COMMENTARY

Immaculate consummation: learning meets leadership

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Introit

Early on in the writing of this commentary I was distracted temporarily by a looming deadline for another project. This necessitated me working my way systematically through some recent OECD publications on leadership and school improvement. It was while doing so that the true significance of this ‘Carpe Vitam’ symposium began to fall into place for me. It became clear when I compared what the OECD and ‘Carpe Vitam’ were separately saying that I was confronted by two quite dramatically different sets of international perspectives on school leadership. Both, in their own way, were about the uptake of leadership-related ideas and how they travelled, and about the ways in which cultures mediated their definition and reception. On the one hand, the impression created was that this migration was largely uneventful and seamless, the mediations unproblematic and that the cultural boundaries encountered were highly permeable. Such is the kind of collective disposition and mindset of global policy-making elites like the OECD: few problems are intractable and few barriers insurmountable, at least not for very long, if only one is prepared to try hard enough to push ahead. On the other hand, of course, there is the hard micro-level grind of situated and lived reality when scholars and practitioners combine their forces: the energy expended in forging links and searching for common ground, in striving to find a shared language, in trying to come to terms with contrasting world views, in accommodating and respecting differences and in negotiating the outcomes. In short, I had before me a contrast between an agenda that was globally pretentious (and audacious) in its drive for the convergence of systems around a normatively preferred set of policy levers (e.g. school autonomy, distributed leadership, so-called ‘system’ leadership) in what it took to be the interests of learning improvement and an on the ground
attempt to construct an international practitioner-based project which accorded due recognition to divergence and complexity.

**Heaven bound**

As a policy-making elite the OECD is susceptible to one of the fatal weaknesses of all elites: an inclination to be inwardly self-referential in their views of the world and to seek confirmation of the positions to which they are already predisposed or committed. In short, there is a strong risk of closed-mindedness and all the accompanying hallmarks of groupthink in their collective self-talk (Janis 1982). But do the same accusations apply to those working at the coalface? What happens when scholars with interests in two domains of inquiry and research (learning and leadership) bring together groups of practitioners with similar interests for the duration of a project? To what extent do they succumb to similar kinds of pressures? Then, does their attempted alignment of leadership and learning merely turn out to be an uneasy form of coexistence (a kind of intellectual odd couple relationship) or can the two be combined successfully in relatively straightforward ways? In short, is the learning–leadership encounter a mutually supportive one, so that both areas emerge strengthened by their coupling or is one advantaged at the expense of the other? And to what extent might the proposed consummation be either complicated or facilitated by the different sets of cultural assumptions and understandings that inform the architects of such matchmaking? These are just a handful of the questions that are highlighted by the articles comprising this ‘Carpe Vitam’ symposium and with which the project members wrestled.

Implicit in what I have been saying so far is the theme of diffusion—the traffic in ideas, the rate and scope of their movement and factors which support and/or impede them. This is one feature of ‘Carpe Vitam’. The other is that it also provides an interesting case study in the production of working knowledge. For this reason, rather than trying to extend what I have previously written about diffusion as a globalizing process (Gronn 2007), I have chosen on this occasion to highlight the idea of international projects as being somewhat analogous to temporary societies or communities, the viability and utility of which depend in large measure on their members’ capacity to establish collaborative working norms as part of their negotiation of shared end values. As with diffusion, so too with globalization. While the lifespan of this particular project (three to four years) occurred during an epoch considered by numerous commentators to be distinctive for its high levels of rapid globalized exchange and diffusion—which sometimes comes with a high price tag and occurs at an electrifying speed bordering on contagion (as has been witnessed so graphically and experienced so alarmingly in the second half of 2008 with the near collapse of financial capitalism)—the scholarly collaboration that ‘Carpe Vitam’ entailed would still have been possible in earlier eras. That is, there is nothing uniquely globalizing, as such, about ‘Carpe Vitam’. Indeed, globalizing pressures and processes are far from unique to contemporary times for, as historians readily attest (see, for example, Hopkins 2002: 3), these features in some guise or another have been intrinsic
to the human condition from time immemorial. From antiquity onwards, for example, as part of the exchange relations that were consolidated between early networked communities, the trading, borrowing, copying, emulating, imitating, templating and adapting of tools and ideas have been defining attributes of humanity. It was only during the early nineteenth century (with the tightening of the global web as a result of industrialization) that this global diffusion became ‘a little faster than in the heyday of the Sumerian web’ (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 214). The point, then, is not that ‘Carpe Vitam’ exemplifies or typifies globalization, but merely that the intensified scope and scale of contemporary globalizing pressures have proven to be highly advantageous for the level of engagement demanded by this particular project.

