Leadership, ready or not: Lessons learned about self through 'becoming' leaders via co-mentoring

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Two pre-tenured faculty members at dissimilar institutions found themselves in similar positions—both were assigned to leadership positions which they did not seek out. This self-study is an effort to investigate their processes of becoming leaders and how that process aligned and/or conflicted with their espoused beliefs. They committed to ideals of democratic practice, transparency, and collaboration. As evidenced in the data, tensions existed as they progressed through the change process. Administrative duties and their enactment at times conflicted with their ideals of effective leadership. Through looking back at their progression, they were able to identify four stages in their development: forming, storming, norming, and performing. This study provides recommendations for new leaders and those who support them.

Context of the study

As pre-tenured faculty at dissimilar institutions in different regions of the USA, we found ourselves in similar, unenviable positions—called upon to assume positions of leadership before our provisional terms concluded. Valerie was assigned to serve as the education department chair in her small, liberal arts college in the Northeast at the onset of her sixth year. Her responsibilities include faculty evaluation, program development and assessment, student advising, and teacher certification. During her fourth year, Laurie was appointed program coordinator in her department at a large state university in the Southeast. Her responsibilities include program development and assessment, student advisement, course scheduling, and liaising with other programs and departments. The positions were not ones we had sought, but rather had been "offered" in a manner we did not feel we could refuse. Though we came to the academy with previous leadership experience, Valerie as an elementary school principal and Laurie as a teacher leader, we felt these current university appointments were premature. We did not yet have tenure and still saw ourselves as relative novices at our respective institutions. While we had begun to feel more confident in our work, we did not consider ourselves prepared nor qualified for leadership positions.

As self-study researchers, we see every new endeavor as an avenue toward a better understanding of our roles and our impact. Unsure of our new leadership roles and how they might play out, we turned to each other to study our work and framed that exploration within the literature on educational leadership and our own experience with various enactments of it. We found "a strict and universally accepted definition of leadership has yet to be embraced by the literature" (Weller, 2002, p. 32). A generic model fails to acknowledge the unpredictable and un-scientific nature of leadership and lacks attention to the importance of context (English, 2011). Lacking definitive guidelines imposed externally, we had the liberty to define leadership in ways that aligned with our ideals and identities as teacher educators. We were concerned, if we were not careful, our core values might be compromised and we might enact our roles in ways that were not true to who we had worked to become as teacher educators (Ramirez, Allison-Roan, Petersen, & Elliott-Johns, 2012). Thus, we aspired to and valued transparency in practice, the enactment of democratic principles, and collaboration. Manke (2004) defines this type of leadership as a "power with" model, rather than "power over." Just as we have noticed gaps between our ideals and their enactment in our teaching (Ramirez et al., 2012), we anticipated incongruities between values and practice in our new roles. This study, then, is an investigation of the following question: *What can we learn about ourselves and our identities as leaders through examining tensions between values and practice in our new roles?*

We hoped to contribute to the dialogue and knowledge of practice by reporting our experiences and findings with the self-study and teacher education communities. Additionally, we strived to provide recommendations for new leaders and for those responsible for appointing and mentoring them.

Methods

Self-study allows teacher educators to examine beliefs, practices, and the interconnections between the two (i.e., Berry, 2008; Samaras, 2011). In some ways, we envision this as a continuation of previous collaborative work where we have, as pre-tenured teacher educators, embraced the study of our own practice with the goal to "improve teaching and teacher education and the institutional contexts in which they take place" (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 844). Self-study allowed us to consider the individual selves of the study, our contexts and goals, from an insider perspective and without the methodological constraints of other types of educational research (Roose, 2008; Zeichner, 2007). In addition, there is a dearth of literature on educational leadership from a self-study perspective (Badali, 2012).

This self-study is qualitative, using narrative methods and including multiple data sources in an attempt to develop and articulate a knowledge of practice (Loughran, 2008). Narrative is a mode of both reasoning and representation; we can both comprehend the world and our experience narratively, as well as share it narratively for the purposes of dissemination and critique (Feldman, 2009; Richardson, 1997). The primary data sources for this study are our shared journals, email correspondence, and face-to-face meetings occurring three times per year. We prioritized journaling, envisioning it as asynchronous dialogue, since we were in different regions of the US and unable to engage in frequent face-to-face conversation. Guiding principles for our exchanges included posing authentic questions, refraining from judgment, and ensuring trust and confidentiality (East, Fitzgerald, & Heston, 2009). We chose asynchronous journaling because we anticipated we would likely encounter a flurry of tasks and obligations that could easily stymie our commitment to this project. Our journals were typically prompted by a significant event (good or bad) that we wanted to share, reflect on, and process collaboratively as friends, colleagues, and research partners. Supplemental data included weekly time usage logs, calendars, to-do lists, feedback from constituents, and personal reflections.

