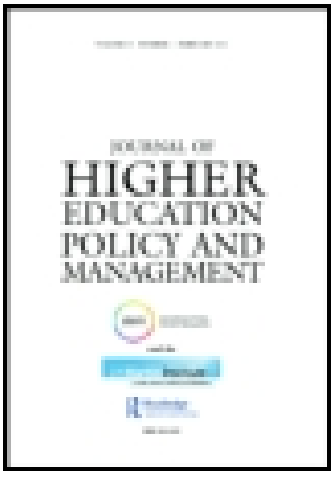

Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjhe20

Middle leaders' learning in a university context

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Published online: 26 Mar 2015.

Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 2015
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1019120

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Middle leaders' learning in a university context

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This article focuses on the phenomenon of middle leadership in a university context and directs attention to the significance of learning as a central facet of leadership development. Drawing on the reflections of two of the authors as new middle leaders (chairpersons of departments), this article critically examines how middle leaders learn aspects of their role. Two tenets underpin our analysis: learning is fundamentally a social process – we learn with and from others; and learning is relational – what and how we learn is determined to some extent by others and affects others. Our experiences point to learning constraints and affordances arising from events, practices and artefacts. Constraints were largely associated with transmission learning experiences, while affordances were found in collaborative knowledge-sharing contexts that arose as *information grounds* in response to an information need. We argue that both those we lead, and the organisation itself, would likewise benefit from a knowledge-sharing perspective on learning.

Keywords: higher education; knowledge-sharing; middle leadership; relational leadership

Introduction

Middle leadership positions in higher education, and in universities specifically, encompass heads or chairpersons of departments (CoDs), heads of schools, faculties and other academic units. Those who take up these positions can be thought of as 'manager-academics' (Deem, 1998; Deem & Brehony, 2005) or 'leader-academics' (Inman, 2009). Many universities, particularly those in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, continue the practice of selecting these middle leaders from within the ranks of their contemporaries and framing the position as one that is temporary and rotational (McMaster, 2014; Smith, 2007). After a period of a few years, manager-academics typically return to join their colleagues becoming, once again, academics. The period of time in a middle leadership position is often seen as one divorced from the trajectory of their usual academic lives. As 'a duty to be fulfilled', middle leadership in universities is widely acknowledged as potentially detrimental to this trajectory in relation particularly to research productivity, but also something that is frequently essential for career advancement. Amidst these tensions, this research has sought to critically explore middle leadership as experienced and enacted by academics who perceive the role and work of leadership as integral to and embedded in their work and ongoing career development as academics.

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The structural position of the middle leader in the university

Bennett et al.'s (2007) identification of two key tensions inherent in the role of middle leaders points to the structural complexity of middle leadership positions in universities. These tensions are explained here in relation to the role of head or chair of department. They are, however, similarly applicable to the 'next middle', relating to, for example, deans of faculties. In the case of heads of chairs of department, first, there is tension associated with the expectation that they retain loyalty to the whole-of-faculty agendas and interests, as while also representing the interests of their particular department or area of responsibility. Second, they are caught between a university culture of line management within a hierarchical framework and the professional need for cooperation and collegiality within their department or area of responsibility. Hence, Lapp and Carr (2006) have identified middle leaders as being synchronistically both *master* and *slave* as they enact the complex roles of being a *subordinate* to those in more senior leadership and management roles, an *equal* amongst middle leaders holding comparable positions and a *superior* in relation to those they are assigned to lead.

From a structural perspective, middle leaders are set apart from academic colleagues, with their position defined in relation to those above them and below them and roles articulated in these structural terms. In our context, the official statement of position purpose for a chairperson is framed primarily in terms of responsibility and accountability to those above; 'the Chairperson is responsible to the Vice-Chancellor through the dean for the leadership and management of the academic and administrative affairs of the department'. Reinforcing this is the rider that it is a position that 'may be terminated early … by decision of the relevant Dean'. The authority that a chairperson has in this position is thus framed in terms of that which is delegated from the dean, the vice-chancellor and overarching university committees, in our case Academic Board and Council. This structure of authority, as codified in the university position description, is linear and hierarchical. It constructs the chairperson as someone who puts policies, determined by those above, into place within departments below. This positioning reinforces an image of middle leadership centring on responsibilities that are framed in terms of discourses of performativity and accountability.

