideal

The createED network was created to facilitate those in learning and teaching leadership roles to join forces to (re)position, promote, enhance and influence institutional and discipline-specific learning and teaching practices, and to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) by engaging in a strategic knowledge network. Specifically, createED aimed to

- Strengthen learning and teaching leadership through engagement in collaborative professional development activities and the sharing of knowledge and resources that inform and validate practice, individually and collectively through both an online and face-to-face network;
- Address contemporary issues of pedagogy and viability by identifying, researching, reviewing, and scoping activities that focus on current resources, strengths, gaps and challenges; and,
- Foster scholarship in learning and teaching leadership and strengthen the teaching-research nexus through the peer review of practice-based outcomes.

A model of transformational and collective leadership underpinned the network at its inception. The initial design included collegial agreement of priorities and sharing of knowledge, practice, and reflections; engagement in real-world projects; and peer-review of outcomes through scholarship (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling 2008, Day, Gronn & Salas 2006, Lefoe & Parrish 2006, Marshall 2006, Muijs et al. 2006, Spillane & Diamond 2007). The project model recognised the importance of four levels of leadership. These included the overall project leadership (providing strategic oversight and direction setting with clear vision and goals articulated); project management leadership (ensuring outcomes are delivered on time and within budget); discipline specific leadership (recognising importance of discipline in leading and facilitating online disciplinary and cross-disciplinary networking); and local state-based leadership (recognising importance of face-to-face networking).

Nine members were proposed for the Project Leadership team, three with specialisations in higher education learning and teaching and one each with disciplinary expertise in each of the creative arts discipline areas. Their role was to develop the project vision and design and set clear goals and timelines; establish the Project Reference Group; appoint the Project and Network Manager; plan project activities and agree on individual tasks; oversee the co-ordination/facilitation of

institutional activities such as professional development related to the project; trouble-shoot; review and sign-off on interim project reports; brief the consultant engaged to evaluate the project; oversee the preparation of the final project report; and collaborate on dissemination activities, including conference presentations and the production of journal papers. Establishment of clear vision and goals was to be achieved through fortnightly teleconference and regular face-to-face meetings. Financial and staff management was the responsibility of project leader (de la Harpe) in consultation with Project Leadership Team. Ongoing evaluation strategies were to involve reflection at each meeting, regular milestone reports and feedback from network members and the external evaluator.

Project management included a Project and Network Manager with responsibility for bringing people together, facilitating ongoing communication and collaboration; overseeing and developing strategic activities; maintaining the project website; ensuring milestones and budget were met; preparing interim and final project reports; and supporting the Project Leadership team in realising the potential of the network.

Disciplinary leadership was envisaged as involving five members recognised in their own disciplines as learning and teaching champions, one each from the disciplines of art, architecture, creative writing, design and performing arts (dance, music and theatre) to act as relationship managers for the network for up to one day per fortnight. These disciplinary leader positions were designed to have pivotal roles in fostering the growth of social capital between and among members and the reference group. It was also envisaged that they would co-ordinate specialist disciplinary activities (online) with members across the network and help in the disciplinary contextualisation of professional development activities. They would also work together to co-lead and bring together the two cross-disciplinary sub-projects: one addressing pedagogy and strategies for leading learning and teaching practices; the other addressing viability imperatives and resourcing contemporary learning and teaching models related to the high costs involved in studio teaching – ensuring a trans-disciplinary and action learning approach. Discipline leaders were to be sought from network participants through an expression of interest process, which was envisaged as an opportunity for members to demonstrate leadership capability and contribute to their career progression.

The local state-based leadership team was planned so that it would be made up of eight members, one from each state and territory. State-based leaders would be sought from network participants through an expression of interest process to act as relationship managers for up to 1 day per week. The State-based leaders were tasked with building and fostering relationships and social capital locally. Their main task was to facilitate local face-to-face, cross-disciplinary meetings (approximately eight per year) and bring together a range of different people in order to build social cohesion and capital within the group. They were also to play a pivotal role in liaising with the project and disciplinary leadership teams. This was seen as another opportunity for these individuals to demonstrate leadership capability.

As indicated above, online and face-to-face communication modes were included in the design of the network.

The network reality

In this section, we reflect on the reality of establishing the network. As planned, the project leaders met on a number of occasions over the lifetime of the project via teleconferences and regular face-to-face meetings. Ongoing evaluation strategies involved reflection at each meeting, regular milestone reports, and feedback from network members. Three members of the leadership team were also embedded in the project teams, offering their expertise and support.

