Learning from Leadership at all Levels: Life Events and Immersive Experiences

Jack McCarthy, Boston University
Sandra Deacon Carr, Boston University
Yseult Freeney, Dublin City University
Patrick Flood, Dublin City University
Jarlath McHale, Mayo Adventure Experience
Brian Harney, Dublin City University

Abstract

We face a competitive global environment characterized by turbulence, complexity, interconnectedness and change across all sectors. Developing leaders who can perform effectively under these conditions is an enormous challenge, as people are constantly pushed beyond their capabilities. This dynamic and interactive Symposium explores the core capabilities that leaders need and shares some of the best practices and relevant lessons for leadership development across multiple career levels. Specific focus is placed on our research and teaching innovations in leveraging life events and immersive experiences for accelerated development. Faculty at all levels are encouraged to participate in this critical conversation.

Learning from Leadership at all Levels: Life Events and Immersive Experiences

Introduction

The competitive global environment today is characterized by turbulence, complexity and change. Global leaders must learn to lead across cultural and organizational boundaries in this chaotic context while at the same time driving strategic and operational effectiveness (Yammarino, 2014). Developing leaders who can perform effectively under these conditions is an enormous challenge. It is clear that leadership development initiatives that are successful in some contexts with learners at one career stage are often ineffective in other organizational settings with participants at different career levels and backgrounds. Teaching and learning programs and curricula must therefore be adaptive, participant-focused, creative and carefully designed to evoke capability development in rich, rigorous and memorable ways. This, too, is an enormous challenge.

Toward this challenge, this session provides real-world examples of best practices in designing and implementing successful leadership development teaching initiatives in multiple domains. Experienced faculty members from two leading universities, one in Ireland and the other from the US, will share their lessons garnered from their use of innovative pedagogy that leverages life events and immersive experiences to actively engage learning and accelerate leadership development. Effective teaching and learning examples are provided here to address learners across multiple career stages, including undergraduate students, graduate and MBA students, professional management development programs and executive education. Individual lessons and curriculum are developed for each domain, along with distillation of common themes and successful approaches that transcend or link learners across these different levels. Our goal is to share a dynamic, interactive and spirited review of multiple innovations in teaching leadership – and in learning from real leaders – to spark valuable conversations with MOBTS participants on how we can accelerate our own development as teachers in helping current and future leaders perform more effectively to be able to lead positive change in our rapidly evolving global landscape.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

Leaders today operate in what has become known as a "VUCA" world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (Johansen, 2009). To address and combat this punishing environment, we seek pedagogy, initiatives and programs that will enable leaders to thrive under uncertainty while forming leadership teams that are diverse and creative (Hill et al., 2014). It has long been understood that developing leaders who can perform under pressure requires both structured and unstructured learning through experiences where the leaders are frequently in "stretch" developmental assignments and uncomfortable situations to develop greater self-awareness and improved decision-making under uncertainty (McCall, 2002; Goldsmith, 2003). In this sense, the critical leadership meta-competencies are personal identity awareness and adaptability, where leaders are *both* highly self-aware and adaptable, being reflexive and open to learn about themselves and actively willing to adapt and place themselves in uncomfortable learning situations (McCarthy, O'Connell and Hall, 2005). Reflecting on one's life story and crucible events is just one example of this.

Further, as the competitive landscape has become increasingly interconnected and truly global, we must also develop leaders who are culturally competent, sensitive and aware, with cosmopolitan and open views of the changing world and the complex interplay of diverse cultural values (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Dalton et al, 2003; George, 2012; Conger, 2014). Leaders must be able to practice respectful inquiry, performing and learning through openly asking followers questions and actively listening and attending to responses (Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Leadership development initiatives that do not take into account cultural and organizational context, leverage diverse values and mindsets across varying career stages and hierarchical levels, and provide clear opportunities for reflective personal learning are destined to fail (Gurdjian et al., 2014).