Middle leaders in universities are, however, also typically identified as having a responsibility for leading learning amongst staff within their department (or other unit) and thereby mentor individual staff in their career development and support the development of their unit as a collective (see, for example, Clegg & McAuley, 2005). Tasks such as undertaking performance reviews with staff to recognise past achievements and to plan future directions and responsibility to recognise and provide for learning and professional development needs for staff reflect this aspect of middle leadership. It is represented in the authors' official CoD position description as 'assist[ing], encourag[ing], and, when appropriate, direct[ing] staff to take up opportunities for training and development, including the upgrading of specific skills'.

Further, we contend that it is critical to acknowledge that the position and role of middle leaders present a need for, and expectation of, learning on the part of individuals coming into the position/role. Becoming a middle leader prompts engagement with, and development of, new knowledge, skills and perhaps also dispositions. It appears that, to date, little research has explored the learning of novices to middle leadership. As Inman (2009, p. 418) states, 'What has been written tends to focus on what [middle] leaders do, rather than why they have become leaders and how they have learnt to lead'. One departure from this is McMaster's (2014) 'reflective essay' in which she narrates her

own process of coming to know as a middle leader and the relationships and diverse sources that informed her learning. Our research has also pursued the latter aspect of the learning of middle leaders in universities. In so doing, it has particularly pointed to the potential for middle leaders to learn from one another, develop productive learning communities and, in the process, enhance organisational learning.

There is a significant body of literature exploring the concept of organisational learning. In recent years, this has taken a shift from systems thinking to relational learning, and the creation of a culture of learning built on relationships has gained prominence (see, for example, Davis & Jones, 2014; Hosking, 2006; Raelin, 2011; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As Uhl-Bien (2006, p. 662) explains, 'A relational perspective changes the focus from the individual to the collective dynamic (e.g. to combinations of interacting relations and contexts)'. From this perspective, leading a learning organisation, or part of an organisation, is about building relationships so as to create a deeper sense of connection whereby the person has not only a clearer appreciation of their organisational reality but also a stronger sense of their part in how it functions and develops. As we discuss below, this research served to particularly enhance awareness and understanding of the positioning of middle leaders within the university as a learning organisation.

The present study

The present study arose in the context of the first two authors becoming new CoDs in the faculty at the same time and enlisting the support and leadership expertise of the third author. What eventuated was a professional learning community, in which we sought to theorise our practice as a way of understanding the often personally and deeply felt frustrations and challenges that our new positions brought, but also, the sometimes-experienced sense of achievement and even joy. We also sought to more deeply understand our role and responsibilities and the limits of our agency in the organisation. To this end, we worked with the third author, to articulate our responses to contemporary leadership theory, to share our experiences and to reframe them in a way that better represented constraints and affordances associated with our position and the multiple roles associated with it. We did this in the context of two individual interviews with the third author and a number of shared discussions amongst the three of us. This constituted the descriptive *data* for the research project. Much of what we articulated concerned how we came to learn aspects of our role.

The research that arose in this context of a professional learning relationship between the first two authors (the new CoDs) and the third is best conceptualised as action research in that it was shared and cooperative, it focused on practice and action in practice, and it generated reflection on action (Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2010). However, not unlike McMaster's (2014) narrative, it is a personal account of the salient lived experiences of the first two authors – and in that sense, it can be seen as a phenomenographic study (Åkerlind, 2012). The two CoDs' accounts represent 'qualitatively different meanings or ways of experiencing the phenomenon' (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 116). However, as with any phenomenographic study, what is of primary interest is the 'structural relationships linking these different ways of experiencing' (Åkerlind, 2012, p. 116).

