

Title: Developing Apprentice Leaders through Critical Reflection

Abstract:

Purpose: This conceptual paper explores opportunities for delivering sustainable leadership education through critical reflection embedded in the framework of higher and degree apprenticeships.

Approach: This paper contributes to leadership development research that focusses on “leader becoming” as an ongoing process of situated learning (in the classroom and everyday work life). The approach to leadership development adopted in this paper proposes that sustainable leadership practices and decision-making are developed when leadership learning is firmly embedded in work-based practices and critical self-reflection.

Findings: The discussion of critical reflection methods focuses on utilising the learning portfolio as a core aspect of all leadership and management apprenticeships to embed sustainable and reflective practice and facilitate situated leadership learning. The paper explores the role of training providers in actively connecting higher and degree apprenticeships to embed this model of leadership development and seeing leadership as a lifelong apprenticeship. It also highlights the potential for resistance by managers and senior leaders in seeing themselves as apprentices rather than accomplished leaders. By paying attention to issues of language and identity in this discussion, it will surface practical implications for the delivery of sustainable leadership education through the framework of apprenticeships.

Originality: This paper adds to our theoretical and practical understanding of sustainable leadership education by exploring opportunities for reframing leadership development as a lifelong apprenticeship focussed on personal and professional development. Recognising the resistance that often exists to reflective practice within leadership development contexts, this paper further explores ways of dealing with such resistance.

Introduction

Leader/ship development and learning has for some time now been criticized for being too individually focused and a need has been expressed for more socially orientated forms of leadership development (Day, 2000). In particular, Kempster and Stewart (2010) argued that leadership learning is fundamentally relational and situated in nature. The learner needs to engage in critical reflection processes where they consider their own working context, experiences and sense of self deeply and in connection with both their learning and role in the workplace in order to develop personally and professionally as a leader. Nicholson and Carroll's (2013) research into leadership development programmes has further highlighted how, in order to become a leader, learners need to engage in processes of identity undoing of their old managerial or occupationally based identities. This has strengthened our understanding of how leadership development is not only about knowledge or skills acquisition and behavioural change but fundamentally about identity work, encouraging us to pay closer attention to emotions, struggles and resistance amongst learners and the need for reflexivity. Studies on creative leadership development methods and practices have demonstrated the need for aesthetic, sensory focused and reflexive approaches (e.g. Cunliffe, 2002; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Schyns et al., 2013; Sutherland, 2013) such as storytelling (Schedlitzki et al., 2015) in addition to cognitive based development models. These creative and reflexive methods enable the learner to deal better with complexity, the unknowable and unpredictable in life and encourage them to engage emotionally as well as cognitively (Hansen and Bathurst, 2011; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009) in the development process. They further allow space for critical considerations and contemplation where the aim is not to have definitive answers but to develop skills of deep listening and questioning in themselves and others.

Yet, whilst the emerging argument for creative and reflexive methods in leadership development seems compelling, we know little about the extent to which this is adopted in the wider practice of leadership development in the UK and indeed whether it is an approach to leadership itself that is welcome in organizational discourse and practice. The first section in this paper adds to our understanding of this conundrum as it looks more deeply at both the need for creative, reflexive methods in sustainable leadership development and the potential challenges that dominant, heroic leadership discourses pose

to such methods in the classroom and work practice. This will set the scene for the paper's exploration of how the new framework of work-based higher and degree apprenticeships in leadership and management in the UK may help to establish further such creative and reflective leadership development practices. More concretely, the ensuing discussion in this paper adds to our understanding of potential opportunities and challenges for the use of learning portfolios as critical reflection tools embedded throughout work-based higher and degree apprenticeships in leadership and management to develop reflexive and sustainable leadership practice. The paper argues that learning portfolios on apprenticeships have the potential capacity to move learners away from a desire for the latest cutting-edge model on leadership and towards embracing deep, situated learning practices that in themselves have a transformative effect in the form of lasting reflexive practices.

Sustainable Leadership Development – the need for critical reflection and situated learning

Leadership development has long been under criticism for its overly individualistic and functionalist nature (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014) where leadership competency models set aspirational – and often unattainable – standards that are then used to re-define the individual as a future leader without considering the individual's social and work context. One of the main criticisms of this approach has been that it lacks reflexivity on the role of the educator and is often void of addressing issues of emotions, gender, power and identity (Collinson and Tourish, 2015; Ford and Harding, 2007). In response to this criticism, there has been a surge of research studies into leadership development that explore not only issues of power, gender and identity but also of resistance and struggle (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Hay, 2014; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Warhurst, 2011). There has also been a call for further attention to be paid to the lived experiences of participants on leadership development programmes (Carden and Callahan, 2007; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014) and their processes of identity undoing and forming that they may experience whilst on a leadership development programme (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) and when back in the workplace (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006).