At the same time, students, managers and leaders in all domains report intense competition for their time, energy and focus. Traditional classroom-based teaching, lectures, case studies,

development programs or expatriate rotational assignments are often too time consuming, too distant from the experience of managerial work, too expensive, or some combination of all of these factors. So, the key question is how do we create leadership developmental initiatives that are rich enough in intercultural context, drive meaningful reflexive learning, convey strategic and operational lessons, and yet are cost effective and minimally (or optimally) invasive on the learner's time and availability?

One response to this dilemma is the rise of immersive learning experiences, where learners, typically corporate managers, are placed in interim and short-term assignments such as working in developing nations within nonprofit organizations and NGOs and in disadvantaged urban areas as an integral element of each manager's personal leadership development plan at their home corporation. These assignments are built around specific learning goals tailored to each participant and include coaching and mentoring during and after the experience to maximize the reflection, adaptability and self-awareness of the learners. As described by Mirvis et al. (2014: 240), "Global service learning assignments typically put participants into a multicultural milieu where they are dealing with people who may have very different outlooks, motivations, and goals. Executives, lacking formal power in this context, have to learn to listen openly to different points of view, explore what is behind them, and exercise a deft diplomatic touch in the face of potential conflicts. In this context, a strong case can also be made for 'team based' service as it can help multicultural groups to simultaneously improve their own teamwork and serve diverse communities more effectively." Ranging from as little as two or three weeks to as long as two or three months, these global immersive learning experiences require reflexive learning and build substantial intercultural competence for developing responsible global leaders, while providing the local organization and community with managerial and business expertise that otherwise would have been impossible (Mirvis et al. 2012; 2014; Pless et al., 2011). These immersive learning experiences provide the space and time for reflexive learning that is necessary to develop responsible global leaders (Gersten et al., 2012; Rosenblatt et al., 2013).

In this way, we extend this research and practice to explore multiple views of creative pedagogy and innovative teaching approaches that use life events and immersive experiences to accelerate leadership development for diverse learners at varying life and career stages, as described below. In the life story work, life events can include career transition points, the maturation cycle from childhood to adulthood to parenthood and transitions from manager to leader. The identification of a life theme can aid managers in identifying how their work and role in society matters – giving them an anchor to grasp when their values are threatened by the experience and challenges of work.

Discussion and Overview

This Symposium actively explores the challenge of creating effective and engaging learning initiatives for teaching leadership to multiple levels of students and learners. A diverse group of experienced faculty members from Boston University and Dublin City University provide salient and relevant examples of curriculum, materials and teaching approaches that have proven to be successful in varying settings. The conversation is further advanced via interaction with a practitioner who runs an adventure experience company and who recently completed the Inca trail in the capacity of a porter to highlight the work that the porters do and the leadership challenges they face.

A key element to our successful pedagogy here is that we have discovered that we all consistently employ life events and immersive experiences to engage learners in reflection, analysis and discovery in examining their own leadership. Through these approaches, we have found that our students are able to exhibit increased self-awareness, enhanced empathy, and greater creativity to perform more effectively as leaders. This Symposium session serves as a forum for us to share our lessons and experiences from our innovative teaching approaches and as a platform to engage the MOBTS audience in conversation and critique to understand, apply and extend to learning to help shape further improvement to our collective pedagogy and teaching practice as faculty members in the field of leadership.

Session Description

We provide a 90-minute Symposium session. During this time, the authors, comprised of five senior faculty members with wide teaching and research expertise in leadership at two leading universities, share specific examples of their successful pedagogy in the leadership domain. This conversation is complemented by insights from work with an adventure experience practitioner who has served in a unique leadership role.

Each faculty presenter provides a dynamic 8-10 minute overview of their respective curriculum and context, as described below, along with the challenges, pitfalls and successes from their teaching experience. Live examples of interactive exercises are employed to demonstrate the teaching principles and engage the audience during the session. Our teaching initiatives involve engaging undergraduate students, graduate MS and MBA students, management development programs and executive education. Break-out sessions (15 minutes) are employed during the session for MOBTS participants to discuss individual questions with faculty members from each domain according to their respective interests. Finally, a concluding integrated discussion is moderated (20 minutes) to distill common themes, raise additional questions, critique and concerns, and to discuss ideas for future enhancements and improvements.