The ideal leadership structure for the network included discipline-based teams who would use the online network to work collaboratively on the cross-disciplinary projects, state-based leaders who would run face-to-face meetings locally and the network manager who would develop and maintain the project website. The project leaders, project and network manager, disciplinary leaders and local state-based leaders were to work together closely and collaboratively to ensure communication was maintained across the network. At the beginning of the project, expressions of interest were called for discipline-based and State based leaders. The State-based and discipline-based teams did not, however, become fully realised as originally planned, except for the State-based team in Western Australia and, to some extent, the teams in South Australia and Queensland. Despite supporting the process in a range of ways, the discipline-based groups did not emerge. Reasons for this may include our underestimation of the difficulty involved in bringing people together whether face-to-face or online and an overly complicated network design that resulted in a lack of clarity and purpose for the role and its part in shaping the network. We may also have overestimated the benefits of these roles as an incentive to participate in additional unpaid work over and above heavy workloads. Given the existing disciplinary groupings of the professional bodies there was perhaps a lack of need for a network (de la Harpe, Mason & Peterson 2011).

This resulted in the createED project developing a different strategy as a means of bringing the State and discipline leaders together: a two-day workshop. This resulted in the two groups merging as one to work collaboratively, leading the proposed two cross-disciplinary subprojects and initiating a third. Two projects addressed pedagogy and strategies for leading contemporary learning and teaching practices; while the third addressed viability in terms of the resourcing of contemporary learning and teaching models. Monthly teleconference meetings were held for the project teams to collaborate and share their project development. To ensure that these projects were focused, useful and aligned to university strategic directions, createED asked Pro Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors, Deans and Heads of School to identify the top three strategic priorities for the creative arts, priorities which would have the most value for the network to focus on. Responses were received from 14 universities. Top of the list was research, followed by curriculum innovation, industry and community engagement and viability (see Figure 1).

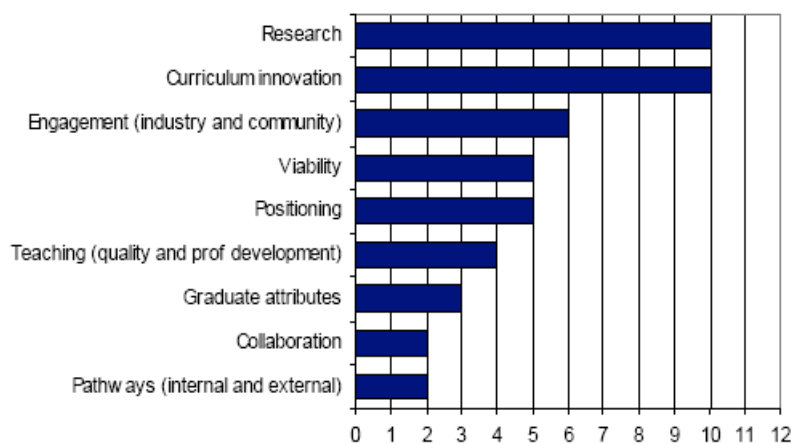


Fig. 1. Senior university leader strategic priorities for the creative arts

This feedback was used to inform the strategic intent and directions of the network as well as the projects outlined above.

Project teams have delivered the agreed outcomes – the cross-disciplinary projects and developed two case study templates as part of this process for adoption or adaption by other institutions. Additionally, strong relationships have been built that will result in further projects and Excellence in Research Australia outputs. By harnessing the energy of a number of highly engaged, committed individuals who were willing to lead and participate in the subprojects, createED not only met the target of two cross-disciplinary projects, but exceeded this expectation.

Extensive research, development and design informed the creation of the online network. As a networking site designed by a professional software design company was beyond the budget and the online network had to be up and running in a timely manner, a wide-ranging investigation of a suitable existing online technology was conducted. As outlined above, the createED network site was to be a place that would encourage trust between learning and teaching leaders, and a site that was used and useful to them – one that was also fluid, extensible, re-mixable, customisable and agile; underpinned by sound learning theory and a universal, participatory, iterative design approach (Cockburn 2001).

In terms of the online site design, a participatory methodology was used that acknowledged organisational contexts, membership characteristics and how the technological environment might influence how the site would be used. The site was designed to be an active one for the creation of new knowledge for innovative applications and to shape, influence and/or create new professional practice. The development of the site initially drew on the research literature and practices undertaken in the areas of constructionism (including social networking, communities of practice, informal learning, knowledge networks, game learning) (Papert 1991, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002); the literature on ‘tribes’ (Becher & Trowler 2001, Donald 1995); organisational leadership and change (Fullan 1990, 1993, 1999, 2006, 2006a, Kotter 1996); and on the latest developments in technology and innovative practices, including Web 2.0/3.0, citizenship journalism and web

marketing (Agarwal 2011, Belsky 2010, Flew 2009). Members were invited to comment on the design, usability and functionality of the site.