There is further some criticism that leadership development programmes are often not culturally attuned to the work context of learners (Edwards and Turnbull, 2013), leaving the individual unable to apply their learned knowledge and skills back in the workplace or indeed experiencing role conflict between their aspirational leader identities and hierarchically defined roles (Carden and Callahan, 2007) and expectations from others about what constitutes effective leadership. Leadership learning is further often treated as either a classroom exercise or an informal on-the-job activity. Kempster and Stewart (2010) challenged this perception with their co-constructed auto-ethnographic study that embraced a collaborative learning approach between academic and practitioner, bridging classroom-based leadership development and workplace based, situated leadership learning. This study made two significant interconnected contributions: it helped to bring the notion of social constructionism and socially constructed identities (e.g. DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) more firmly into the realm of leadership learning and particularly with a view to demonstrating how the practitioner student required the structure of co-constructed auto-ethnography to become aware of the spatial and temporal situatedness of their work-based learning and development. Kempster as the academic educator took on the role as facilitator in a coaching style process where, through reflexive questioning, he helped Stewart to make sense of the experiences and emotions he had captured in a reflective diary in the early months of his new executive role. The connection with Kempster had been previously forged through a formal educational setting and enabled the further exploration of leadership learning as a situated practice in this more informal setting. This form of reflexive dialogic practice enabled Stewart as practitioner learner to think deeply about underlying assumptions he was holding about who he was striving to be as a senior leader, unearthing realisations about notable others in his life who had influenced these assumptions as well as individuals in his organisation who had held his role previously. It further enabled him to reflect on the organisation's history and culture and how this influenced his own identity as a senior leader as well as his decision-making processes. Whilst other studies have also contributed to our understanding of creative and dialogic leadership development methods (e.g. Taylor and Ladkin, 2009; Cunliffe, 2002), this study shows particularly well the importance of the educator as facilitator and co-constructor within the learner's reflexive process. It was through the facilitated process of co-constructed auto-ethnography that Stewart as the practitioner learner was able to

“understand something that is already in plain view” (Wittgenstein, 1953: 89) and the difference this new understanding may make’ (Cunliffe, 2002: 57) to his life.

Enabling learners to engage in such processes of deep reflexivity and more generally develop their skills for critical reflection arguable has a transformative effect on them (Smith and Martin, 2014). Rather than seeing leadership as a competence that they develop by attending a programme and applying a model, they start to see leadership as a situated work-based practice where the notion of effective leadership is socially constructed. When faced with competency frameworks, they have the ‘reflective tools’ to step back and critically reflect on the underlying assumptions of this framework as well as the situated meaning that particular competencies may take in their workplace and hierarchy-based role. By seeing their own leadership practice as situated in space and time, learners may also develop a deeper appreciation of non-individualistic models of leadership where they can dispel with the myth of the leader as the person with all the answers. It may empower them to listen deeply and openly to others, consider other perspective and see successful leadership as a collective and culturally situated process (Edwards and Turnbull, 2013).

One of the main challenges that this form of reflexive leadership development may face is the pervasive organisational discourse of the leader as the superior ‘Master’ (Harding, 2014; Schedlitzki et al., 2017) that paints a dominant image of leaders – and to some extent managers – as figures of authority and bearers of certainty. The latter is often associated with assumptions that leaders and senior managers know and give direction for other employees, are able to solve difficult, complex problems and make or take singular responsibility for decisions (Schedlitzki et al., 2017). This image is deeply embedded in many popular depictions of effective leaders and managers, particularly in a business context. The notion of reflexivity and seeing contemplation as constructive inertia that enables individuals to cope better with complexity and embrace inclusive decision-making may feel somewhat at odds with such an image of the individual, decisive, strategic – and at time almost heroic – leader or manager. This may indeed evoke resistance from participants within a leadership development setting or lead to identity and role conflicts back in the workplace if others and indeed the organisational culture do not recognise this as ‘effective’ leadership and management. Whilst the development of critical reflection skills may enable participants to become aware of their own and organisations’ assumptions embedded in

this dominant leadership and management discourse and come to appreciate alternative ways of leading and managing, they may nevertheless experience difficulty in enacting their new self as leader and manager back in the workplace (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). This is, unless we start to see an organisation/sector or society wide change in what is seen as effective leadership and management practice.