A summary of each faculty member's teaching innovations discussed at the Symposium is provided below:

- The transformation of a large multi-section undergraduate Organization Behavior course (1,000 students per year, in 30 discussion sections) at the Questrom School of Business at Boston University through the implementation of creative arts-based experiential exercises and a studio classroom model. We also employ innovative technology-enhanced lecture delivery models that have improved the student learning experience, use of digital content of conceptual and theoretical material to allow more classroom time for application and experiential learning, diverse team experiences, and direct engagement with managers and leaders at external organizations in industry to learn firsthand from studying and discussing real leadership in action.

o The large 500-student lectures in this Business School course (OB221, The Dynamics of Leading Organizations & People) are infused with surprise visits by musicians and performers, who creatively demonstrate the course's concepts in team dynamics, collaboration, leadership and dealing with complexity. In addition, a live stage play performed by School of Theatre students and faculty is employed as a real-time "case study" in conflict and power for students to analyze at multiple levels of learning in subsequent small group discussion sections. Designers from the university's College of Fine Arts also come to class discussions to serve as expert consultants in a "Project Runway-style" design exercise in creativity and decision-making in groups and teams.

o At the same time, student teams in the course are tasked with gaining access to an actual management team in a business or nonprofit organization to conduct onsite interviews and observation of management and teamwork in action. In this way, our students see and hear the course's concepts and lessons in the voices and behavior of practicing managers, which reinforces the very same principles that the actors, designers and musicians value in their collective work as creative ensemble. Similarly, reflective exercises and peer coaching and feedback processes are instituted throughout the semester to increase students' self-awareness and to leverage the students' own teamwork as a dynamic learning environment to practice and study teamwork.

o Discussion class sessions were redesigned to be experiential studio model, where students work in groups to practice and apply course concepts in a more immersive, hands-on manner, with emphasis on self discovery, engagement and practical application of course concepts.

o We also designed and implemented a digital media production process within OB221 to create custom course content, distill lessons and enhance students' learning experience. We produce our own creative digital content each year that engages our OB221 students in their exploration and discovery of course content through the use of short films, interviews and digital media for core topics that

are curated and deployed as creative content, online resources and teaching materials. This content illustrates and helps teach course lessons in a real-time way, using the voices and examples of our own current and former OB221 students to actively describe concepts and lessons as they occur in their actual work. Interestingly, students have followed our lead here and are also developing more of their own digital content and short videos that capture lessons and experiences to not only expand and reinforce their learning but also to enhance the quality of their deliverables, build valuable integrative skills, and provide a knowledge base and content that can be used in future classes. See some examples of our custom OB221 digital content through the links below:

Capstone OB221 video   OB221 Tips for Team Meetings   What is Leadership?

- o Lecture content is systematically distributed and facilitated through traditional face-to-face lectures as well as other synchronous alternatives where students experience the lecture as digital media in their smaller group discussion class sections of 30-36 students that is moderated in a classroom by their discussion instructor as well as online through a virtual chat feature. Lecture content is also available in digital formal asynchronously for subsequent viewing or review. The use of varied formats of content distribution engages multiple modes of learning in our students and further enhances self-awareness and strengthens adaptability and learning agility.
- o A feature article profiling the successful transformation of this course as a "success story" for innovative pedagogy and the creative use of digital learning initiatives is provided as Exhibit 1.

