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Whole Circles: Models for Academic Textile Design Research Leadership in the Circular Economy

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Abstract

New leadership approaches are needed in design research to support the creation of more resource-efficient models for material resource loops and cyclability. Designers will need to take on enhanced roles in order to drive changes to products, systems and behaviours. The conceptual model, Characteristics of High-Performing Research Units (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2015), cites people, collaboration, partnerships and networks, and departmental practices as all key factors in successful research hubs. In this paper, the author discusses insights drawn from an original auto-ethnographic study and proposes a revised model which provides researchers, practitioners and managers with questions they need to consider in order to lead in ways that academia, industry and the planet urgently needs.

Introduction

The work at Textile Environment Design (TED) and Textile Futures Research Centre (TFRC) and University of the Arts London (UAL) is grounded in practice-based textile design research for the circular economy which includes considering new roles for future designers. To understand and prepare for these roles textile designers need to consider leadership in an industry where traditionally they have been taciturn (Igoe, 2015); and needing support to 'step out' (Press & Heeley, 1997). The opportunity here is for progressive leadership approaches from industry to be applied to academic design research units, so that they can create the systemic change the textile industry requires (LeJeune, 2016).

This paper primarily draws upon the experience and reflections of the author, a textile designer and the Director of a University research Centre, and triangulates this with a conceptual model and a corporate leadership model, in order to identify insights to support design leadership for the circular economy.

Inspired by the 2015 HEFCE conceptual model, Characteristics of High-Performing Research Units, the author has reflected upon building the unit

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and delivering circular fashion textile projects across a five-year timeframe. In seeking to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Bochner & Ellis, 1992:165-172), the author used questions derived from a workshop and Skype session with Ayelet Baron whose seven signposts (Baron, 2016) frame this study. The questions explored were:

1. *How can I lead this research Centre, meeting all the objectives I have been set?*
2. *How can I make sure all members get involved in the Centre and projects?*
3. *How can I become a whole self when I am so many different things to so many different people here?*
4. *How can I develop a shared purpose for the Centre and its members?*
5. *How can I work at living, rather than live to work; and how can this become a healthy way for my research team to work too?*
6. *Who do we want to work with and why?*
7. *How can I work differently to support the diverse interests of group?*

Context

Traditional industry leadership approaches place importance on position and productivity above people (like Maxwell's *Five Steps*, 2011); however, in the same way that the field of sustainability has evolved away from a focus on the product and towards systems and social equity, recent leadership approaches have become more people-centric (like Mackey & Sisodia's *Conscious Capitalism*, 2014).

The HEFCE model (figure 1) puts people in the middle of the circle surrounded by strong leadership, culture and values - and proposes that these are pre-requisite factors for success. Strategy and funding positioned as enabling, along with collaborations, networks and institutional practices. The publication of the model coincided with end of the five-year leadership period covered in this paper. The author's Centre was not one of those that took part in the research that formed this study, but was rated as a high-performing and impactful Centre within the UAL (University of the Arts London, 2016).

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Figure 1: The conceptual HEFCE model, 'Characteristics of High-Performing Research Units' (HEFCE, 2015)

Baron's seven signposts

Baron's book, *Our Journey to Corporate Sanity: Transformational Stories from the Frontiers of 21st Century Leadership* (2016) is based on many years as an international manager at Cisco, followed by a period of consulting for companies around the world testing her guidelines for more people-centric approaches. Baron's signposts were developed to support leadership endeavors that address new problems that are emerging as we enter an era where 'we are the leaders at the forefront of a human-to-human, purpose driven experience.' (2016:8), as the increased interest in sustainability and social equity issues also evidences.



Figure 2: 7 Signposts to Thriving in the 21st Century (Baron, 2016)

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Methods

The author conducted a review of the process of establishing the Centre itself and key projects within this timeframe, seeking to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.