Taking the view that middle leadership is fundamentally relational (Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2015; Davis & Jones, 2014; Hosking, 2006; Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006) has allowed us to, indeed, reframe our experiences, to appreciate the inherently social nature of leadership, to recognise power relations amidst that and to consider the opportunities

for agency within and amidst the structures, processes and hierarchies that feature in our work as middle leaders. Previously, we have discussed our conceptualisation of middle leadership as relational, highlighting the discursive events, practices and artefacts of our context, which both reflect relations and are constituted by relations (Branson et al., 2015). In this article, we specifically consider how learning was experienced, how it was constrained and enabled by discursive events and practices, and how it was both represented and mediated through codified artefacts. Our aim was thus to explore responses to the following questions through critical reflective analysis of our experiences and the data and dialogue they have generated in this study.

(1) How can learning opportunities for middle leaders be enhanced within the university sector?
(2) How can we learn collectively with our colleagues to renegotiate events, practices and artefacts?
(3) How can we create better learning opportunities for those we lead?

In the section that follows we consider different conceptualisations of learning and learning relations pertinent to middle leadership. This provides a platform for then focusing on the analysis of our own experiences of learning as middle leaders. In our concluding discussion, we return to the key questions posed above.

Learning new knowledge and skills

Like other areas of leadership study, research on leading in higher education has included a focus on understanding the characteristics of individual leaders and models of leadership (see critiques of this paradigm by Davis & Jones, 2014; Fletcher, 2004; Hosking, 2006; McMaster, 2014; Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006), on understanding the development of leaders over time (Braun et al., 2009; Inman, 2011) and on analysing the types of knowledge needed in leadership roles, such as self-knowledge, people knowledge, knowledge of university structures and systems (Inman, 2009; Knight & Trowler, 2001). However, there remains a gap in understanding how leaders come to know – the social processes by which they learn aspects of their new position. The significance of this gap is underscored by research that points to an apparent lack of institutional engagement with learning for middle leadership. A number of previous studies have highlighted the fact that new middle leaders in higher education feel unprepared for their positions and, focusing on formal learning, point to the fact that universities tend to provide little in the way of training opportunities (Inman, 2009; Smith, 2007). Deem and Brehony's (2005) study, for instance, found that only one-third of the manager-academics interviewed had received any training. The fact that studies have largely framed learning as *training* suggests a default view of learning as transmission, not as a process that needs to be tailored for individual need, ongoing, and enabled in a social and cultural context.

Knowledge transmission

Viewing learning from a relational perspective that focuses on hierarchical structure assumes that CoDs have much to learn from those above. This view is enacted through knowledge transmission practices and events – knowledge is seen to be held by individuals (often positioned in higher levels of the organisation or 'external experts') and to be passed on to individuals such as a group of middle leaders. Knowledge transmission

focuses very much on a nondifferentiated generic view of a learner and their uptake of a circumscribed body of knowledge. In knowledge transmission, knowledge itself is seen as bounded, not contextually situated, factual and somewhat static. As Bosua and Scheepers (2007, p. 95) explain, 'Knowledge detached from its context becomes meaningless'. Smith's (2007) interviewees reported topics such as 'health and safety, equal opportunities or the university's administrative systems' as examples of such knowledge (Smith, 2007, p. 6). This type of knowledge, and the manner of its presentation, represents an autonomous view of learning, where learning considerations are removed from the context. Learning to be a middle leader (like other organisational knowing and learning) is rather, as Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow (2003, p. 3) explain, situated in the system of ongoing practices of action in ways that are relational, mediated by artefacts and always rooted in a context of interaction. Such knowledge is thus acquired through some form of participation, and it is continually reproduced and negotiated; that is, it is always dynamic and provisional.

More in line with the perspective outlined by Nicolini et al. (2003) is a view of learning as knowledge-sharing.