- The development of an undergraduate Leadership seminar at Boston University that employs service learning in the nonprofit sector for students to explore and build their leadership capability by working with a small team to design, develop and execute an impactful service learning project (see Exhibit 2). This course also engages students with

dynamic learning opportunities through interactions with organizations such as a renowned university-wide institution dedicated to social justice and civil rights ([The Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground](#) at Boston University), and with global leaders from developing nations serving as Fulbright Fellows in the [Humphrey Fellowship Program](#) at Boston University, as well as other guest speakers and experiential initiatives designed to provide undergraduate students with a variety of leadership learning and development opportunities. All of these experiences build upon in-class leadership development opportunities in which the students lead small group discussions of important leadership concepts and practices and then design, engage in, and reflect upon personal "leader experiments" throughout the semester;

- Focusing on women's leadership journeys, leadership development initiatives aimed at women often fail to take into consideration potential disengagement from leadership tracks due to temporal invisibility from the workplace (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; McDonald, Bradley & Brown, 2008). Career transitions are often characterized by a myriad of challenges. Such challenges can disrupt a sense of self or identity (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015) but while they can be difficult, they almost always present a valuable learning opportunity that can teach one so much about leading effectively. Individuals on leadership journeys must come to appreciate the evolving nature of their professional identities and through careful reflection on lived transitional experiences, they can learn much about themselves and, more importantly, on how they manage their relationships with others (Freeney, van der Werff & Collings, 2018). Ultimately, transitions have to potential to derail progression towards senior leadership roles, where the individual does not leverage both the challenges and the enrichment and where critical relationships at work fail to support learning.

  While the focus here is on common transitional experiences for women and how that shapes their leadership journeys, extracting maximum learning value from career transitions is applicable to everyone on leadership journeys. The session focuses on leadership learning on the job and examines the roles of coaches, HR business partners

and line managers in leveraging transitions for high potential women. It examines the use of critical incident techniques and in-depth reflection to maximize lived learning experiences of key career transitions, which also supports effective reintegration and enriches personal development as leaders in the workplace. It draws on practices across 30 organisations in Ireland (See Exhibit 3). Consideration will also be given to the implementation of a class-based exercise based on critical reflection on lived key career transitions.

- The development of self-awareness and reflective capabilities in Executive MBA students using the life story methodology of Dan McAdams, Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University (see Exhibit 4). Coupled with 360-degree leadership evaluation, this allows participants to reflect on the influence of the past on their leadership style, consider their present abilities and develop a future-oriented leadership development plan. The use of the dramatic arts as part of this journey is illustrated in a short video clip filmed in theatre.

- In keeping with the theme of learning and leveraging non-traditional circumstances, we draw on a practitioner's reflection of serving as a porter on the famous Inca trail in Peru. Jarlath McHale took on the 43km iconic trail weighed down by a 25kg bag. Jarlath's work as a porter saw him complete all key tasks including transporting pots, pans and food and setting up camp each evening.

    > *"You could be carrying everything from your own gear, the clients' gear, cooking utensils, food, a cooker, pots and pans, tents for yourself, tents for the clients, cooking tents, eating tents, sleeping mats, bags. The way it works is for two people to do the trail, you need six porters, for three people it's eight, and so on. So there were 20 of us, and 12 of them so we had food and equipment for 32 of us being carried by the porters"*

In completing this task, Jarlath became the first non-Peruvian porter to complete the Inca Trail. This immersive experience highlights the dynamics of leadership, perseverance and

the critical and often neglected role of these key agents in enabling and sustaining tourism.

> *"They make your life so much easier. But what I really admired is that not only do they carry all your stuff, which is just fantastic, but they cheer you on when you come into camps. They really welcome you in, there'll be two or three guys making sure that when you arrive at your camp spot or your lunch spot to meet you or direct you"*

Jarlath's interaction with the porters also highlights the role of humor and empathy. This experience forms a catalyst for conversations around success, perseverance and recognizing the voices and contributions from those who have been hitherto ignored. See the short film chronicling this leadership journey through the link below and as highlighted on Exhibit 5.

Carried Away: A Porter's Story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNkLDDWDUes

This Symposium entails a lively and interactive session of shared inquiry with MOBTS participants. Our session develops and distills shared lessons across our diverse experiences and engages participants in an active conversation around how we can best employ these practices, approaches and ideas in our creative pedagogy going forward. Given the broad reach and wide impact of the topic of leadership and the breadth of the teaching innovations discussed in this Symposium, faculty from all levels and all domains are encouraged and very welcome to attend and participate.