Writing about an experience to share with an audience can in itself be seen as a form of leadership and as a research output. 'A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write auto ethnography. Thus, as a method, auto ethnography is both process and product.' (Bochner & Ellis, 1992)

Auto ethnography is a method that is growing in use amongst textile researchers, as they seek to describe, analyse and share personal experience in order to understand more about their work – and often the things that they do and make which seem to happen instinctively. The call for textile designers and researchers to become more vocal and engaged (Press & Heeley, 1997) has been one which the author responded throughout their career; but more through action, than written reflection. In writing about design and research decisions and textiles made previously and the shifting of boundaries that happened as a result, it brought the author '...closer to the truth of lived experience and more scientifically valid than more detached and seemingly more objective methods.' (Goett, in Jefferies, Wood Conroy, Clark, 2016:125)

A workshop at the Centre with Baron in July 2016 introduced the 7 Signposts to the researchers which later led to the development through Skype calls of seven questions which were used by the author to reflect on the experiences of both building the Centre and leading circular design research projects. A 10,000-word text by the author in response to the questions was used to draw out a series of insights and observations. These were then placed into a table that was created to form a triangulation with aspects of the HEFCE model. The insights table is included below and was edited further to write up the results section of this paper.

The text and the HEFCE characteristics have been used to form four areas for discussion in this paper: people, culture & values; community and network; and strategy, funding and institutional/departamental practices. Baron's seven signposts formed four themes for this study which correlate with the four areas from the HEFCE model: Creating and Leading an Inclusive Centre and Being Whole Within it; Developing a Shared Purpose, which includes Working at Living; Co-creating Communities and Finding New Ways of Working.

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Results – People

Baron's signposts that were applied here were Conscious Leadership, Integrating the Team & Becoming Whole. When considering questions for the HEFCE circle of 'People' – the idea of the leader as a person, and leadership as an agreement and relationship between people, came to the fore. Unlike the HEFCE model, where leadership was separate to people, and less central, Baron's signposts encourage leaders to be the most 'whole' person possible – supporting others and the self to achieve the best results. The questions developed from this part of the study were:

- 1. How can I lead this research Centre, meeting all the objectives I have been set?*
- 2. How can I make sure all members get involved in the Centre and projects?*
- 3. How can I become a whole self when I am so many different things to so many different people here?*

Creating and Leading an Inclusive Centre and Being Whole Within it

The answers to these questions reveal certain things that are of paramount importance for the leader to establish at the outset of the role. These include setting one's own objectives and building one's own team. The business plan must be authored by the leader in order to enable commitment to a vision. The team and membership should avoid being too big, with too many conflicting interests, and too many managers. Integration is an ongoing process – making sure that all people feel included in the Centre's vision, and able to participate as fully as possible.

The leader should aim to surround themselves with people they want to work with and ensure they are properly resourced. Aim to create opportunities for others, above oneself, as a leader – looking for projects that will bring out the strengths of the team. But – key to success – is that the leader also IS the researcher they want to support. "As Director, you need to lead by example. Make the time to be a researcher – don't just manage others. Create a work and time plan, based on realistic objectives – that ring-fences time to write. And make sure your team know how important it is for you to be absent to do this."

In order to achieve the above, in particular the last point - it's important to know when to bring in the managers. "If new ventures mean more time and commitment, and new knowledge levels or greater degrees of administration, identify the limits of the team and work towards getting in extra support." Learn to delegate well, as spreading the load and knowing when it's time to

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ask a team member to take on more responsibility is part of delivering a vision for all the people in the Centre.

The vision of the Centre should include developing projects with open briefs to support broad participation by members – researchers of all levels should be able to contribute – and the participants should develop practices where group reflection and knowledge exchange is a regular occurrence. This way of working improves many aspects of a Centre by making the people in it feel supported, heard and understood, but also serves the group well when difficult situations arise. The leader needs to set an example through how they communicate, to encourage the members to see communication between people as essential to good research practice.

In order to support the members of a Centre in becoming better researchers the leader needs to ensure that coaching, mentoring and training are regularly delivered and reviewed as part of the appraisal process. Personal growth and development are key to original research – for the members as well as the leader. “Learn new things together. As a leader, as you learn, so you can share.” Becoming whole is about being your best self – inside and outside of work – and not separating too much the way that you present yourself in these contexts. Progressive leadership in industry is about being ‘authentic’. From the experience of the author, this particular approach proved to be the most successful in enabling the Centre to recruit good people and retain them, which HEFCE recognize as key to high performing units (2015:20).