Knowledge transfer and sharing

Learning is a fundamentally social process, a 'collective participatory process of active knowledge construction emphasising context, interaction, and situatedness' (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 2). Bosua and Scheepers (2007), in their work on *Knowledge Management* in complex organisations, distinguish between *knowledge transfer* and *knowledge-sharing*. Knowledge transfer occurs when knowledge moves from one to another supported by a joint understanding of the context. Knowledge-sharing is

> a dual process of enquiring and contributing to knowledge through activities such as learning-by-observation, listening and asking, sharing ideas, giving advice, recognizing cues, and adopting patterns of behaviour ….[It] is both an individual and collective activity, involving explicit and tacit exchanges between people. (Bosua & Scheepers, 2007, p. 95)

Knowledge-sharing is a process captured in Lave and Wenger's (1991) familiar notion of communities of practice and implicit in their concept of *legitimate peripheral participation.* Legitimate peripheral participation is a relational model of learning that, if considered in the context of middle leaders in a university, would assume that novice middle leaders are privy to the practices of more experienced middle leaders and to the artefacts of the community and, through increasing participation in those practices and use of the artefacts, become more expert themselves. Novice middle leaders might expect to be mentored and provided with resources that are organised and presented in a way that is *tuned* to their needs. As Luckin (2008, p. 451) comments, human and artefact resources must be 'organized and activated appropriately' for effective learning to be supported. Inman (2009, p. 421) speaks of learning for middle leaders in higher education as needing to be 'bespoke and contextualised', thereby not only emphasising personalisation, but also implying a carefully *crafted* or *made-to-order* approach.

A great deal of knowledge associated with the role of the middle leader is codified in multiple text forms – or 'knowledge artefacts' (Bosua & Scheepers, 2007) including, but not restricted to, terms of reference for the position, policies and guidelines and meeting agendas and papers. It is reified in discursive events such as meetings. If an organisation

takes a knowledge-sharing approach, novice middle leaders might also expect knowledge artefacts and discursive events to be mediated by a more knowing middle leader.

Having distinguished knowledge transmission, transfer and sharing, we now turn describing our experiences in relation to these modes of learning.

Experiencing learning

This section presents our experiences of learning, recorded in the context of wider discussions with the third author on contemporary leadership theory and our experiences in general as we enacted our role.

Knowledge transmission, knowledge artefacts and mediation

Transition into the CoD role was essentially represented as one requiring knowledge transmission. It was a situation in which we, as the incoming chairpersons, also had to be proactive in seeking knowledge from the outgoing chairpersons. We had no official period of transition in which, as novices, we could shadow the expert. Our administrative assistants became the temporary and unofficial mentor, particularly in matters administrative. In both cases, knowledge was transmitted in the form of material artefacts – a CD of all department-related files from the former chairperson's desktop in one case and a pile of temporally organised files in another. In the view of the previous chairpersons, the material artefacts *handed down* seemingly represented what we needed to know.

The CD and the pile of temporally organised files potentially represented invaluable knowledge artefacts had they been more than meeting agendas, minutes, budget reports, etc., and had they been personally and meaningfully mediated. No helpful contextual information accompanied the physical handover of the CD, and thus what was contained in the computer files was not mediated in any way. In the case of the paper files, the handover was accompanied by little substantive mediation and was accompanied by advice on how to act to effect a personal agenda while in the CoD position. Much of the knowledge accumulated by the predecessors over their time as chairpersons remained tacit and disappeared as they vacated the position. The following comment illustrates the impact of this:

> I'd say that a lot of the work is understanding systems, and I think if you inherit or you have a relationship with a previous chair where you don't need to put in all that thinking around systems that would release you a lot. (CoD 2)

For both of us, neither codified knowledge sources (including those knowledge artefacts discussed above) nor discursive events were mediated by a more knowing leader. Had meaningful mediation occurred for us, we might have said our experiences, during the time of transition into our position, were ones of knowledge transfer. Had shared reflection and interaction occurred between previous and ourselves on how the departments might work more effectively in terms of both their own operation and for the faculty, we might have said our experiences were ones of knowledge-sharing.

