Chapter 12

The Application of Blended Action Learning to Leadership Development
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the use of blended action learning in a professional development context. Action learning is a process that involves small groups of learners working on issues or problems they face in their every day work with the support of a facilitator. Although action learning sets most often meet face-to-face, ICT is increasingly being used to support or in some cases replace traditional set meetings, thus providing a 'blended' approach. Action learning is a potentially empowering process that encourages reflection and questioning and promotes shifts in workplace practice. The role of the action learning facilitator appears to be a key element in the success of this approach. The purpose of this chapter is to describe a case study of a blended action learning process designed to support leadership development and discuss the subsequent implications and emerging trends.

INTRODUCTION

Blended action learning is a process that involves small groups or sets of learners working on issues or problems in face-to-face settings with the use of ICT to support some of the interactions. This chapter describes a case study in which participants, who were teachers in the New Zealand Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector, both met face-to-face in facilitated workshops and interacted online. The online interactions allowed for ongoing reflection, discussion and the sharing of knowledge and resources related to leadership back at their respective workplaces. The open source software MOODLE[1] was the enabling technology used in this study and the ICTs used include email, online

reflective journals, forum discussions including online forums, and chat sessions. The group used an action learning process to learn about themselves as leaders and to work collaboratively on issues and challenges related to their leadership roles. Preliminary data from this study suggests that blended action learning groups are a very effective model for use in leadership development. Some of the benefits of this model are that it: allows for an intensive professional learning experience while not requiring a large amount of scheduled meeting time; encourages both individual and shared reflection; supports participants to identify and take action on issues that they face in their everyday work; and builds communities of practice through the sharing of knowledge and the building of strong networks. Both the action learning process and the role of the action learning facilitator in the face-to-face and virtual learning environments will be described and analysed in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Leadership in ECE

There is no commonly accepted definition or understanding of what leadership in the ECE sector involves. This situation has been attributed to the "complexity of the field and the wide variety of program types" (Schomberg, 1999, p. 215). Rodd (2001, p. 10) has argued that "leadership is a contextual phenomenon, that is, it means different things to different people in different contexts". Scrivens (2003), drawing on Southworth's (2002) work, agrees. She has contended that "there is not just one way to be a leader" and that "leadership will vary from culture to culture and situation to situation" (p. 30). The diversity of the sector makes a common understanding of the notion of leadership problematic.

There has been debate about the similarities and differences between leadership in ECE and in the school sector or corporate world. Although some characteristics of leadership such as vision, courage and ethics; consideration of work culture; and productive work style (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001) appear to be universal, several writers have identified and discussed major differences between leadership in early childhood and in other settings. Henderson-Kelly and Pamphilon (2000, p. 9), in a discussion of the relevance of generic leadership and management language and practices to childcare, have commented that "many ideas provided structure and affirmation to the children's services leaders' work; however, an equal number provided contradictions". Kagan and Hallmark (p. 8) have claimed that "the intimacy, flexibility, diversity and individualization of early childhood programmes create a decidedly different leadership context than the formality, uniformity, rigidity, and bureaucratization that has been conventionally associated with the corporate setting". Many of the commonly accepted definitions of leadership are not appropriate for early childhood settings because of the more collaborative way early childhood teachers work and the lack of a hierarchical structure in the profession (Morgan, 1997).

More recent literature has minimized the differences between ECE and the wider field of education. Rodd (as cited in Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003) has stated that "being a leader is not at all different from being a leader in any other field. Effective leadership, be it of a large multi-national company or a child-care centre, requires certain attitudes, attributes and skills" (p. 22). The more recent literature on conceptions of leadership in the wider field of educational leadership such as distributed leadership (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003; Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2003) suggest frameworks more in line with the collaborative leadership approaches favoured in the ECE sector, so it appears the differences are becoming less significant.

A study exploring notions of leadership in the New Zealand Centres of Innovation programme found that leadership in these centres

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