Finally, ironically, the last insight is about developing a sense of limits or boundaries to other people who make demands of the leader. It became clear through the reflection process that ‘growing a thicker skin’ was important to being able to counter certain pressures arising from people both within and without the Centre. Finding a balanced view on what can be done for oneself and for others will enable a leader to sustain a role, whilst also developing vision and ambition within the membership.

Results – Culture and Values

Baron’s signposts that apply here are Creating a Shared Purpose & LIFEworking. When considering questions about culture and values, the following questions were developed:

4. *How can I develop a shared purpose for the Centre and its members?*
5. *How can I work at living, rather than live to work; and how can this become a healthy way for my research team to work too?*

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Developing a Shared Purpose, which includes Working at Living

What emerged through these questions was that a desirable internal culture – especially when exploring circular economy ideas – was a highly collaborative one, and that every collaboration should be seen as an outcome in its own right. “Collaboration means making time to bring people together to co-create a shared purpose.” It was felt to be important to work out the details of collaboration upfront. “Don’t work it out as you go along – sit down and talk through the potential outcomes and ownership issues, as well as the methods and processes. Find the foggy bits, and note them.”

When it was not possible to work this way – members had different approaches and could not collaborate easily on ideas – a much more disjointed and less comprehensive set of results were presented at the end of projects. In some cases, members left the Centre to set up their own hubs or groups; and whilst this is not necessarily a negative outcome, building and growing a Centre that is ‘high-performing’ would not be possible if members did not ascribe to the culture and values that exist at the heart of the organization.

Democratic decision making and systemic development in an academic context is important to trust and collaboration efforts. “Academic research loves to hold up its high-achievers, its philosophers, its award-winners. But these individuals are becoming rarer as the environment changes. Embrace diversity and enable progression across the board. And if the academic system seems outdated, challenge it to change.” Research leaders need to make fairness, equality, accessibility and generosity central to the group’s collaboration ethos.

The reflective texts revealed that spending time together as a team was important to how the culture and values developed at the Centre. Eating meals together – at work, on trips, and for social events helped researchers to debrief and ‘digest’ the activities and ideas. The informality of these events built an understanding for all that was hard to capture through other feedback routes. “Formal feedback mechanisms rarely capture the human interactions.” Likewise, working together outside of the physical office space was beneficial, as “we connect differently in different spaces – and by being connected we are more resilient.”

In terms of resilience, the culture and values need to seek to sustain researchers as well as project outcomes, aiming to “Look after each other. Know what each individual needs – what makes them happiest and what will make them flourish. Support their efforts.” The notion of liking and enjoying your work sounds obvious, but if practice-based researchers only produce

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written outcomes like journal articles, their unique offer to the field is at risk when it needn't be, "...our field of practice-based textiles research we have the flexibility of defining it for ourselves." The culture needs to support a range of practices and approaches, and the leader can find ways to ensure time and work load planning takes into account creative, hands-on action.

Finally, stress can negatively affect a culture and it was found to be something that needs to be openly discussed and addressed, and even monitored. Whilst insights like these fall into the category of Human Resources at an organization, and many measures are provided to support researchers centrally, a research Centre culture can also enable a healthy balance for its members, which in turn enables strong levels collaboration, trust, knowledge exchange, generosity, understanding and creativity to be maintained.

Results – Collaboration and Networks

Baron's signpost that was most relevant for the author here was Co-Creating Communities. The internal collaborations seen above will naturally foster external collaborations which lead to more developed networks. For the author, the Centre had a large membership served by people that were all well connected, so this question was less about building these communities from scratch, and more about being selective with time, energy and resources:

6. Who do we want to work with and why?

Co-Creating Communities

Through the reflective process the author realised that the first step in this process was to enable the people in the Centre "be conscious of the need for community". For academic researchers, a Centre can often feel like enough of a community in its own right – isolated study being the basis of traditional academic pursuits – but external networks and communities are the lifeblood of research connected to the circular economy, as the ideas are most often applied and needing context. Also, all major funding calls require a great degree of cross-sectoral collaboration and these most often come from trusted communities and networks that have taken time to develop. The reflective texts also highlighted the need to "understand the community through the local and global lens."

