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Dr Howard Youngs

School of Education

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

e: howard.youngs@aut.ac.nz

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Title: *The importance of engagement, transparency, and critical thinking in unknown times: Leadership practices for journeying through paradox and crisis*

Abstract

The global Covid-19 pandemic has created for higher education institutions (HEI) what Rittel and Webber (1973) call wicked problems. Wicked problems are problems that no matter which decision is made to address the problem, the actual decision made will in turn create other problems that need to be addressed. This perpetual state means we cannot use decision-making practices and assumptions used for past solvable problems. In times of the unknown and of crisis, critical thinking is required, particularly approaches that embrace paradox. In this presentation and paper, I combine two approaches of critical thinking to inform leadership practices, so that managers and employees are more likely to experience engagement and transparency in challenging times. These two approaches are double-loop learning (Argyris, 2010), and dialectic thinking. To fully engage with these approaches managers in particular are called to walk a path of humility and wisdom, where deep assumptions are surfaced, tested and at times changed. These approaches may help a HEI shift more towards practicing organisational learning as their foundational principles for leadership practice. Afterall, all HEIs are supposed to be centres of learning, not just for their students, but for all employees and managers as they go about their day-to-day practices.

Introduction

The core purpose of a higher education institution (HEI) is learning. In this paper I argue that learning is for all, the academic and professional staff employed by the HEI as well as the students. However, in the season of this global pandemic and the wicked problems associated with it, learning needs to be embedded in care and encompass knowing how to engage with paradox. Learning in HEIs can be susceptible to being limited to a transaction generated through a lecturer to a student in the form of knowledge transmission. This limitation may be more likely when principles of New Public Management (NPM), effectiveness, economy and efficiency are used as drivers that look to reduce the cost of course delivery. Course delivery will also look different across a HEI based on the pedagogical skill of the lecturer and students' degree of engagement in a learning process. The ultimate hope is that students' learning is transformative and applied, rather than merely a knowledge transmission from the HEI through a lecturer to a student. Transformative learning is connected to identity, identity

development, as well as competency development, and “means a change or alteration into something qualitatively different” (Illeris, 2014, p.575). Transformative learning is not limited to HEI students, it is a necessary component of an organization’s culture so that all managers, lecturers and professional staff learn individually and collectively. It is here across staff, where a HEI has the potential to develop and sustain organizational learning. Organizational learning is enabled and restrained by contextual features of the organization, as well as the environment in which the organization is embedded (Levine & Argote, 2020). The global and local environments of HEIs are experiencing a disruption not seen since the Second World War. HEIs contextual features have also been severely impacted and changed. There has never been a time such as this in the post-millennial era, where HEIs need to focus their attention on well-being, organizational learning, unlearning, and relearning. This is because the global Covid-19 pandemic has created an environment ripe for wicked problems. No matter how challenging it may seem to see an end to the global pandemic, I present in this paper some approaches and positions that bring together aspects of critical thinking and navigating with paradox that may provide some tangible hope to HEIs, their managers, lecturers, professional staff, and students. There are three sections. After discussing the impact of the current crisis, I first provide justification to why we need to navigate with paradox rather than suppress it or address it inadequately through decision-making process appropriate for less chaotic and complex times. In the second section, a framework is discussed that may assist HEIs and their staff with decision-making processes and direction forming so that organizational learning is enhanced. Finally, suggestions associated with how HEIs can engage with fluid environments are made so that resilience and well-being are prioritized as the well-needed investment into being human first in a broken world.

An ongoing global and HEI crisis

We are still in the pandemic crisis. It is unknown as to whether this current period of time will be positioned in a post Covid-19 pandemic period as a critical juncture. A critical juncture is where change at a macro-level is both rapid and discontinuous (Munck, forthcoming 2022) and may not become apparent as a deep societal, economic, and political shift until years or decades later (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). However, what is known in this current period of the pandemic, is that there are many unknowns. Because of this the associated problems HEIs face are unlike ones they have encountered in the recent past.

