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A sociocultural perspective on learning for leadership in a global context: a focus on the experience of full-time 'pre-experience' MBA students (0028)

Programme number: R6

Research Domain: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

### Outline

There is a call for business education programmes to produce employable graduates who are 'business-ready', developing enough 'transferable skills' to be capable of 'hitting the ground running'. An alternative conceptualisation of a business education programme sees it as a developmental opportunity involving the identity of the whole student and the development of the capability to comprehend and influence the complexities of contemporary life (Kegan, 1984,1992; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Pegg et al, 2012). This conceptualisation is particularly relevant to students on a 'pre-experience' MBA, learning about their own leadership potential, as it involves creating a developmentally-orientated and potentially transformative pedagogical pattern that encourages self-awareness, team working and opportunities for leadership alongside knowledge development (Portnow et al, 1998). However, although this type of approach has been commended (for example Kreber, 2010), student development remains a poorly understood concept in the UK, is under- researched (Quinlan, 2011) and presents particular challenges to students and their tutors alike.

Research on student leadership development suggests the significance of integrating theories associated with leadership with theories of adult development into programme design (Dugan, 2011; Wagner, 2011). An essential component of any MBA programme involves developing understanding of theories of leadership. However, to promote leadership development and a more complex understanding of leadership, it is necessary to actively promote personal leadership awareness against theoretical perspectives, and to acknowledge the challenges involved in changing personal perceptions and conceptualisations. This is particularly relevant when working with those at the start of their careers and makes particular demands on the tutor and the pedagogical approaches adopted.

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010:45) suggest that a Business School may create an '*identity workspace*' for leadership development by providing the type of environment and

experiences that enable in students the self-understanding necessary for the development of more complex identities. This does not mean simply taking account of the single student as the unit of development, as it needs to be comprehensively student-centred, embrace diversity and include all of those involved. It encourages understanding of the influence of organisational context, previous experiences and future aspirations and the group's culture. On an accredited programme like the MBA, with the need to meet learning outcomes as well as provide a developmental opportunity, providing an integrated curriculum and a pedagogical approach with these aims in mind is particularly challenging. Viewing the processes involved through a sociocultural lens helps to identify the complexities of the students' experiences and the influence of organisational issues and therefore supports future development.

The full-time MBA at the City of London Business School (London Metropolitan University) is designed for young adults preparing for a career involving leadership and management. Students are recruited internationally from widely diverse backgrounds and the programme consists of semester-based content modules plus a year-long module associated with leadership and personal development. A sociocultural analysis of the students' experiences on the year-long module, Leadership and Personal Development has enabled their perspectives and the organisational context to be taken into account, so informing future planning and development. The pedagogical strategy adopted for this year-long module involves the students in finding out about themselves, their influences and values and also gives them the opportunity to plan, carry out and evidence an event through which they can show their understanding of the development of their own leadership capacity. The MBA student body at London Metropolitan University is characterised by diversity, which provides challenges but also considerable advantages over other, more homogeneous groups. The approach adopted capitalises on this diversity, enabling the students to learn from their differences. The students show their learning and development through the preparation of a portfolio of evidence including individual and group tasks, presentations, websites and conventional written text. As groups, they have to devise and implement a fundraising event for a charity of their choice, and this provides the vehicle through which they learn about developing leadership capacity in a global context.

Taking a sociocultural viewpoint of a learning context helps with identifying influences and outcomes in a developmental environment. At the end of the 2012-13 academic year the students were asked how the opportunities on the year-long module had influenced the

development of their leadership capacity. Using a qualitative instrument developed by James and Biesta (2007:33) their responses were analysed according to whether they perceived that their capacity had been '*confirmed, developed, challenged or changed*' during the year. In a similar vein, and using another qualitative instrument developed by James and Biesta (2007:38) the organisational context was analysed to identify how it '*permitted, promoted, inhibited or ruled out*' particular approaches.

Analysis of responses from the students indicate for example, that they felt challenged by the style of teaching adopted and the tasks set, particularly at the beginning where they needed to analyse themselves and identify areas for development. As time progressed they felt that the approach allowed them an optimal balance of trying out and reflecting on their behaviours to help them adapt to the needs of the situation and to develop accordingly. In particular they enjoyed having the freedom to make their own decisions. Significant areas of change involved their conceptions of leadership itself, and how it related to working collaboratively, especially with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Appreciating that a 'perfect' leader does not exist was one outcome, and also that leadership, rather than being an independent activity was in reality an interdependent activity.

Analysing the experience of organising and teaching this module using the second of the instruments developed by James and Biesta (2007) identified the significance of the organisational context and the particular issues involved for the tutor in encouraging awareness of the development of leadership with students from diverse backgrounds. In particular, the analysis showed the significance and demands of developing a supportive, challenging and at times confrontational environment and the difficulties presented by different approaches being used elsewhere in the programme. The analyses are helpful as they contribute to discussions regarding the creation of an '*identity workspace*' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010:45) with pre-experience MBA students, provide valuable evidence for informing future planning and how the programme can be developed to provide the students with the opportunities to develop their own leadership capacities in a global context.

## References

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