The introduction of the new Degree Apprenticeships with its framework of holistic development of the learner and strong emphasis on the utilization of learning portfolios could be welcomed as a potential means to enhance a focus on critical reflection and situated leadership learning. It offers through its reach into a large number of organisations in the UK the potential to support a shift in discourse from one that favours the individual, decisive, heroic leader towards one that embraces inclusive and sustainable decision-making. In the following sections, we explore the potential that leadership and management apprenticeships have for enabling sustainable leadership development and creating a path for lifelong learning.

Leadership and Management Apprenticeships - a path for lifelong learning

The introduction of the Apprenticeship levy and new apprenticeship framework, extending the notion of apprenticeships to degree level, has brought a potentially significant change for the world of part-time leadership and management education (see Rowe et al., 2016; Daley, 2016). Employer-led trailblazer groups have - through the format of Apprenticeship standards from L3-L7 - explicitly defined the role of leaders and managers at different hierarchical levels in organisations and specified the particular knowledge, skills and behaviours that are seen to be best practice at these levels. The underlying aim is to use these standards as benchmarks of excellence for the holistic development of employees to become successful leaders and managers and to enable organisations to use their levy in order to upskill their employees and develop a fully competent workforce (Rowe et al., 2017). Whilst some employers have been writing off the levy contribution as an additional tax, others are now exclusively funding all learning and development activities through their levy contributions. Training and education providers thus have no choice but to align their own programmes and qualifications in line with this new Apprenticeship framework.

Particularly at degree level, the practice of developing learners towards a fixed benchmark setting out who a leader or manager is, what they should know, be able to do and behave is a significant change (Rowe et al., 2017).

In the context of a movement towards sustainable leadership development through a focus on reflexive pedagogy (Iszatt-White et al., 2017), this new apprenticeship framework may offer a variety of opportunities for educators. The notion of being an apprentice is arguably rooted in the socio-cultural and historical context (Rowe et al., 2017) of lifelong learning leading to occupational mastery as its end-goal. Whilst the apprenticeship as a programme of skills development is temporal and usually bound to only a few years of an employee's working life, it can be seen to be potentially tied to this ideology of mastery as an achievement through lifelong learning. This may now be particularly enhanced through the presence of apprenticeships at L3-L7 and an employee may find her/himself developing their leadership and management knowledge, skills and behaviours throughout their career by completing several apprenticeships to support their work-based development. As indicated earlier in this paper, leadership development scholars have argued that in order to get away from the popular idea of being a great leader by following 10 easy steps, we may need to embrace and promote the notion of "leader becoming" (Kempster and Stewart, 2010) as an ongoing – lifelong – process of situated learning (in the classroom and everyday work life). Yet, particularly at senior leadership levels, this focus on reflective practice may be perceived to stand in contrast with the assumed organisational need for leaders and managers to be innately experienced, omniscient and make quick, decisive decisions based on rational logic. It is certainly incongruent with dominant leadership discourses focussed on the heroic individual leader setting the strategic direction and having 'all the answers' (Schedlitzki et al., 2017).

This is where the new leadership and management apprenticeship standards with their focus on holistic, sustainable leader and manager development measured through the completion of a portfolio of evidence which requires ongoing critical reflection could challenge the hegemony of the decisive, omniscient leader and manager discourse. Indeed, it may provide an opportunity to develop sustainable leadership practices and decision-making through the delivery of programmes where leadership learning is firmly embedded in work-based practices and critical self-reflection. Where organisations develop managers

and leaders at all hierarchical levels through leadership and management apprenticeships that embrace a focus on situated and reflexive learning as discussed in the previous section, this could have a transformative effect for their workforce. As we discuss in the next section, it can open up opportunities for seeing leadership and management as a situated process that is fundamentally relational (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Developing critical reflection skills may enable leaders and managers to become more noticeable of who they are as individuals in relation to others and context and how these shape their assumptions of the skills and behaviours that leaders and managers should display (Kempster and Stewart, 2010). Embracing critical reflection and self-reflection as part of everyday practice could be key to sustainable decision-making as it enable leaders and manager to embrace rather than fight uncertainty and tackle wicked problems (Grint, 2005).