Our transition into the position of chairperson was not experienced as a shared and collective activity. In retrospect, we are aware that such transition could be facilitated within and supported by a strong community of fellow chairpersons. Arguably the absence of such an experience was because the chairpersons previously had not operated as a collective or community in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms or, more specifically, a

professional community of practice (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Neither was our learning experienced as 'emphasising context, interaction, and situatedness' (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 2).

Beyond our time of transition, both of us frequently experienced knowledge transmission. For instance, on a number of occasions, speakers – *experts* – were organised to speak on topics ranging from an explanation of the university's budgetary processes to an outline of the university and faculty's publicity activities. The former was a response to a request for support in helping us manage our departmental budgets and the latter was unsolicited by the chairpersons. Both were deemed to be knowledge that we needed and/or would find useful in our roles. If knowledge is transmitted to middle leaders when others deem it to be needed, and in a form determined by others, it risks the possibility of being rejected, regarded as nonimportant, as it is not contextualised or tuned to personal need.

When learning opportunities are deficient, such as in our case, where there was an over-dependency on knowledge transmission, role holders are likely to seek to escape from the position or seek or create alternative learning opportunities. This notion is captured in the term, *work around*, used primarily in information technology to describe alternative and sometimes idiosyncratic strategies used to solve a problem, or reduce an information gap when more conventional procedures or processes do not work (see, for example, Petridies, McClelland, & Nodine, 2004). We describe below how our work-around was an alternative community and space for learning.

An alternative community and space for learning

A sense of frustration, and the experience of limited control over what and how knowledge gaps were addressed, how learning was experienced and constrained by discursive practices, led to a group of novice middle leaders (including but not limited to the two chairpersons in this study) establishing their own 'information ground' (Fisher, Landry, & Naumer, 2007; Pettigrew, 1999), in the form of *breakfast meetings*, which were held at a cafe some distance from the faculty but still on campus. The three factors that in concert determine an information ground are information, people and place. Information grounds are 'synergistic environments temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information' (Pettigrew, 1999. p. 811). One of the middle leaders commented on these meetings:

> That's been really positive, that relationship building within as a group and to recognise we're all facing similar issues and that there is a lot that we can learn from each other and we can also be very supportive of each other. (CoD 2)

The comment captures the dynamics of information grounds as expanded by Fisher et al. (2007) – that in an information ground, people may initially be motivated by the need for social engagement or mutual support, but that they come to experience significant information sharing, from which they can benefit 'along physical, social, affective, and cognitive dimensions' (Fisher et al., 2007). The following comments highlight how the information ground shifted to become much more strategic.

> But also increasingly, it's quite interesting, it's also shifted to how can we operate as a collective more strategically. Because I guess that we are seeing some things that we want to

> influence and don't feel that current structures and processes are enabling us to influence so we're actually being proactive in trying to create space and opportunity and a mechanism to do that. (CoD 2)

The professional learning community that grew in association with the information ground appeared to be constituted because of the fact that a critical number of novice middle leaders with a similar ideological stance, values and motivations were appointed at roughly the same time. The more senior management personnel constructed the positive relationship between the new middle leaders and their peers as one of mutual emotional support and friendship. In seeing this collective as a friendship or support group, they thus possibly limited its agency. While these were undoubtedly strong dynamics of our relationship, the potential of our professional learning community to contribute to knowledge generation in the faculty was perhaps its most powerful, but under-acknowledged aspect.