**Matters of doctrine**

The ‘Carpe vitam’ participants managed to sustain themselves as a temporary band of pilgrims during 2002–2005. They did so in something of the spirit of a breakaway movement from the mainstream orthodoxy of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) (MacBeath *et al.* in this issue). While the project should not be viewed as evidence of doctrinal schism within this particular ecclesia, at least one leading ICSEI patriarch (Reynolds 2007) has recently queried the extent of the global impact of its evangelizing mission. To ICSEI apostates and sceptics the respective effectiveness and improvement wings of this holy (or unholy?) alliance appear at times to pull in different directions. Further, on the fringe of the improvers’ camp there is a level of iconoclastic fervour that verges at times on an urge to purge the very idea of ‘improvement’ itself (Wrigley 2008).

The scholars who were the prime movers in this project were from five (OECD) countries. After an initial meeting, these five were augmented by representatives from two further (OECD) countries. Working against the OECD grain (as is manifest in its methodological approach to the PISA studies, for example), this team eschewed outcome measures of improvement and instead privileged such familiar qualitative foci as: understanding, portraiture, narrative, vignettes, texts and images. Statistically speaking, nonetheless, the details of the entire project are impressively ambitious: apart from the researchers themselves there were: seven nations, twenty-four schools, over eighty school personnel, four annual international conferences, numerous workshops, documents (visual and verbal), surveys (beginning and end), interviews and focus groups, shadowing, ongoing dialogue, numerous site visits and lots and lots of talking. As to the learning impact of the project, the team committed itself to the strategy of exposure to the unfamiliar, rather than an approach of deliberate influence or intervention (although the project’s influence, as Møller’s dialogue with her Norwegian principal shows, was unavoidable), i.e. the project provided space and opportunity for those involved to question and test their own assumptions through participation and the crossing of cultural boundaries. At various points, different national researchers attested to the participants’ self-reported shifts in their preconceptions (MacBeath *et al.* in this issue). Cultural exposure, as anyone who
has experienced the transitory status of tourism knows well and as Schutz’s (1964) celebrated essay on what it means to be a cultural stranger confirms, can be a potentially powerful engine for fast learning, no matter how temporary or sustained the immersion undergone. On the other hand, a more hardline card carrying devotee of an Argyrisian persuasion might seek to query the extent to which the learning loops yielded by cultural exposure were predominantly of the single or double variety (Argyris 1990). Conceding for the moment that there may have been shifts in outlook or world view comparable with double loop learning among the participating members of the project schools, what happened when they returned to their workplaces: did their new learning dissipate under the weight of the routines and ruts of their own everyday practice, which simply proved too adamantine? And what about their own colleagues’ potential absorptive capacity: were they able to transfer what they had learned to their professional peers or was it unable to travel?

Instead of 10 Commandments there were five headline key principles that emerged out of this long march towards the promised land of learning improvement and the formation of democratic citizens (Møller, Portin in this issue). The gestation of these five was made possible by research, collaboration and theory, and they became the overarching normative standards by which all aspects of the project were judged (MacBeath et al. in this issue). These quasi-commandments are proclaimed as general and universal in their applicability—but then so, of course, were their Mosaic antecedents. At this point, however, the Biblical analogy breaks down for, unlike the latter edicts, which admitted of no hedging or qualification (‘Thou shalt not’), these five carry with them detailed elaborations which endeavour to explain their meaning and applicability. If it took 39 articles to demarcate the newly emerging Reformation English national church from the old corruption of papal Rome, 27 dot points have served to spell out the articles of faith of this learning–leadership project. Exegesis, through devising and linking illustrative vignettes of practice (the foci of critique and reflection) to principles has, however, proven to be difficult for the project participants (according to MacBeath et al. in this issue) because contextualized exemplars are plurivocal: they have resisted tight confinement and have spoken to more than one principle. On the other hand, the respect for and recognition of difference and dissonance as part of the overall spirit of cosmopolitanism of ‘Carpe Vitam’ (Møller, Portin in this issue) contrasts refreshingly with the convergent proselytizing of the OECD.