Multiple technologies were explored including the ALTC Exchange, Facebook, Concrete, Joomla and WordPress. Groupsite proprietary software was finally agreed upon and selected for its ability to store information, collaborate through discussion forums and blogging, share files and media, share a calendar for events and its ability to send out mass emails. In comparison to other social networking tools explored, the Groupsite software was also more aesthetically pleasing – a very important factor for use in the creative arts – and, moreover, could be branded to develop a customised visual identity. It also could include web 2.0 plugins such as a Twitter feed, and was free of distracting advertisements. The createED Groupsite was initially trialled with the Western Australian State-based team and then broadened to the wider group of learning and teaching leaders.

A number of ‘hooks’ or initiatives to engage network members to collaborate or share were introduced to the online environment over the two years of the project. These included:

- Weekly email blasts with a video and an article on learning and teaching and/or leadership linked to a discussion forum;
- Burning issues section to post to;
- General discussion area to post to;
- Featured ALTC project discussions, facilitated by the leader(s) of the project;
- Strategic project group pages with wikis (one on viability and two on pedagogy);
- Opportunity to undertake the ACER 360 degree leadership feedback tool;
- Online Surveys (such as the Academic Standards survey);
- Opportunities to collaborate with Creative Industries Innovation Centre (CIIC); and
- Group areas for State-based and discipline-based teams, with their own discussion forum/blogs/management areas.

Members also received ‘playful triggers’ by mail such as a Christmas card, a calendar and a bottle of champagne for the 100th member on the network site, to remind them to visit the network website. Playful trigger methodology involves the creation and use of artefacts to promote and/or provoke thoughts and actions (Akama & Ivanka 2010). Playful Triggers activate receptive modes of engagement and ‘ask people to challenge taken for granted or conventional ways of doing, seeing and articulating things and to co-generate shared understandings and collaborative practices’ (Loi & Dillon 2006: 372). Regular news updates were also sent out the project as it unfolded and to encourage participation. The project also developed a suite of leadership professional development resources contextualised for learning and teaching leaders in the creative arts disciplines available on the createED network site.

The process of developing the site revealed complexities within the university structures for leadership of learning and teaching in the creative arts, and the configuration of the creative arts themselves. The project assumed that there would be a defined group of people in each institution who were involved in ‘formal’ teaching and learning leadership, such as Associate Deans or Deputy Deans of learning and teaching. However, identifying and engaging those in leadership positions has been challenging due to the variation in structures across universities, inconsistent roles or time allocations, a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for learning and teaching leadership in institutions and very few designated School-based learning and teaching roles. 16 (28 per cent) of the 57 individuals in formal learning and teaching leadership roles in the 38 Australian universities offering creative arts programs who were initially contacted have joined the createED network. Those who did not join the network either sent on the invitation to others in discipline leadership roles or did not take action. Some of those who forwarded on their emails wrote back with comments such as

Thank you for the invite. I am the Learning and Teaching Chair in the Faculty (thus, have the formal learning and teaching leadership role in which creative arts is located) but I am a Philosopher/Educator/ Geographer/Lawyer ... I know nothing about the creative arts. You need to speak to... [and typically referred us to the Head of School, discipline leader or course/unit coordinators.

Over time, the number of those on the initial list in ‘formal’ learning and teaching positions who have joined the online network has increased to 28 (49 percent). Figures cannot be exact, given the continuous movement of people in and out of roles and changes to university structures.

In addition, the leadership team decided to widen the network membership, by inviting discipline learning and teaching champions asking existing members to invite others. Consequently, the membership grew to include centrally-based teaching and learning academic developers, an Executive Dean, Heads of Schools, program coordinators, managers of projects, academics in the creative arts disciplines and even a PhD student. This diversity of members – with a range of needs, purposes and levels of seniority within the university sector – altered what was originally intended as a site for a congruent group of leaders in learning and teaching and has made creating a shared identity within the online network difficult. While having a large number of members in the createED network strengthened the dissemination of the project, their different needs have made it difficult to tailor professional development activities or provide articles of interest.

This diversity also may have led to a lack of sufficient alignment between members for them to have any shared meaningful or strategic discussions. The majority of members have not contributed or shared their views on the site. Interestingly, however, statistics from the site show that some posts have received hundreds of views. In addition, members have been very interested in seeing who else has joined the site, as evidenced by the number of hits on members’ biographical information.

In contrast to an active, collaborative network, what has emerged is an individually-centred network with a ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-for-me’ focus. This outcome mirrors

the path of a number of similar networks worldwide, for example, the Behance network in the United States of America and the Creative Choices in the United Kingdom. The Behance network focus has shifted. It is no longer about artists sending their work to company websites and hoping for commissions but having one website, where creative artists contribute their work to receive exposure, showcase and assist in job searching and career advancement – the artist now has agency as opposed to employers. Similarly, Creative Choices which is aimed at providing ‘information, advice and resources to help build skills, find new opportunities, or get a better idea about a particular job or career path for creative professionals’ has undergone a shift,

no longer [do we] want web visitors to stay as long as possible on a site but for them to access the information, content or provision they need quickly and efficiently, whether that is on your site or by providing the best conduit to another site. This builds a loyalty which is not about the length of time that someone stays with a site but their perception and experience that this is the ‘go to’ site rather than the ‘one stop shop’ (Turner 2011: 5).