Learning Portfolios as a critical reflection method – opportunities and challenges for changing identities

Portfolios of evidence are one of the two key elements (work-based project being the other) of all leadership and management apprenticeships from L3 to L7. Within the framework of apprenticeships they act as a vehicle for capturing ongoing development of apprentices against the respective standard. They are further a means for individuals to demonstrate at end-point assessment that they have acquired all knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the standard and to show that they are now working at the respective leadership or management level in their workplace. This paper argues that the incremental nature of these portfolios of evidence and their presence throughout the apprenticeship programme constitute an ideal space for embedding critical reflection and reflexivity. By re-framing portfolios of evidence as ‘learning portfolios’ and giving learners structured exercises that enable them to go beyond capturing practice and starting to reflect critically, they empower learners to become reflective practitioners and to shape their own meaning of leadership and management as situated, cultural practices.

At the start of a leadership and management apprenticeship, particularly at the higher levels, leaders and managers may struggle with the developmental language of apprenticeships and indeed the need for and purpose of critical reflection. They may

question how, if they are already practising managers in their organisations, they can dispel with this authority and become enquiring leader apprentices. Indeed, these apprenticeships ask individual learners to straddle across two identities: the accomplished manager in a hierarchical position and the apprentice learner. A key aim then of engaging in critical reflection is to shift this initial conflict of identities by challenging the very notion of the self as an accomplished leader or manager. Using learning portfolios as reflective tools (Zubizarreta, 2009) has the potential capacity to make visible the temporal and spatial situatedness of leader identities and leadership learning (Kempster and Stewart, 2010). By developing sustainable reflective practices through regular scheduled reflective activities, we may enable learners to see effective leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than the outcome of developing fixed competencies. Whilst the competencies set out in the apprenticeship standards provide a definition of effective leadership, they require further cultural interpretation and the creation of organisationally situated meaning of competencies through reflective practice. When seeing learning portfolios in this way and using it as a reflexive pedagogical tool rather than a container of information, we open up possibilities for enabling learners to reframe their own development as leaders as a lifelong apprenticeship.

So, what do we mean by learning portfolios and reflective practice? There are many different approaches to learning portfolios and the role of critical reflection within this, embedded in different occupational and pedagogical disciplines (Zubizarreta, 2009). This paper argues that, within the framework of leadership and management apprenticeships, the purpose of learning portfolios is closely linked to its role in the end-point assessment and as such consists of two elements: a) a folder (virtual or physical) of all pieces of evidence of personal learning and development gathered over the course of the programme and b) a synthesis or narrative written by the learner that demonstrates how he/she has developed all knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the apprenticeship standard by the end of the programme. Critical reflection, defined by Reynolds (1999, p. 538) as 'a commitment to questioning assumptions and taken-for-granted embodied in both theory and professional practice' and 'a perspective that is social rather than individual', gives both aspects of the learning portfolio on apprenticeships a much needed depth of analysis. It enables the learner to go beyond surface level assessment of self against the standard and

empowers them to become aware and questioning of their own taken-for-granted assumptions and expectation as managers and leaders and how these relate to assumptions and expectations held by others (in their organisation and wider society) and indeed embedded in theory and the standard itself. For work-based programmes like the leadership and management apprenticeships, it is the integration of theory and practice through experiential learning that is at the heart of reflective practice during the gathering of evidence and writing of the synthesis in learning portfolios.

Within the field of leadership and management, Kolb's (1984) work on experiential learning is probably the best known and widely used theoretical underpinning for reflective practice and arguable highly useful for structuring critical reflection in the development of learning portfolios. Kolb (1984, p.26) argued that 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' and visually demonstrated this ongoing process of 'experiential learning' through his learning cycle. This showed the importance for learners to focus on learning as a continuous process grounded in experience and an external environment (Vince, 1998) rather than seeing it as an outcome of isolated knowledge download. This simultaneously stressed the experiential, situated nature of learning and the importance for learners to engage holistically by thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. Kolb's (1984) learning cycles depicts the learning process that individuals go through in four stages of direct experience, reflection, theorisation and experimentation and through these stages shows the importance of not just theory or practice but the integration of both and as such 'experiential knowing' (Vince, 1998) for deep learning. For example, when starting with an experience as a piece of evidence for their learning portfolio, the learning cycle encourages the learner to go through several stages of sense-making: taking stock of the experience and what happened, understanding and examining own emotions and reaction to and within the experience and then analysing this experience and emotions by drawing on theory, other previous experiences to make sense and becoming more aware of underlying assumptions and cognitive or behavioural patterns of self and others. Finally and crucially, it involves experimentation where learners needs to think about how they are going to use this new learning about what happened in the future. Making visible these four stages of learning and indeed a need for holistic reflection on and integration of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviours has also

been highlighted to be beneficial for individual's self-awareness of learning processes (Vince, 1998). Kolb's learning cycle and its four stages are particularly useful to structure reflection templates for learning portfolios as going through the stages will encourage learners to not just describe what happened but critically reflect on feelings, thoughts, embedded assumptions and prompt them to try out the newly learned knowledge on-the-job and thus develop skills in this area.