Redemptive stories

‘Carpe Vitam’ recounts a never-ending story of learning. As a pilgrimage, the project’s hallmarks were critical friendship and research co-inquiry. In addition, distributed leadership was utilized as an organizing framework or perspective during the journey (Møller, Portin in this issue). The subject matter of two of the contributions (Møller, Johnson in this issue), however, foregrounds principals. This is a curious and ironical tendency that should not go unremarked, for there is a similar bias evident in the six case studies in Spillane’s and Diamond’s (2007) recent book Distributed Leadership in
Practice, where the focus is squarely on the deeds of six US principals. In their self-justificatory accounts in Møller's and Johnson’s articles two ‘Carpe Vitam’ principals try to reconcile their self-confessed leader-centrism with the imperative to be distributional.

The work life of school principals and headteachers has rarely if ever been a free or easy ride. Thanks to a succession of media reports and an accumulating body of research, however, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the already high cognitive and emotional loads known to be experienced by principals are being significantly exacerbated by work intensification and hugely consequential high stakes accountability pressures. Indeed, the OECD itself has acknowledged as much: difficulties with school leader recruitment and retention were key issues considered as part of the recently completed 22 nation ‘Improving school leadership’ project (see Pont et al. 2008). The practice of the Norwegian principal who is the subject of Møller’s article exemplifies some of these kinds of tensions documented by the OECD: in this instance striving to live out and foster not just distributional leadership, but also the democratic ideals that have long been a defining attribute of Norwegian schooling, while at the same time being hemmed in by an ever-expanding municipal mandate which, unless she is careful, will push her holus-bolus in the direction of the heroism that is the very antithesis of a distributed perspective. This principal (with her rather enigmatic tendency to smile, to which attention is drawn on at least three occasions) tried to speak as part of a leadership team, thereby disavowing heroism. On the other hand, according to Møller her teacher peers are predisposed—mainly because they owe their appointments to her—to construct her as a charismatic hero. One can’t help contrasting the tensions in these Norwegian dynamics with those that apparently obtain in Spain where, for the duration of their three year incumbencies, democratically selected principals tend to function as the creatures of the teachers who select them, rather than the reverse (Bolívar and Moreno 2006).

Møller’s claim that her interview permitted her principal interviewee to construct herself while telling her tale is reinforced by Johnson’s discussion of an Australian principal’s self-analysis of her professional identity. The mechanics of this recounting of the principal’s positioning of herself as a leader relies on a favoured distinction invoked by ethnomethodologists between topic and resource. That is, the ‘how’ of interactional construction between interviewer and interviewee substitutes for substantive interview content as the topic focus. The flip side of this kind of approach, of course, is a rejection or downplaying of interviews as instrumental vehicles for information transmission. This topic–resource dualism is useful as far as it goes. One potential danger, of course, is that it risks reducing identities to being mere artefacts of interviews, as though these identities have no claim to a pre-established or enduring existence, least of all in the minds of interviewees themselves. Clearly, interviews provide occasions for identity work in much the same way that parallel communicative modes provide confessionals for informants’ subjective reasoning—such as diaries and journals, as I have argued elsewhere (Gronn and Lacey 2004). The other difficulty with interview positioning is that, in its acute attention to the immediate, it is inclined to gloss over-awareness of long-term strategy. The ploys and
gambits evident in Johnson’s transcribed interview extracts are good illustrations of what Goffman (1979) termed ‘footing’: here and now tactical aligning that allows speakers to project themselves in a range of preferred guises for their hearers. The problem is that these tell us remarkably little about overarching life course trajectories and an informant’s identity switching through time.