The COVID-19 crisis has without doubt caused an incredible amount of harm and disruption. Many countries have witnessed a massive dismantling of the small and medium enterprises sector, reduced working hours, and redundancies in the manufacturing industry, as well as overall plummeting productivity and unprecedented unemployment rates. (Hwang & Höllerer, 2020, p.298)

The OECD (2021b) reported in September 2021, that in most countries the number of online jobs advertised have dropped by more than 40% compared to the beginning of 2021. The gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ has widened; those in our communities disadvantaged in some way, the poor, and the homeless, have become more disadvantaged (Hwang & Höllerer, 2020). The pandemic is not the only cause of this gap, it has revealed the extent of gaps that were already there (Nandy et al., 2021) and brought issues of equity into a clearer view (Netolicky, 2020). The current crisis is more than a health issue, it is also a social justice issue. “Health advocates have accordingly argued that social justice and inequality should be a core focus of risk and crisis management efforts so as to ensure health

disparities are addressed” (Wardman, 2020, p.1103). The impact of the disruption across our societies may linger beyond the end of pandemic. For example, HEI graduates may be seeking employment in economies that will look different to how they were just prior to the pandemic. As to whether the opportunities current students had relied on when they started their study will still be there, have stayed the same, or have changed through new opportunities is an unknown. This unknown may differ from nation to nation due to the impact of the pandemic and the different policies that underpin education systems.

HEIs, as well as schools and kindergartens, are facing multiple challenges. Studies are starting to reveal the impact the pandemic, lockdowns, and online delivery are having on student and teacher well-being and learning (for example see, Bartolic et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2021; Education Review Office, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Marek et al., 2021; OECD 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Watermeyer et al., 2021). Further findings will emerge from, *The covid-19 international student well-being study* (C19 ISWS), a multi country project involving 110 HEIs that collected data from HE students in the northern hemisphere spring of 2020 (Van de Velde et al., 2021). Gaps have widened between those who have access to online learning and those who do not due to education systems relying on online education as their main mode of Emergency Response Teaching (ERT) throughout the pandemic (OECD, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). It is important to note the difference between ERT and online distance education. “Many scholars have observed that courses that are converted to distance learning on an emergency basis are not true online distance learning (ODL) classes because they are often not well-considered, theory-based instructional designs for sustainable online learning” (Marek et al., 2021, p.92). In addition, there is some evidence to suggest the online migration of HEI courses has led to a possible pedagogical dumbing-down from the transformative learning discussed at the start of this paper, to a didactic transmission of course content (Watermeyer et al., 2021). On the other hand, this has been less common where lecturers have prior experience with online or blended learning (Bartolic et al., 2021). Irrespective of HEI staff experience, the indications are staff, as well as students have experienced stress, and particularly for lecturers, extra workload as they hastily converted courses to online ERT mode. HEIs are also grappling with staff and student illness, a drop in international student enrolments, the loss of research engagement due to lockdown restrictions (staff and postgraduate students), income reduction, health and safety site issues, staff and student off-site engagement, and dilemmas related to welcoming staff and students back on campuses. These times are uncharted for HEIs, saturated with dilemmas, wicked problems, and paradox, where hopefully new opportunities also abound.

Engaging with paradox in leadership practices

Paradox is present when there are two or more elements in play that appear contradictory. It may be challenging at the moment to think about new opportunities and engage with a plethora of wicked problems. Holding both may appear a contradiction, and to shift our view to one of engaging with paradox requires a dialectical approach to thinking. As an example, this shift would see a change in problem articulation from using “or” to “and”. For example, how do we find ways of grappling with wicked problems, “and”, looking for and creating new opportunities. Another example is, how do we manage an income drop “and” create opportunities to retain, care for and develop all staff. In addition, how do HEIs open up their campuses “and” maintain a healthy environment for staff and students. Threading through

examples is a need for leadership that draws on lessons learnt in crisis management research over the past 40 years (Wardman, 2020). Wardman (2020) explains why crisis management research rejects “mechanistic hierarchical formulations of ‘leader-follower’ relations ... [and] ‘decide-announce-defend’ (DAD)” (p.1095) practices, in favour of pluralistic leadership characterized by shared clarity of direction, adaptability, transparency, partnership, empathy, meaning making, and the addressing of concerns. These practices are not new in the fields of leadership studies, management studies and organisation studies, however, the application of them are now vital for HEIs as they engage with paradox during and beyond this pandemic.