References

Adler, N. 2008. I am my mother's daughter: Early development influences on leadership. European Journal of International Management, 2(1): 6-21.

Coetsee, J. and Flood, P. (2013). <u>Change Lessons from the CEO: 27 CEOS tell their stories about change</u>, Jossey Bass, San Francisco.

Conger, Jay A (2014). "Addressing the Organizational Barriers to Developing Global Leadership Talent." *Organizational Dynamics* 43.3: 198-204.

Dalton, Maxine, Chris Ernst, Jennifer J. Deal, and Jean B. Leslie. (2003) *Success for the New Global Manager: How to Work Across Distances, Countries, and Cultures*. N.p.: Jossey-Bass.

Flood, P., & Carroll, S. 2010 The Persuasive Leader: Lessons from the Arts: John Wiley & Sons (23 July 2010)

Freeney, Y., van der Werff, L., Collings, D. (2018). Re-Engaging Talent Post- Maternity Leave: Enablers and Barriers to Positive Reintegration. Dublin: DCU

George, W. (2012) "A New Era for Global Leadership Development." *BloombergBusinessweek*. Bloomberg, 27 Feb. 2012.

Gertsen C. M., Søderberg, A.M., & Zølner, M. (2012): *Global Collaboration: Intercultural Experiences and Learning*. Chippenham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Goldsmith, Marshall. *Global Leadership: The next Generation*. (2003) Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT/Prentice Hall.

Gurdjian, Pierre, Thomas Halbeisen, and Kevin Lane. (2014) *Why Leadership-development Programs Fail*. McKinsey & Company, Jan. 2014. Link to [Article](.).

Hewlett, S. A., & Luce, C. B. (2005) Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success. *Harvard Business Review*, *83*, 43.

Hill, Linda A., Brandeau, Greg, Emily Truelove, and Kent Lineback. (2014). "Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation" *Harvard Business Review,* Jan 2014.

Javidan, M., Teagarden, M. and Bowen, S. (2010). "Making it Overseas." *Harvard Business Review,* Apr 2010.

Johansen, R. and Ronn, K. (2015). *The Reciprocity Advantage: A new way to partner for innovation and growth.* San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler Publishers.

Johansen, R. (2009). *Leaders make the future: Ten new leadership skills for an uncertain world.* San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Ladge, J. J., & Greenberg, D. N. (2015). Becoming a working mother: Managing identity and efficacy uncertainties during resocialization. *Human Resource Management*, *54*(6), 977-998.

McAdams, D. P., & Guo, J. (2015). Narrating the generative life. *Psychological Science, 26,* 475-483.

McAdams, D.P. (2015). *The Art and Science of Personality Development.* New York: The Guilford Press.

McCall, M. W., Jr., & Hollenbeck, G. P. (2002). *Developing global executives: The lessons of international experience.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

McCarthy, J., & Carr Deacon, S. 2015. Igniting passion and possibilities through the arts: Conflict, collaboration and leadership through live stage performance. Journal of Leadership Studies, 9(1): 33-41.

McCarthy, J., O'Connell, D., and Hall, D.T. (2005). Leading Beyond Tragedy: The Balance of Personal Identity and Adaptability. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal,* 26(6): 458-475.

McDermott, A. and Flood, P. (2010). <u>Leadership in Ireland</u>, Blackhall: Dublin.

McDonald, P., Bradley, L., & Brown, K. (2008). Visibility in the workplace: still an essential ingredient for career success? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *19*(12), 2198-2215.

Mirvis, Philip, Kevin Thompson, and John Gohring. (2012) "Toward Next-generation Leadership: Global Service." *Leader to Leader* 2012.64: 20-26.

Mirvis, P., Hurley, S. and Macarthur, A. (2014). "Transforming Executives into Corporate Diplomats: The Power of Global Pro Bono Service." *Organizational Dynamics*, 43 (3): 235-245.