In his examination of Kolb's work, Vince (1998) stresses that this reflective practice comes with challenges both externally and internally. Learners naturally get stuck in their own behavioural patterns where their individual cognitive and behavioural preferences may keep them trapped in one part of the learning cycle, such as experimentation without reflection or theoretical analysis without experimentation. This again stresses the need for careful facilitation and structure within the context of learning portfolios as tools for critical reflection and experiential learning. In Kempster and Stewart's (2010) example, it was the coaching process within the method of co-constructed auto-ethnography that enabled Stewart to engage in deeper, critical reflection about the organisation's culture and his own assumptions about leadership and his new role. Within the remit of learning portfolios on leadership and management apprenticeships, it is therefore advisable to develop learners' critical reflection skills through guided reflective activities, critical reflection templates and by asking learners to submit and receive feedback on synthesis pieces where they need to critically examine their development to date. The benefits of developing such critical reflection skills and enabling reflexivity in learners go beyond the completion of the task of the learning portfolio. It enables learners to look at their own development and indeed future leadership practice in an embodied way where they become more cognisant of emotions, thoughts, underlying assumptions and behavioural patterns both internally and externally/socially. Indeed, it makes more visible how leadership development is a site of identity work (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) and leader becoming is not an accomplishment upon completion of a development programme but a lifelong, contested journey.

Focussing on external influences and power dynamics in this learning process (Vince, 1998), it is important to note the potential tension between the ideological aim of apprenticeships to embed the idea of lifelong learning into leadership and management education and evoke sustainable, reflective practice through the use of learning portfolios and the very

concrete and fixed nature of the apprenticeship standard. As a competency framework (Bolden and Gosling, 2006), the standard sets out in 'black and white' who a leader or manager should be and only those who can evidence that they indeed know all the things and are able to do all the things and behave in exactly the way that the standard sets out will be able to complete their apprenticeships. Apprentices have to prove and evidence their development not only on programme but also at an end-point assessment event and in front of an independent assessor, thereby going through a symbolic ritual that they leave with a stamp of having successfully become a leader or manager. As such, the standard and end-point assessment ritual work as a disciplinary mechanisms that regulate and control (Carroll and Levy, 2010; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) the apprentice's emerging leader identity. In the following section, we explore the role of the educator as a facilitator of reflective structures and processes throughout higher and degree apprenticeships, which empower learners to engage in reflexive contemplation throughout this process of self-assessment and self-alignment as a means to provide learners with agency.

The role of the educator

Engaging learners in critical reflection processes is not easy (Iszatt-White et al., 2017). Indeed, research (e.g. Schedlitzki et al., 2015) has demonstrated the importance of careful facilitation where reflexive tools actively engage learners in the process of self-assessment and critical reflection. Whilst there is great transformative capacity in such processes and great potential value as argued above for impacting sustainable leadership processes, reflective practices evoke emotions and this may include heightened states of uncertainty and anxiety amongst learners (Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Vince, 1998). Carroll and Nicholson (2014) explore the existence of resistance as an inevitable and potentially constructive part of leadership development work that openly invites critical reflection about self and work contexts. They see this as a crucial aspect of identity work within leadership development processes where learners naturally resist when encouraged to consider and adopt new or alternative ways of being a leader. Schedlitzki et al. (2015) similarly demonstrated the variety of emotions evoked in participants when asking them to reflect on identities at work through the allegory of Greek Gods and Goddesses in development workshops. They

stressed the role of the facilitator here to deal with such emotions and support participants in these processes of reflection so as to contain heightened levels of anxiety in the room and focus on the critical insights about leadership practices that can be drawn from the learning experience.