We compiled all data sources and systematically immersed ourselves in an iterative process, doing multiple line-by-line readings, identifying codes and subcodes, emergent themes, and questions for consideration as they related to our initial research question (Merriam, 1998; Samaras, 2011). We engaged with the aggregate data, exchanged ideas, discussed and reflected, and identified the broader patterns within our distinct contexts and roles (Samaras & Freese, 2006). In our face-to-face meetings, we returned to the data and our initial analyses, refining codes and themes, outlining our plans for writing, and selecting representative data points to include in the manuscript. We attended to issues of trustworthiness by using collaborative methodology (Taylor & Coia, 2009). Using multiple data sources and validating each other's interpretation by serving as critical friends strengthen this work.

Outcomes

Engaging in a priori data analysis revealed an evolution in our practice and identities as leaders, paralleling the change stages of *forming, storming, norming,* and *performing* outlined in team-building models (Tuckman, 1965), As we probed the data, we were struck by the shifting tone of our correspondence. Journals initially contained evidence of the *forming* stage, characterized by uncertainty, tentativeness, and

a lack of clarity in goals. The *storming* stage followed, comprised of resistance, hostility, and defensiveness. Over time, we saw ourselves moving to the *norming* stage where we felt increased harmony between our values and practice, commitment to our new responsibilities, and a sense of pride in our work. Though still evolving, we are beginning to recognize potential for the *performing* stage in our leadership roles. We are approaching organizational clarity, empowerment, flexibility, and a sense of vision. We use excerpts from our correspondence to highlight the characteristics that represent each stage in our evolution.

Forming and storming:

Every single day I start with a determined attitude to get to the bottom of what seems to be a reasonable to-do list. And every day a million little things come up that add and add and add to that list. (Laurie, September 6, 2013)

There seem to be no boundaries on how the job of chair infringes upon other aspects of my professional and personal life. I am not finding time for research, family, or exercise at the moment. (Valerie, August 27, 2013)

As is clear from the above excerpts, the responsibilities of our new leadership roles were initially unclear. There was uncertainty about the scope of our responsibilities and what resources we had available to us. Complicated by the fact we were pre-tenure faculty, we hesitated to ask questions or delegate tasks, wanting superiors to view us a competent and cooperative. We initially endeavored to operate in a manner that masked feelings of insecurity, admitting them only to one another through our journals. This leadership style was inconsistent with who we strive to be as teacher educators. We value transparency, vulnerability, and shared decision making, yet we found ourselves working in isolation and growing increasingly resentful.

It doesn't feel like it's a matter of being successful in my work (as an instructor, researcher, or chair). I find myself very much in survival mode. How can I avoid someone complaining or yelling at me (recently happened)? How can I make it through the day upright and not sobbing out of exhaustion? (Valerie, September 22, 2013).

Administration is killing me. I'm SO busy and it is not getting better!! I honestly feel like all I do is go to meetings. And many of them feel pointless… I could have used that hour! I want it back!! (Laurie, October 29, 2013).

Over time, our frustration grew. Tensions we both experienced included lack of time, unanticipated tasks that became necessary priorities (i.e., web design, recruiting, managing students and personnel), drawing attention away from our commitments to teaching and scholarship. Calendars, time logs, and lengthy to-do lists demonstrated the intensification we experienced in our work. For instance, in the week of September 9-15, Laurie spent 12.5 hours in meetings associate with her responsibilities as program coordinator. Two weeks later, September 23-29, Valerie spent over 7 hours in meetings related to department chair duties. In order to fulfill leadership obligations, we were forced to sacrifice time that had previously been spent in professional and personal pursuits that had initially brought us to our positions in the academy. As hostility mounted, our shared experience and collaboration were lifelines to helping us regain balance between our values and practices and our professional and personal lives.

I hope we can help each other through these challenging times. My advice to you, my dear Valerie – go for a bike ride! I, in order to gain some perspective today, am going for a hike if it kills me! (Laurie, September 6, 2013).

Over time, we began to see more moments of clarity. It wasn't a smooth progression through the stages of change. We experienced roadblocks in the form of others' expectations and internal politics. We both followed individuals whose leadership styles were substantively different from our ideals. This, at times, resulted in apprehension, miscommunication, and uncertainty in navigating relationships.

I have observed the four full-time faculty in my department. I'm sure it was nerve-racking to have me observe, but it was quite interesting to see their various styles and learn a little about their content. It would be beneficial for everyone on the faculty to make the rounds. I'm going to encourage it, but I'm not particularly confident they will find the time to do it, given how busy everyone is. (Valerie, November 25, 2013).

Perhaps because of our uncertainty in our new roles, our values and expectations as leaders were not immediately transparent to others with whom we worked. As relatively new faculty still acclimating to our institutions, we did not possess a full understanding of the internal politics at play. Often, the values we espoused and endeavored to enact were not part of the established climate. There were times we were taken aback when we encountered certain practices that had become entrenched in the institution.

I don't know if I could actually bring myself to adopt this "do only what is good for me and my career and my wallet" mentality. It is forcing me to rethink a lot of what I hold close, not to mention some of the people I have felt were my support system.. (Laurie, October 29, 2013).

This somewhat extreme example of unforeseen politics is just one of many incidents that prompted us to question how established past practices were outside our ideals and how we might better align them to fit. The example above shows Laurie grappling with the institutional context and how adopting that stance would compromise her values. Fortunately, forming and storming eventually led way to advancement as we entered the stages of norming and performing.

