



DISTRIBUTED E-LEADERSHIP AND TRUST: THE VISIBILITY/INVISIBILITY PARADOX IN THE ECOLOGY OF ONLINE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Few things are more important to school effectiveness than inspiring leadership that enables high trust educational environments in which staff and pupils feel they belong and can succeed within proactively engaged learning communities in well-functioning school systems. Yet that is hard to achieve, and in the race to attain visible success in an increasingly economically-driven, competitive, marketised global education landscape, sometimes more effort to improve schools through stricter performance accountabilities, regulation, audit and standardised systems achieves less actual learning and achievement. The paradox that 'less is sometimes more' has been much debated in problematising research and professional practice on school effectiveness and improvement. Jameson brings a new theme into this discussion, observing that school effectiveness studies are often, pragmatically, based on natural assumptions that school communities operate mainly via face to face human interaction. A sense of shared time and place is important to us in establishing trusting human communities. Yet, like it or not, we are gradually slipping into a liminal zone in which new forms of highly uncertain, disruptive online technologies are emerging, changing education in unpredictable ways. Accelerating growth in educational technology and social media usage is radically changing the environment experienced by pupils, staff, schools and parents to the point that online C21st technologies need to play a more significant role in education than ever before. Emerging pedagogic and systemic digital innovations, variously interpreted as utopian and dystopian, offer significant opportunities for schools to transform at system-wide levels to enable the future growth of high trust learning ecologies. In this changing future landscape, distributed e-leadership and trust will be vital: a visibility/invisibility paradox, akin to 'less is more', can enable the facilitation of effective learning ecologies in which school communities thrive in achieving excellent curricular, administrative, technical and qualifications outcomes.

A. Introduction

In 2013, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated that about 2.7 billion people, almost 40% of the world's population, were online, with 31% of the developing and 77% of the developed world able to access the internet (ITU, 2013). The ITU reported that at the end of 2013 there were 6.8 billion mobile-cellular subscriptions globally: almost as many as the number of people on the planet, while earlier in 2013, Meeker reported an 8% year on year growth in the internet (*ibid.*; Meeker, 2013).



However, a significant disparity of access to the internet has differentiated ICT-enabled (Information Communications Technology-enabled) educational provision in schools, with broadband internet access costing schools around 700 times more in the poorest countries in comparison with significantly low access costs in more developed nations. Yet this digital divide is rapidly altering, as broadband costs have dropped and mobile phone communications usage has vastly expanded, notably in Asia and Africa (ITU, 2013). Furthermore, it is clear that ‘digital natives’ in ITU’s terms (modified in recognition of critical literature), that is, young people aged 15-24 with more than five years’ experience of using the internet, are steadily driving a global expansion in the use of ICT across the developing world. This emerging trend is interestingly reinforced by both school enrolment and domestic access, with ‘digital natives’ now informally and unexpectedly leading the way, taking on a digitally literate networked mindset in advance of the rest of the population (*ibid.*). It seems that a global race by young people towards achieving ICT skills and networked connectivity is on, in the attempt to attain visible success and tangible rewards in an increasingly economically-driven, competitive, instrumentalist and marketised global education landscape, in which high youth unemployment is an ever-growing threat. As Czerniewicz *et al.* (2009) observe of students in lower socio-economic groups who, despite numerous constraints, ‘make a plan’ to exercise their own sense of agentic freedom in South Africa: “computers are the means to a ‘better’ life, to success in the market place and possibly to future financial security”.

Innovative Disruptive Digital Technologies: Effect on Young People and Schools

Arguably there has been insufficient public acknowledgement of the importance for young people and for schools of the massive global shifts occurring in technological development and access, as the liminal zone stretching a gulf between more limited and more connected technology-enabled methods of learning and teaching has widened over the past few decades. Innovative forms of highly uncertain disruptive online technologies are gradually transforming educational and employment opportunities for young people equipped with smartphones, internet access, social media applications and online support in this newly connected, spontaneous milieu. Mobile devices in particular have opened up previously inaccessible learning and job opportunities, even to those in remote rural communities in the poorest regions (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2009). For those with the confidence and connectivity to learn how to use new ICT resources, it is now theoretically possible to learn and earn 100% online from any location, to



teach oneself remotely through free opportunities for study in online courses run by elite institutions across the globe and to generate income from self-publishing or start up innovations. These unprecedented opportunities are best achieved when reinforced by school ICT access, good pedagogic guidance and family support, but are even possible without this. As Mitra has demonstrated, there are circumstances in which, through ‘minimally invasive education’ (Mitra and Rana, 2001), digital resources can enable keen young people effectively to teach themselves valuable skills, regardless of socio-economic circumstances.