From informal to formal activity

At the time of writing, the group of chairpersons has been striving to gain recognition as a collective by asserting its role and responsibilities in making a strategic contribution and by codifying its authority and reporting lines though proposing a formal terms of reference for its constitution and its operation. However, there are ongoing feelings of constraint associated with others' apparent reluctance to recognise middle leaders as a knowledge resource. In this regard, during the period of our tenure as middle leaders, we recognise that we were *consulted* in the process of reviewing policies and guidelines and other codified text forms. The exercise of review was one that often encouraged the adoption of minor changes, and policies were seldom critically scrutinised and collectively reconstructed; the assumptions underlying the policies and guidelines were seldom questioned. From our perspective, this signified both a lack of commitment to knowledge change for the organisation and a denial of the capacity of the chairpersons to collectively play an important role in organisational learning. This resulted in some frustration as seen in the comment below:

> Why not use people's strengths, we work collectively so actually we're putting away our personas as chairpersons but we're sitting down as people who have values and are committed and who are reasonably good, if not very good, strategic thinkers and why don't you utilise us better? (CoD 1)

Knowledge-sharing comprises a two-way exchange and a commitment to it would ensure that chairpersons, and all members of staff in fact, are encouraged to make a knowledge contribution and would mean that the social practices of the faculty afforded such contributions. Principles of knowledge-sharing then apply to relations between ourselves, as chairpersons and those above us, but also in the learning of those we lead.

Learning for those we lead

Knowledge-sharing was deemed critical in facilitating learning for those we lead. We worked to share the knowledge we had about the organisation with staff in our respective departments:

> I've tried to make all of the department far more aware of the many things coming across my desk, the many things raised at senior management, CoDs, and so on, and actually getting

> people far more engaged with the breadth of issues that you're trying to deal with on behalf of the department, and I think that's really important. (CoD 2)

This related to knowledge that, in our view, was tuned to their need.

> Everybody has a right to know information that negatively and positively impacts on them, and underpinning that is the idea that actually there isn't a fair and the collective knowing things about knowing information, knowing about budgets, knowing about how much of an allowance a chairperson gets or so I think that whole thing about disclosure is really, really important for me, and so I do try to practise that and articulate decision making and when I have found information, both good and bad that might impact on people I work really hard at trying to share that responsibly with people. (CoD 1)

If we accept that learning is a relational as well as a social process, then other members of our departments can be framed as resources for each other's learning. To this end, as CoDs we aimed to encourage collaboration not competition, as explained below.

> My work with people is leading up to and in relation to promotion applications; and also within that trying to very much foster a collaborative sort of atmosphere within the department. I was [saying] to people that you're not competing against each other in this promotion, if two of you are trying to go above the bar for senior lecturer, work together, sit down and share, and that's all been new and positive for people and that's been really great to see. (CoD 2)

While research expertise was recognised by the faculty through the codification of research outputs, teaching and other forms of expertise were often not acknowledged or shared. We worked to create contexts in which expertise of this nature is shared amongst members of our departments. Practices in our departments with this aim included the nomination of those who had recently become expert in an administrative area such as student disciplinary processes for plagiarism, or take a lead role in extending departmental knowledge and understanding of assessment and moderation. This person, for the moment, became the *go-to person* for that particular process. This recognises the dynamic and situated aspect of expertise. Other practices that reflected a distributed expertise perspective included rotating chairing of meetings, and the devolving of sections of the larger department budget to particular groups.

Our commitment to knowledge-sharing was also reflected in the way we organised departmental social practices such as departmental meetings. The two chairpersons in this study sought to use meetings primarily for discussion and debate for knowledge-sharing and collective learning, rather than for transmitting knowledge that could otherwise be accessed by department staff through forums such as online repositories of policy documents. We experienced different degrees of success in this endeavour, with one finding that time constraints of meetings, limited opportunities for the whole department, and interpersonal relations amongst staff all presented challenges.