It was vital that the Centre and its members were properly represented online and fully visible. Clear and evidenced statements supported by links to strong research outcomes would mean that the community and network could then

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self-select. “Be abundantly online. Don’t worry about over-sharing online. Ideas are just ideas; actions actually make things real. By building your audience you will receive feedback, support and new approaches.” This can also mean changing the language – shifting it away from an academic style to a more generalist audience. This is hard for a group of people to do and needs strong leadership, creative direction, and lots of consultation. “Communicate your success. Traditionally research under-sells itself. It doesn’t seek a broad audience, for fear of devaluation. It’s important to show yourselves and the world what you are doing and bring them with you on your journey.” Ask researchers to be accountable for communicating the work of the Centre as well as their own ideas, in both formal and informal contexts. “The team need to understand milestones and work openly towards them – presenting them brings new insight and feedback during the project process, rather than just at the end.”

What became most interesting about this part of the study was that when some of the community became real – not online but in the room – what had been previously regarded as different communities quite easily became one. The sense of potential for sharing ideas and approaches was greatly increased in situation where co-creation took place. “Find ways to connect up the different community groups. Explore the potential of bringing groups together to create new synergies, ideas and maybe projects.” This highlighted the need for developing both online and offline communities in quite different ways, for the way in which they benefit the research – as well as the research benefitting them – is changing through real time interaction with the ideas.

Results – Strategy, Funding, Institutional and Departmental Practices

These attributes are presented in the HEFCE model as desired, but not a prerequisite, for high performing research Centres. In many ways reflections on these aspects could form their own study, as practice-based design research is lacking in useful guidance in this area. For this paper, the author focused here on one question, framed by Baron’s signpost Finding New Ways of Being:

7. How can I work differently to support the diverse interests of group?

Finding New Ways of Working

Up to this point in the study the subject of funding and finances had not been expanded upon, yet as most researchers working today will recognise, the opportunity to lead may only come through a project with funding attached. Financial resources underpin performance levels in a Centre, as it buys time to

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explore and develop new ideas that can evolve into bigger projects. Whilst staff on teaching contracts may produce research outcomes, the time dedicated to teaching duties often puts such enormous pressure on them that unless funding is available to buy-out teaching hours, the time commitment to a research unit is very limited. Finding funding to support staff is a critical part of the leadership role, and can be approached through a strategy that builds a range of projects directed at different levels of research outcomes and activities.

Traditional sources of funding will support communities and networks – at local and international levels – as well as larger community projects. Non-traditional sources – like industry partners and independent organisations – can support research that is designed to take new forms, such as ‘design researchers in residence’ in scientific organisations (for example, Ribul & de la Motte, 2016). Enterprise work - contract research – can also create ‘seed funding’ opportunities. Centre leaders need to evolve multi-level strategies to attract funding to grow the productivity of its membership.

Finding ways to develop and implement a strategy will often involve meetings – and finding a way to make the most of the many meetings leaders have is key. The advice from the study was clear – meetings are time consuming but they enable progress: “if used well, they can provide ‘boosters’ or foot-holds; they can give you the next step up.” The study also recommended that a leadership strategy should include making aspects of the role recognizable and consistent. “Establish a series of recognizable leadership tasks for yourself. This creates physical signals to your team about how you are leading.”

New ways of working in a young field like academic design research may mean that assumptions need examining before proceeding with projects and activities, to ameliorate against cross-sectoral misunderstandings. “Art Schools are not like science institutions. Design research projects – especially when practice-based – are very different to most science research projects.” After this, if questions remain unanswered, it is important to know when external support is needed. “Bring in the experts... Don’t be afraid of reaching out for help – you will gain the respect of your peers, not lose it.” Art, design, science research is dynamic and innovative – that is the appeal – “but we can’t be expected to know how to do everything in a culture that is constantly changing.”