Norming and performing:

As the change process unfolded, we began to reconcile our practices and ideals, altering previously unexamined, hidden leadership practices. We began to see our positions as opportunities for change and improvement rather than simply fulfillment of obligation. As we entered the norming stage, we became more efficient and less reactive, reclaiming time for other commitments and passions. As we move into the performing stage, we are able to be more reflective, using our individual and shared experiences to align our practice with our ideals of effective leadership. While our earlier journals were dominated by negativity, placing blame, and rationalizing, our most recent journals and dialogues are marked by problem solving, attention to our teaching and scholarship, and optimism about our capacity to lead in a manner congruent with our teacher educator identities. This seemed to result from having time to settle into our new roles, developing knowledge and confidence in role expectations, and consistently supporting one another.

I am feeling a little less under the gun in the last week (have no fear, I doubt the calm will persist). ☺ In the meantime, I have other things I need to pay more attention to. (upcoming conferences, papers, and other scholarly activities). (November 10, 2013).

I am actually starting to see some "benefit" for all the work I am doing. Our chair and I have been talking regularly and she is so positive, helpful, and supportive. She acknowledges how much I am there and how many irons I have in the fire. (Laurie, November 29, 2013).

Over time, colleagues and students expressed appreciation for our leadership styles, specifically mentioning openness, responsiveness, and willingness to help. Most of these comments occurred informally, in hallway conversations, making it difficult to document them. Regardless, they have served to affirm our commitment and shown evidence we are enacting our values as leaders. For example, Laurie received a message from a colleague stating *By the way, you have done a great job as our program coordinator…your openness and new approach is a good thing; just don't say thank you enough.* Valerie, following her first department meeting as chair, received informal compliments from two colleagues who expressed appreciation for the transparency she provided about the department's budget. These types of positive feedback buoyed our confidence, which is evident in the following excerpts:

In many ways, I DO feel like I'm doing a good job. I feel more confident in my decisions and rarely have to ask for help anymore. (Laurie, November 29, 2013)

I can see myself more often feeling successful and, most importantly, able to function in the position without compromising my ideals and find time to pursue my research, writing, and teaching goals. (Valerie, January 5, 2014)

We began to see tasks not as potential failures, but opportunities to help and support colleagues and students. The confidence we gained stemmed not only from comments from others, but also from our feelings of growth in terms of knowledge and expertise. Because we have systematically studied our practice since entering the academy, we can look back and see how we have traveled a variation of this road before. Looking back on our early journal entries, Valerie noted this realization:

It is interesting to me that our journals of the last several months largely mirror the journals we shared in our first years in the academy. We've been here, we've done this before. (Valerie, January 5, 2014)

Early in our new positions, we made decisions motivated by a desire to be safe and to be viewed as competent. We noted a shift, where concerns now focus on improving our contexts and enacting our work in a manner congruent with our goals, and began to see ourselves as more innovative and collaborative. Where we had previously worked in isolation because of insecurity, we now feel more competent, which leads us to be more open to input from others. In the *forming* stage, we were resistant to being viewed as vulnerable. We now realize the importance

of vulnerability in building a trusting, collaborative community with our respective colleagues and how leadership can look different in those contexts.

Recommendations:

This study, in tandem with our previous work, demonstrates what Manke (2004) observed: "Self-study is enriched when the practitioner engages in looking back at past practices and past contexts to assist reflection on current contexts and practices" (p. 1370). The process of engaging in self-study and being willing to honestly reflect with a trusted friend alleviated our angst in our new roles and was the catalyst through which we saw change in our identities and practices as leaders.

While we recognize appointing pre-tenure faculty to leadership positions is problematic, perhaps these are changing practices for changing times. As budget cuts abound and faculty are asked to take on more, there simply may not be other options. It is imperative the tenure process take into consideration the full context of the faculty member's teaching, service, and scholarship, giving adequate credit for the unique demands of leadership. While the leadership position intensified Valerie's tenure process, it did not, in the end, adversely impact her. We are hopeful, as Laurie applies for tenure in the coming year, she will be given adequate recognition for her leadership service.

Our second recommendation is that all faculty appointed to leadership positions have some form of mentoring. We believe systematic and intentional mentoring benefits all involved, lessening the anxiety and missteps of the new leader, streamlining decision making, and facilitating positive change. Mentoring relationships, according to Miller and Thurston (2009), must include four important components: friendship (emotional support, advice, etc.), collaboration in research and career development, information about policies (e.g. tenure and promotion), and intellectual guidance. At some level, each of these components was realized in our relationship. As pre-tenure faculty placed in leadership positions in institutions without any formalized mentoring, we sought community and support from each other. We had experienced previous success with a co-mentoring model (Ramirez et al., 2012), and chose to continue that practice. In the absence of formalized mentoring, we encourage new leaders to find co-mentors with whom they can engage in dialogue and reflection. The safety, confidentiality, and freedom to be open and honest emerged as the most significant aspect of our self-study.

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