Engaging with paradox during and after crisis is also associated with meeting our needs as human beings. Human beings “seem to need three things: they need to comprehend the world around them, they need to find direction for their actions, and they need to find worth in their lives” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p.541). Comprehending is reliant on understanding the situation through clear communication, experiencing direction is one that embraces inclusion in direction forming, and finding worth is associated with being heard and having tangible hope in the present and for the future. The challenge for HEIs is how to recalibrate in such a way so that the human needs of staff and students are met, as well as securing a resilient and sustainable educational role in the future. It is here where contradictions come together, and it is our choice whether or not to see them paradoxically.

Apparent contradictions, including rationality/empathy, stability/flexibility, present/future, local/global, autonomy/control, individual/collective, require directing. The guiding thread of resilient leadership is the talent for balancing responses to contradictory forces that present themselves as non-alternatives during periods of high ambiguity. (Giustiniano et al., 2020, p.973)

During times of high ambiguity, such as those we currently experience, means we are in environments with many known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. Snowden and Boone (2007) in their model for decision-making, argue the way forward is one based on emerging patterns, where any application of a command approach longer than is needed will be detrimental. This is a key point because every nation experienced some form of command, whether from political or health officials, near the start of the pandemic. In a crisis as serious as this pandemic, swift action was initially required, though as previously argued, pluralistic leadership is necessary now if we are to learn from risk management research.

Pluralistic leadership in times of uncertainty bring to the fore the need of sensemaking. Sensemaking is a key aspect of organizing, where it is “a process that is ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift, social, and easily taken for granted” (Weick et al., 2005, p.409). Sensemaking is a continual redrafting of the emerging narrative as comprehension grows, rather than striving to get things done right (Weick et al., 2005). Those in positions labelled as leader and/or manager do have a responsibility to steward sensemaking processes but not to dictate them, otherwise pluralistic leadership will be stifled. The same goes for lecturers with the students in their courses. The greater need to focus on emerging patterns and adapt to them means that a process ontology and a leadership-as-practice informed understanding of leadership may be appropriate during unknown times, instead of leader-follower-based understandings. Here the focus goes on the ongoing forming of directions as relational, temporal, organizing processes, and leadership practices (Crevani 2018; Raelin, 2016; Wood & Dibben, 2015). Another reason for HEIs to focus on leadership this way, is that it brings

their attention to what is happening in their organization as it is occurring as well as to what is emerging and what they hope will emerge. The latter is needed to guard HEIs from presentism, where decision-making has the tendency to get caught up only in present and urgent issues, especially in times of crisis. Every HEI will be different in this regard, due to each having its own contextual features (Levine & Argote, 2020). During times of uncertainty, imitation is likely, where organizations “tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.152). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue this mimetic isomorphism is a “standard response to uncertainty” (p.150), so it is important for HEIs just not to uncritically copy what other HEIs are doing. In some situations, it is important HEIs do learn from each other regarding good practice, the key is discerning to what extent, why, and then clearly justifying this with staff. Done well, an ongoing outcome may be the growth of resilience across staff during unknown times. Conditions conducive to growing resilience may be facilitated “by investing in organizational learning through constructive interactions” (Giustiniano et al., 2020, p.974). Organizational learning can bring into focus the intertwining of learning, re-learning and unlearning; processes that are vital as HEIs engage with paradox in these challenging times

Engaging through organizational learning in leadership practices

Organizational learning encompasses collective learning across an organization, learning in teams and groups, learning that may occur in the relational space between two or more people, and the individual learning that may occur in us as we reflect in and on practice. Reflecting on practice is reflecting on a past event or action, whereas reflecting in practice is reflecting while the event or action is occurring (Schön, 2016). When people in an organization assume and/or experience threats to their confidence, purpose, and value, especially in times of disruptive change, defensive and productive reasoning will be taking place in and through the members of the organization (Argyris, 2010; Argyris & Schön, 1974). There will also be in play differing degrees or alignment and misalignment between what people espouse and what they actually do. These can be respectively labelled as espoused theories and theories-in-use. Sitting beneath defensive reasoning and productive reasoning are guiding values. Defensive guiding values seek to protect ourselves and others from threat, embarrassment, and fear. Productive guiding values position us as open to learning, re-learning and un-learning. It is important any concept or model related to organizations is not understood or applied in isolation to other concepts. Therefore, the processes explained in the remainder of this section must be viewed alongside those discussed earlier in this paper.