Consider a strategy where your team can offer more than just the research outputs – impacts can be a broad variety of things. Despite the economic and performance pressures that a Centre may bring about, part of a strategy should

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be about creating a team with optimum membership. Too big, and the role of leading becomes difficult as the people in Centres all need to make identifiable contributions to the shared vision. “Collaboration has optimum scales – people play a specific range of roles – learn about this and use it internally, and externally.”

When the team dynamics work well, then the learning curve can be great and can provide ample ‘data’ that can be more rigorously reviewed and shared. These endeavours all provide other design research units with new knowledge. “Make everything you do data. Your team is an experiment, as the field is so new. You have much to offer other ‘start ups’ in the sector.” When a team is not working – the leaders’ role is to spot this. “Not all the pieces fit, all the time. Know when to let go... recognise this and make a new strategy.”

The Revised Model

The revised model (figure 3) which resulted from the study and discussion fuses ‘People’ and ‘Leadership’ as one entity – the text that formed the auto-ethnographic study highlighted the fact that leaders are people, and that progressive leadership is so much about co-creation and collaboration that individuals working in the Centre must form one whole entity – the centrifugal force of the Centre. In this revised model people and leaders are together, and they weight the model – they ground it. In this way, the diverse interests of the group are embraced and the model can evolve outwards in new directions from a stable core.

This study has revealed that at the heart of a high-performing research unit – (this Centre was the most financially profitable of nine research Centre’s at the University during the period examined) – people and leadership are one entity. Cultures and values are essential in terms of success, with collaboration and network coming afterwards; as culture and values need to be consistent and reliable, whilst collaboration and networks can be flexible and ever-changing. Strategy, funding and institutional and departmental practices provide leaders with new ways of working to support the core focus - people, culture, values - through collaborations and networks.

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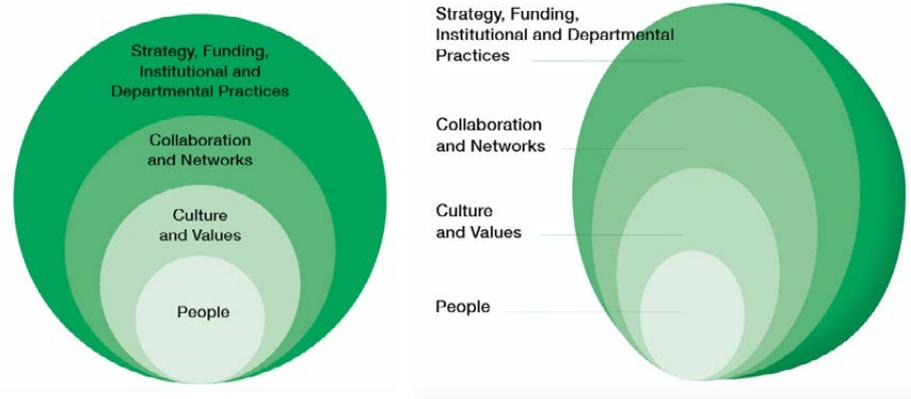


Figure 3 (left): The revised HEFCE model. Figure 4 (right): A model for Whole Circles Leadership

The model can be expanded further to enable the people at the Centre to evolve their own leadership opportunities – their own cohort of researchers with their own particular take on culture and values that still relate to the Centre. These emerging researchers may then need to develop their own collaborations and networks, and evolve their own circles. Thus, the final model (figure 4) shows how leadership in the circular economy might take the form of *Whole Circles*. The two-dimensional model has evolved into a three-dimensional model as researchers in the Centre progress into the leaders of their own areas of specific expertise – interests and activities remain connected but diversification and growth is enabled – making the Centre not larger, but more rounded, more global, more aligned with the earth.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of using the academic space for telling the stories of our research experiences; so that design research leadership can make a vital contribution to addressing the complex challenges of the emerging circular economies and cultures. The study could be expanded to include other reflective accounts from the same period. The circular economies of the future face people-centric challenges and need people-centric styles of leadership from all design fields.

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