Mirvis, P. (2008). Executive Development through Consciousness-Raising Experiences. *Academy of Management Learning and Education,* (7) 2: 173-188.

Pless, N., Maak, T. & Stahl, G. K. (2011). Developing responsible global leaders through international service learning programs: The Ulysses experience. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 10, 237-260.

Rosenblatt, V., Worthley, R., & MacNab, B. (2013): "From contact to development in experiential cultural intelligence education: the mediating influence of expectancy disconfirmation." *Academy of Management: Learning & Education,* 12 (3), 356–379.

Van Quaquebeke, N. and Felps, W. (2018). Respectful Inquiry: A Motivational Account of Leading Through Asking Questions and Listening. *Academy of Management Review*, 43:5-27.

Yammarino, F. (2014) 'Introduction to 25th anniversary issue of the Leadership Quarterly', *Leadership Quarterly*: 1-2.

Exhibit 1

Boston University Digital Learning & Innovation Success Story Feature Article (OB221, 2017)

Source: https://digital.bu.edu/success-stories/transforming-the-large-lecture-course/

Exhibit 2

Examples of Recent Service Learning Projects

Exhibit 3

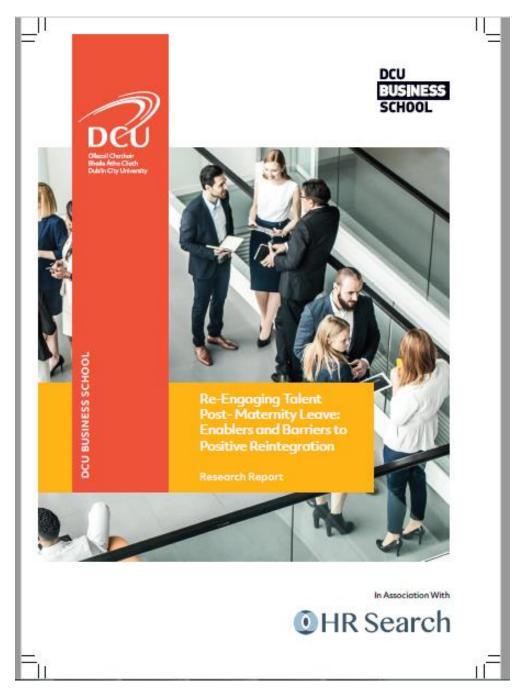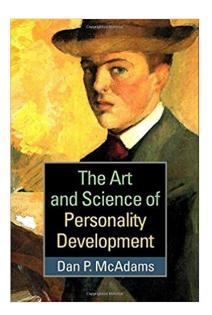**Study of Leadership Practices in Women across 30 Organisations**

Exhibit 4

Life Story Methodology
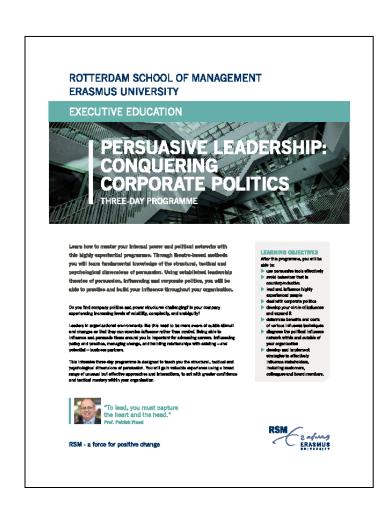

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySDUoyL3KHg

Exhibit 5

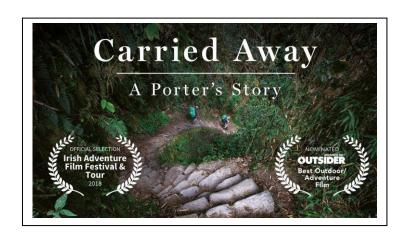**Jarlath McHale on the Inca Trail**

Media Coverage: [Outsider Magazine](#)

[Lonelyplanet](#)