**Spreading the good news**

There is a more explicit focus on the substantive content of the narratives of five school leaders in Portin’s article. His account—this time Argyrisian-informed—emphasizes ‘interference’ rather than exposure and is insistent on a greater likelihood of alignment occurring between what is preached and practised due to the adoption of amended theories-in-use, based on these leaders’ immersion in a range of cultures and schools.

In Portin’s article there is strong evidence of democratic awareness raising that took place among Scandinavian and (in particular) US teachers during this project. There is a marked contrast between the kinds of engagement that occurred among ‘Carpe Vitam’ teachers (extended cross-national school visits and conferencing) and that of the OECD policy elites. One cannot help thinking that a considerable proportion of OECD visitation time seems to be taken up by conferring with local elites—as is evident, for example, in the numbers of officials that form a significant part of the lists of personnel consulted, which are to be found in the annexes accompanying that agency’s case study reports. [An important exception is the rich description of leaders’ actions intended to foster learning in the English schools visited by Huber et al. (2007: 123–139) as part of the ‘Improving school leadership’ study.] In ‘Carpe Vitam’ it was not enough to articulate the mantra of ‘democracy’ as an espoused theory, for there were differences about ends and means concerned with allegiance to this belief. For the Scandinavians democratic salvation lay in student-centrism: listening to all groups with an interest in learning, but then requiring that teaching be built around the demands made by students. For the US leaders it was about debating the possible pathways to achieve predetermined learning purposes. In a critical reflection on his data Portin is forthright about revelation and the scales falling from one’s eyes in projects like ‘Carpe Vitam’. He asks an interesting question: to what extent had those US teachers he described as having the eyes to see attained a critical point of cognitive receptiveness to alternative ways of seeing and doing? Was such readiness a precondition for the success of ‘Carpe Vitam’?

Finally, does every picture tell a story? Or, is seeing believing? Presumably so, because Michael Schratz would have his readers affirm ‘yes’ to both questions. Not for the first time in a project with an avowed commitment to distributing leadership does the discussion begin by focusing on headteachers: this time he provides readers with a sequence of pictures of heads’ offices as the ostensible command centres or management centres of schools. This set is followed by a second sequence portraying a range of leaders relying on images with which to represent themselves to their peers, after which there
follow purported instances of student learning (sequence 3), knowledge sharing (sequence 4), integrated theory and practice (sequence 5) and, finally, learning–leadership (sequence 6). In all, there is a gallery of 18 images. Taken together, these express a strong sense of verisimilitude. But to achieve their effect the pictures have had to be accompanied by words, for as stand-alone images they would tell us very little. Indeed, it is the words that capture the contexts. Shuffle the order of the three pictures of principals or heads seated at their desks (that comprise sequence 1), for example, and expunge the background text and I would be hard put to say which of the three countries of origin was which. On the other hand, maybe these three illustrations indicate that the work of principals and headteachers is the same the world over and that their offices conform to a type—shades, perhaps, of the pressures towards convergence among elites that were referred to earlier? This same need for words (especially for those who were non-participants in the project) applies to the successive sequences. As windows of enlightenment about the workings of ‘Carpe Vitam’ and its outcomes, then, the route to blessed assurance lies not solely through imagery. Images are not icons: there can be no way of knowing by this means that learning has taken place (as Schratz concedes at one point) so that we are left assuming that it has. Learning, it seems, is something of a leap of faith.

Sanctification

Had this project been a crusade, in defence of a true faith, instead of the pilgrimage that it was ‘Carpe Vitam’ may have done much less justice to the depth and breadth of understanding and practice that it sought to capture. In this respect, MacBeath et al.’s (in this issue) point is well made about the contrast between the project’s adoption of a principled approach and the decontextualized leadership standards that find increasing favour with policy-making elites and governments. Finally, as a case study in the production of knowledge, the project team strove to be a democracy in action by aligning their espoused and in-use theories. In its search for an alternative approach to knowledge construction it sought (and managed) to resist pressures towards epistemic and theoretical reductionism and instead accorded due weight to complexity, variation, potential, possibility and hope. What has resulted is not a new canon of leadership and learning orthodoxy but, more modestly, a worthy and worthwhile template for collaborative growth and inquiry.

References