The model (see figure 1) presented may help HEIs discern whether a problem they are engaging with can be solved using past strategies, or is complex and requires critical reflection where staff surface, test and challenge individual and collective assumptions about the problem. The first approach (see ‘A’ in figure 1) may be achieved through single-loop learning where past strategies are suffice to solve the problem. In this process learning is centred on what worked well in the past and guiding values are not surfaced and tested. Given the complexity of HEIs and the current pandemic situation, decisions that worked well in the past are less likely to work now and in the future. If past strategies are the preferred current way of managing problems in a HEI then careful reflection is required to ensure this

approach is not based on defensive guiding values, where managers may be reluctant or unsure of opening up the decision-making process to include others through pluralistic leadership, as advocated in risk management good practice. Managers may also prefer to stick with past practices particularly if they have a need to control or fear being exposed as not having sufficient knowledge. In times of complexity, risk, paradox and unknowns, such defensive guiding values may harm the HEI.

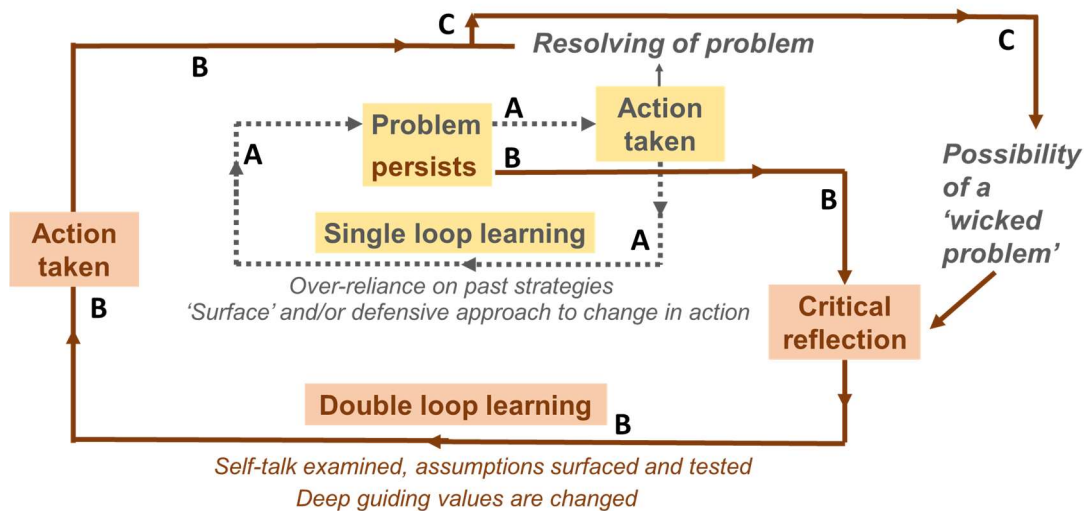


Figure 1: Employing continual double loop learning with wicked problems (informed by Argyris & Schön, 1974; Cardno, 2012)

One sign that single loop learning through an over-reliance on past strategies is causing potential harm to the HEI is that the problem or problems persist despite efforts to solve them. The ongoing persistence of problems plus the generation of new ones as consequences of HEI decision-making are more likely due to the current environment. Because of this it is even more vital HEIs focus on and minimise defensive guiding values in their own organizational context. One way of doing this, in addition to the strategies discussed in the earlier sections, is to engage in double-loop learning (see B in figure 1). This may result in organizational learning if assumptions are surfaced, tested and possibly unlearned, if this testing intentionally takes place in teams, between teams, and while staff are engaged in dialogue with each other. The key is open dialogue across the HEI, and senior managers not assuming they know what is best for staff and students without testing their assumptions first. If the surfacing and testing of assumptions does not lead to a shared understanding of the problem and steps to solve the problem, then a wicked problem may be present. A wicked problem means that some or all of the problem may be solved, but in doing so other problems are created (see C in figure 1). The key here is that the HEI stays in the mode of critical reflection so that assumptions continue to be tested and guiding values continue to change and adapt to the everchanging environment caused by the pandemic and government responses to it. Central to these processes is the engagement with staff regarding well-being and enhancing opportunities that provide hope, so that organizational learning also becomes a form of resilience building.