The practices that we tried to foster in supporting the learning of those we lead are premised on a belief and recognition that our learning must incorporate the knowing of others. Burns (2010) posits that it is critical not only that the leader takes the time to learn and appreciate what are the foremost important values, needs, motives and beliefs of those they are leading but also, most significantly, that these are embedded in some tangible way into their leadership vision – and we would add, action. However, the reality is that managerial aspects of our position as CoDs have constrained our ability to foster learning for others:

> I came here very much wanting to play a lead role in terms of particularly leading research capability and capacity building and helping people shift in terms of their own profiles and us collectively shifting the profile and that's definitely been hindered by being in the CoD role. (CoD 2)

Learning outcomes as relational

Our tenure as chairpersons is a temporary one, a 3-year period, after which we return to the ranks of our colleagues, to be led by another. As indicated in our introductory comments, the tenure can be thought of as time apart from our work and development as academics; as a time of 'managing oneself, one's job, and one's continuing learning in a context of constrained time and sources, conflicting priorities, and complex inter- and intra-professional relationships' (Eraut, 2004, p. 259). But what are the learning outcomes for us? Many of the comments are imbued with a consideration of relational outcomes. An example is as follows:

> I think really one of the huge gifts, benefits, good things about [being a CoD] is your relational expansion, actually, your world just expands and gives you a completely different, it shifts you into a completely different perspective. And I can remember feeling like that right at the beginning, it was a sort of slightly otherworldly, you know, it was almost a bodily experience, and I was thinking oh, I'm sitting here in front of the room and it just felt quite different. (CoD 1)

In fact, knowledge of self, in concert with knowledge of others – the essence of what relational means, was deemed to be significant. When asked 'What sort of professional learning do you think would be of greater support to you in your role?', one of the middle leaders identified relational awareness.

> I think something where I learnt about how others might perceive my actions or how I'm perceived by others or how I threaten people. So you said that to me the other day, 'Have you thought about what might be this person's reaction if you say this?' So I don't really do that and I think if I did that more systematically I might be more aware. That would be useful, I think. (CoD 1)

Discussion and recommendations

Previously we have presented a view of middle leadership in the university context considering a number of relational dimensions including power relations and discursive relations (Branson et al., 2015). This article has focused on learning relations and is premised on the fact that we learn with and from others and that what and how we learn is determined to some extent by others and affects others.

This perspective has allowed us to see that learning (from both an individual and an organisational perspective) is constrained when people, practices and discursive events delimit what we can learn from others. These include practices that support knowledge transmission, that pay minimal attention to mediation of knowledge artefacts and discursive practices and that fail to see all staff, not just CoDs, as contributors to knowledge generation and new learning for the organisation. It has also allowed us to see how learning can be enabled when we take an 'ecology of resources' perspective (Davis & Jones, 2014; Luckin, 2008; Westberry & Franken, 2013) which recognises that all participants in a community or a learning context can contribute to knowledge generation and have a perspective they can bring to bear on problems, issues and discussions.

Learning can be enabled through informal and self-initiated groups and communities. The experience that afforded good learning for us was the information ground, the serendipitous problem-focused and outcomes-centred meetings and interactions were what provided us with situated and relevant knowledge to more successfully fulfil our roles effectively. Inman (2009) however cautions against informal learning of this nature being the only form of learning and suggests that

> learning from informal experience needs to be more conscious with time planned for critical reflection and discussion … [as] informal learning is likely to be unstructured, unclear and unplanned, and it is therefore doubtful how much development actually takes place. (Inman, 2009, p. 425–426)

We suggest, in response to Inman, our workaround resulted in providing a productive and informative information ground. Moreover, we take the view that such activities should signal to the organisation that learning and knowledge gaps exist. Petridies et al.-(2004, p. 101) reflect this view also when they claim that 'existing workarounds within an organization provide a blueprint for identifying the pressing information gaps that need to be resolved when considering improvements ….'

Novice middle leaders in universities which are learning institutions, and who themselves are teachers, may expect that they will be offered effective formal learning opportunities and that those learning opportunities follow principles of good learning and teaching practice. Our experiences suggest that the university offers few effective formal opportunities for significant learning. Our formal learning opportunities represent a form of *training*, a concept not dissociated from transmission and an autonomous view of learning (see Deem & Brehony, 2005; Inman, 2009; Smith, 2007). Inman (2009) presents a range of 'development approaches': reading, modelling, observing, questioning, problem solving, counselling and coaching. Inman's model 'builds on the perceived effectiveness of more experiential forms of professional development, which considers a leader's background and needs rather than providing a generic formal training solution' (Inman, 2009, p. 428). This arguably better serves the leadership needs of an organisation such as a university.