It was also clear that those in learning and teaching leadership roles were keen to meet face-to-face as a more formal group before interacting online. Therefore, regular bi-annual meetings for Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching/Education/Academic) across the creative arts are now in place. Meetings aim to facilitate the formation of strategic alliances, address issues of leadership in learning and teaching across the creative arts, and create a sense of unity and a shared identity for these leaders. Feedback from the inaugural meeting indicated that 90 per cent of participants believed that Associate Deans or nominees should attend the meetings and 100 per cent would either come or recommend that their Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) come to the next meeting. Extension funding from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching made the meetings possible for 2012. In addition, the project has allowed learning and teaching leaders to network in various ways – whether in meetings, at conferences or in projects.

Critical to this endeavor has been finding ways for learning and teaching leaders to engage with colleagues across the sector in a way that personally benefits them. We found that, in order to build and sustain a national strategic network for leaders in learning and teaching (both online and face-to-face), the following was essential:

1. Continued leadership and oversight of the network
2. A project manager to grow and cultivate member engagement and identity
3. Clear definition of the audience and participants
4. Adoption or adaptation of existing technologies (rather than designing and building a custom-made infrastructure)
5. Facilitation of face-to-face interaction (to build trust and assist interaction in the online environment)
6. Flexible technology to meet user needs
7. A small team to source and manage online content
8. Network leaders/managers staying positive when members only ‘lurk’ (as a collaborative, sharing and community focused purpose might not suit the

group orientation)

9. Member projects that are aligned with sector challenges and senior leader objectives (in order to build cohesion, trust and collaboration between network members and build social capital and identity)
10. A process for expanding the scholarship of learning and teaching to include creative works related to learning and teaching and for peer reviewing of these as submissions for ERA
11. Experienced learning and teaching leaders enlisted to submit works to establish the practice and provide models
12. Additional funding

The network evolution

In April 2012, the createED network merged with the Creative Arts Learning and Teaching Network (CALTN). CALTN is a newly created discipline-based network funded by the Australian government's Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) to 'consolidate existing connections in the sector and help foster new collegial and cross-institutional links to generate high-level collaborative approaches to teaching and learning issues' (OLT 2012). As CALTN is committed to bringing together leaders to work positively to build a collective identity and strengthen the leadership of learning and teaching in the creative arts, the merger was supported by createED as a way of avoiding duplication and competition.

Conclusion

Associate Deans and Deputy Deans play an important role in leading learning and teaching in the creative arts. We believe this leadership should be seen as distinct from academics who are passionate teachers in their disciplines. We remain convinced that a network for learning and teaching leaders can play an important role in supporting their work and strengthening their influence. As advocates for the creative arts disciplines, it is important for learning and teaching leaders to deeply engage with creative arts pedagogies so they can translate disciplinary needs to the central university/government bodies that develop strategic plans and allocate funding.

createED's main purpose was to engage learning and teaching leaders in the central issues facing the creative arts and provide a communications portal through which the practices developed within the projects and through the network could be transferred into wider systemic practice through conversation, collaboration and publication. In providing this opportunity, and now linking this group with the wider CALTN body, we believe the future of this national collaborative endeavor is bright and learning and teaching leadership practices in the creative arts disciplines can continue to be strengthened in local contexts.

Acknowledgements

createED: Strengthening learning and teaching in the Creative Arts disciplines is an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching supported project. The research team is a collaboration between: RMIT University (Professor Barbara de la Harpe; Associate Professor J Fiona Peterson, Thembi Mason and Professor Richard Blythe); Curtin University (Professor Suzanne Trinidad); University of Tasmania (Professor Noel Frankham); Newcastle University (formerly Professor Richard Vella now represented by Dr Raffaele Marcellino); Queensland University of Technology (Professor Susan Street and Associate Professor Christina Hong-Joe); Central Queensland University (Professor Donna Brien); Charles Sturt University (formerly Professor Anthony Cahalan now Associate Professor Margaret Woodward) and The University of New South Wales (Graham Forsyth). Project team leaders/members include: Associate Professor Bill Wade, Tony Woodward, Dr Louise McWhinnie, Jane Lawrence, Professor Josie Arnold, Linda Erceg, Dr Les Morgan and Sandra Gattenhof.

Support for this activity has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this activity do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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