Yet advanced information communications technologies – and our global fascination with them - are gradually changing all levels and facets of education in unpredictable ways for schools and families, and in most cases are, regrettably, sharply reinforcing social, gender, employment and income inequalities of existing digital divides in a highly stratified education system. From the use of web-based learning systems, virtual learning environments, social media applications, games-based learning, smartphones, iPads and digital notebooks in homes and classrooms, to the application of online assessment tools and advanced MIS systems, more technologically connected schools in developed nations have experienced a massive expansion in ICT-enabled teaching, learning and administrative applications that are providing unprecedented benefits for students. Accelerating growth in educational technology and social media usage is radically changing the environment experienced by such pupils, staff, schools and parents to the point that online c21st technologies are now playing a more significant role in education than ever before. Emerging pedagogic and systemic digital innovations, variously interpreted as utopian and dystopian, offer significant opportunities for schools to transform at system-wide levels to accommodate and develop the strong interest shown by young people in technological innovations. While a critique of neoliberal technological determinism removes the normative expectation of techo-glamour relating to such ambitions, there is little doubt of their instrumental effectiveness in enabling learning and employment opportunities for young people desperate to achieve.

Inspiring Leadership of High Trust Learning Environments: Less is Sometimes More

Yet in this changing future landscape, it is more important than ever not to leave the potential for positive benefit from pedagogic support for ICT-enabled curricular developments to chance or to do a job that is just ‘good enough’ (Jameson, 2005). Skilful and creative operation of both face to face and virtual



distributed e-leadership is vital, if school leaders are to support young people to achieve their ambitions for the future in the most effective ways in a world in which power and resources are unfairly and unequally distributed.

In considering how best to achieve such school effectiveness in e-leadership, it is useful to observe that the paradox that ‘less is sometimes more’ has been much debated in problematising research and professional practice on school improvement, as well as in other contexts (Harris, 2013; Weaver et al., 2012). Adept recognition of a visibility/invisibility leadership paradox in online school provision, akin to ‘less is more’, can enable us to consider critically how best to facilitate effective learning ecologies. Arguably, school communities thrive in achieving excellent curricular, administrative, technical and qualifications through ICT-enabled outcomes when authority is genuinely broad-based in a sustainable distribution of leadership (Harris, 2013). In the creation of well-balanced and healthy learning environments, attempting to force school improvements through an autocratic hierarchy unskillfully is about as unproductive as trying to force-feed learning. To cite an old proverb, “you cannot fatten a pig by weighing it”. School leaders at all levels need to achieve a careful, fluent balancing act between high leadership visibility as regards ‘meaning-making’, mission, vision, commitment and behavioural values, alongside the observable humility of ‘minimally invasive’, effectively responsible positional management (Collins, 2001). This visibility/invisibility paradox, an on-going expertise in complex organisational plate-spinning (Jameson, 2005), does not change in the leadership of ICT-enabled online school provision. For it remains the case that few things are more important to school effectiveness than broad-based inspiring team leadership. This kind of leadership enables high trust creative educational environments in which staff and pupils feel they belong, are trusted, and can succeed within proactively engaged learning communities in well-functioning school systems (*ibid.*). To enable the future growth of high trust in virtual and face to face learning ecologies, sometimes more micro managerial effort to improve schools through stricter performance accountabilities, regulation, audit and standardised systems achieves less actual learning and achievement (Ravitch, 2011).

In this changing future landscape for schools, in which unpredictable spontaneous digital innovation will continue to accelerate, a genuinely collaborative distribution of e-leadership tasks and responsibilities to all positional levels, both formal and informal, will be needed. This is a risk and a challenge for school leaders, particularly those at the top of institutions. But for young people to become all that they can be in



achieving sound digital skills, learning and future employment, it is worth all the effort it will take.



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