Argyris and Schön (1978) make a distinction between learning contexts that ask for single loop thinking or those that involve double loop thinking. In the former, knowledge is not there to be contested, but is information to be acted upon or implemented in a way that allows the organisation perhaps to solve a problem, or respond to a challenge in an expedient way, which allows the organisation to continue to function as it has done previously. In the latter, problems and challenges invoke not only the examination of possible responses and solutions but also the assumptions that underpin them. With respect to contributing to the learning of the organisation, professional learning communities are far more effective than individuals in bringing discrepancies, dissonance and critique in ways that can contribute to the double loop learning and thus the health of the organisation. For middle leaders, professional learning communities are powerful ways of drawing on the expertise of each other to create new knowledge and to contest old ways of knowing. The middle leadership learners in learning relationships with each other in our work increasingly became aware of their collective potential and acted collectively in their knowledge contributions.

One important consideration not discussed in the present article is the wider context of education reform and change, which must be acknowledged. Contemporary universities are sites of change, a fact drawn to our attention by numerous writers at least two decades

ago (see, for example, Buchbinder, 1993; Pinto-Coelho & Carvalho, 2013). The contemporary context – the new managerialism, was well described by Deem in 1998 and still appears apposite today:

> The techniques highlighted by 'new managerialist' theorists include the use of internal cost centres, the fostering of competition between employees, the marketisation of public sector services and the monitoring of efficiency and effectiveness through measurement of outcomes and individual staff performances. Other features include attempting to change the regimes and cultures of organisations and to alter the values of public sector employees to more closely resemble those found in the private 'for profit' sector. (Deem, 1998, p. 49–50)

The new managerialism plays an unequivocal role in framing the position of the middle leader and the relations that the middle leader has with those above, alongside and below her/him. However, Clegg and McAuley (2005, p. 7–8) report that academics in middle leadership positions construct themselves as leaders rather than as managers: 'Heads of department and other middle academic managers frequently disassociate themselves from managerialist practices, which they identify only at the most senior levels, while they rely on consent and negotiation within the confines of mutually understood norms of collegiality'. This preference for a more relational interpretation of the position of middle leader needs to be supported by learning opportunities, social practices and mediation processes that enable middle leaders to enact relational leadership.

Conclusion

In the time since taking up middle leadership roles, we have come to understand that what we need to know and learn is much more complex than what can be represented in the text forms we inherited, or the transmission-oriented sessions we were exposed to. Given this complexity, we feel it is essential that the university frames the middle leaders' period of time in the role as a time of learning and development, not just one of performing aspects of the position as prescribed in codified documents such a position descriptions. In answer to the questions raised earlier, we conclude that learning and learning opportunities for chairpersons need to:

- provide knowledge and learning interactions that are 'bespoke and contextualised' (Inman, 2009, p. 421),
- involve the meaningful mediation of artefacts and events,
- value the knowledge contributions/dynamic expertise that middle leaders bring, and
- structure events and enact practices that bring these relations into being.

Learning for those we lead needs to reflect the same enabling conditions as we deem necessary for our own learning.

A relational analysis has allowed us to appreciate Newman's (1995) notion of a 'transformative organisation' where 'work is more team-based, hierarchies are flattened and considerable attention is paid to long-term goals and to the management of organisational cultures' (Newman, as cited in Deem, 1998, p. 50). This arguably could serve as the new middle leader's work plan and thus also as the learning brief.

We see it as critical that the university recognises the relational complexity inherent in the position of CoD and, in fact, that of other middle leaders as well. For a university to not only model its fundamental calling to promote learning, but also to implement prudent

strategic organisational practice, personal and organisational learning must surely be promoted as an unequivocal cultural norm.

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