When engaging learners in creative and reflexive learning processes, it is also important for educators to be mindful of and constructively address the hegemonic assumptions on management and leadership that learners arrive with in the classroom. As discussed earlier in this paper, these may be focused on deeply embedded, individualistic notions of leaders and managers as figures of authority in organizations who are judged by their capacity to take decisive action and show emotional resilience. Reflexive practice that asks for constructive inertia and contemplation may then be seen as contradictory to this image of the rational, logic decision-maker. When encouraging all learners to engage in self-assessment processes and skills gap analyses at the start of an apprenticeship programme, educators have the opportunity to devise reflexive exercises that help apprentices to reflect on their embedded assumptions about leaders, leadership, managers and management and the potentially disciplinary nature of the apprenticeship standard as a competency framework. This frees up space for considerations of alternative assumptions and models of being a manager and leader at work and over the course of the apprenticeship.

Yet, the concreteness of the standard as a competency framework in itself may continue to pose a challenge for educators on leadership and management programmes engaging in reflexive practices. Bolden and Gosling (2006) have explored in detail the potentially constraining nature of competency frameworks that through their explicit description of ideal practices create a benchmark that is then utilized for two mutually exclusive purposes: assessment and development. This echoes concerns of others (e.g. Carroll and Levy, 2008) with competency based leadership development as a tool of alignment to pre-set assumptions and ideals counter-acting its higher purpose of empowering individuals to become 'better' leaders and managers. Indeed, the leadership and management apprenticeship standards and the focus on preparing individuals on demonstrating specific knowledge, skills and behaviours at end-point assessment, inevitably brings back a fundamental focus on the individual as accomplished leader or manager. This presents a potential tightrope walk for the educator who needs to keep the balance between

facilitating the individual's self-assessment development against this concrete benchmark whilst also enabling the individual to understand the importance of social context in relation to the self. In light of the complexities and potentialities for resistance within reflexive practices highlighted above (Vince, 1998), it is vital for educators to design a careful infrastructure throughout the apprenticeship programme that guides the learner through stages of their personal and professional development. This needs to include a clear narrative connected to the particular knowledge, skills and behaviours set out in the respective apprenticeship standard and a set of reflective tools – including the learning portfolio – so that apprentices are empowered to critically reflect on their incremental development towards this standard and the standard itself. It is then within this personal and professional development strand of the apprenticeship programme where the development of the learning portfolio as both a key reflexive tool and output is situated and facilitated through ongoing coaching practice between the educator and learner. As highlighted in the previous section, educators could draw on Kolb's learning cycle and embed the four stages within reflection templates as a guiding structure that deepens learners' analysis of their learning and development. Regular synthesis pieces further support the learner in their self-assessment against the standard and offer great opportunities for feedback on the learner's ability to stand back and examine their changing identity and practice. This infrastructure will help to keep the learner engaged at a critical level and navigate between the self and social context in their awareness and challenging of embedded assumptions on leadership and management.

Furthermore, where an educator provides apprenticeships at different levels, there is value in developing an interconnected framework across apprenticeship programmes that enables facilitators, learners and employers to see how the standards and connected personal and professional development strands reflect potential career progression within the organization. Firmly connecting the tri-partite progress reviews to these personal and professional development strands by giving them a developmental focus linked to a clear, individual personal development plan further supports the shift towards embedding an alternative assumption of leadership as a lifelong apprenticeship rather than quick accomplishment into organizational discourse and practice.

Going forward

This paper has explored in depth the opportunities for sustainable leadership development and potential practical challenges of learning portfolios as reflective tools embedded in the framework of leadership and management apprenticeships. This discussion has revealed the potential capacity of apprenticeships to move learners away from seeing leadership development programmes as focussed on buying in the latest cutting-edge model on leadership as an 'easy fix' solution to competency and productivity gaps. Instead, it offers the opportunity to create and embed reflexive skills and practices in learners that last beyond the scope of the programme. The learning portfolio as a reflexive tool engages the learner in ongoing, deeply situated learning practices that enable them to reflect deeply and critically on actions and decision-making processes at work. It develops the crucial skill of constructive inertia where, instead of rushing into making a decision under pressure, managers and leaders in organisations feel comfortable and empowered to pause for long enough to consult and gather evidence from different perspectives and critically reflect on assumptions made to inform their decision-making processes. Particularly where such skills and practices are embedded in apprenticeship frameworks from L3-L7 and an organisation benefits from employees completing several of these apprenticeships at different levels, we may indeed be able to see a shift within organisational decision-making processes and discourses that reflect sustainable and collective leadership practices.

Going forward, it will be important to conduct longitudinal research studies that capture learning and development of leadership and management apprentices during and after the completion of specific apprenticeship programmes where learning portfolios are used in the way discussed in this paper. Of particular interest would be ethnographic studies that are able to follow the development of apprentices at different levels and over time within the same organisation to capture the impact this may have on organisational practices.

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