Engaging through resilience and well-being in leadership practices

Developing resilience and supporting staff well-being will be insufficient if the means of support are limited to past HEI programs and the provision of resources for staff to read and possibly interact with. Programs that have served staff well in the past may need to be positioned perhaps as a past strategy, as discussed in the previous section. Such programs and resources may still have a role to play, but the effects of the pandemic on societies and HEI staff means that we need to acknowledge staff and students to differing degrees have had assumptions challenged and for some, shattered. Staff well-being needs are different now compared to pre-pandemic times. “Grief experts have suggested that emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic are very similar to grief” (de Jong et al., 2020, p.1 of 6). People’s assumptions that “the world is benevolent and meaningful, and that the self is worthy” (de Jong et al., 2020, p.2 of 6) can be shattered through traumatic events. Even though the majority may not need specialised professional care, they “could still benefit from interventions to rebuild their sense of meaning in life” (de Jong et al., 2020, p.5 of 6). For some HEIs the pandemic may be working against staff perceptions of recovery, especially when there has been a reduction of resources and finance (Nandy et al., 2021). This means if well-being is a guiding value of the HEI, then it must be careful to not quickly embrace an austerity program that involves the reduction of staff. An alternative approach, could involve the following questions:

1. “What is it that we’ve missed that we want to bring back in?” (Netolicky, 2020, p.394);
2. “What is it that has been removed that we do not want to return to?” (Netolicky, 2020, p.394);
3. In our current plan (operational and strategic) how can we include processes, initiatives and systems we want to have less of? In other words where are we creating work for the sake of maintaining a system that does not enhance staff well-being and student learning?
4. What ideas regarding new opportunities are sitting latent across HEI staff and students? How can these be enabled and supported, accepting there may be a gap between investing in these new opportunities and the return they may generate?
5. How can we adjust our quality assurance processes, measures and expectations so that any culture of perfection and non-reporting of error (areas for development) are intentionally dismantled? “Resilience is about building and constantly topping up emotional and mental fitness, rather than trying to attain ‘perfect health’” (Nandy et al., 2021). Perfectionism that leads to non-reporting also works against organizational learning;
6. How can we further develop an online (Burke & Larmar, 2021) and when campuses re-open, a face-to-face pedagogy of care for students and lecturers?
7. How as responsive organizations in our communities can HEIs provide bridges to education especially to those whose lives have been damaged through the pandemic?

If a market-driven model is the main force shaping a HEI then the suggestions listed above may appear challenging and perhaps for some beyond the mandate of what HEI are expected to do. However, this pandemic has possibly created an opportunity for HEIs and governments to reflect on their dominant model. Is it educationally driven, or financially driven? In the midst of this pandemic we have this moment in time to focus on the greater good of others.

Studies already show students have experienced an increase in mental health related challenges (Deng et al., 2021) and some staff have struggled with increased pastoral care demands as well as extra workload related to the online migration of courses (Watermeyer et al., 2021). For those who have experienced grief and trauma, finding meaning is a central theme in the literature that focuses on these areas (de Jong et al., 2020). Finding meaning involves the threading together of coherence, purpose, and significance, where the opposite of these respectively are:

- Uncertainty and incomprehensibility;
- Aimlessness and loss of direction; and,
- Absence of [personal and collective] value. (Martela & Steger, 2016)

Therefore, if HEIs are intentionally going to (re)build resilience and well-being for staff and students, then they will be asking:

- Where is uncertainty and incomprehensibility most apparent?
- Where are staff and students possibly experiencing a loss of direction and purpose?
- How can staff and students experience being valued in and by the HEI?

Conclusion

The current global crisis is one that impacts physical health, well-being, equity, and economies. It is also a crisis that may create in some nations a form of segregation between the vaccinated and not vaccinated. We are in times where the problems we are facing are ‘wicked’ ones, where the solutions we implement may also produce further problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This may be a bleak picture; however, it is not the complete picture. Alongside the fear that permeates our societies is tangible hope, as well as opportunities to re-calibrate the role of HEIs in our societies. This re-calibrating brings together learning, re-learning, and un-learning. HEIs do have a vital role to play in and through this pandemic. People in HEIs can still change lives for the greater good, as long as those people also look out and care for each other.

He aha te mea nui?
He tangata
He tangata
He tangata

What is the most important thing?
It is people,
it is people,
it is people

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