

The Global Perspectives Project:
Building Shared Leadership through curriculum design

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This chapter explores a curriculum design project designed to effect culture change among staff and students at Regent's University, London. The chapter has two aims: to recount and reflect on the shared leadership approach that emerged from our experience, offering this project as a case study for those considering similar university-wide initiatives; and to explore the benefits of three specific tools we used as part of this collaborative process.

Context, Objectives and Challenges

The aims of the project stem from the particular context of the University, the legacy of six separate higher education institutions who shared a site until merging to become Regent's College in 2006. While the drive towards taught degree awarding powers and university title promoted a common institutional aim among the staff, there was certainly still unrealised potential for colleagues from across the campus to work together. Moreover, students continued to identify with the brands of the former schools. A working party sought ways to enhance awareness of a shared institutional identity. One of the earliest ideas to accomplish this was the creation of a single module that would be a shared experience for all first-year undergraduates. Simply mixing students from different programmes in a common module was intended to forge relationships across the disciplines. To that purpose, the idea of a generic skills module was mooted, but deemed problematic given the divergent competencies required for programmes as diverse as business, acting, liberal arts, psychology and design. However, it was an even more notable diversity that helped to shape the project into a module called Global Perspectives. Regent's students come from over 140 different countries, with no single national group dominating the demographic. To celebrate that diversity and enable students to flourish within such an environment, the idea was formed to develop the module to promote greater awareness of global, intercultural issues among students. In our earliest discussions, we agreed that the module would be framed by the University's institutional values rather than subject skills or knowledge. The result of this was an agreement that the module's learning outcomes would all be within the domain of transferable skills. Partly based on our own institutional experience of running a US-validated liberal arts degree, we explored existing models of common curricula that attempt to promote a global outlook among students, notably the approach based on the Global Perspectives Inventory designed and implemented by Braskamp and Engberg (2011).

Research from other university-wide curriculum projects has shown that if change is perceived as substantial or threatening, individuals may resist due to fear of instability, loss or increased workload (Hunzicker *et al.*, 2018, p. 196). When this is the case, groups may come together to maintain current practices or to protect disciplinary interests. Often, universities respond to such resistance with, at best the strong leadership of a charismatic individual, what John MacGregor Burns calls the ‘heroic’ leader (1978). In the increasingly managerialist cultures of universities, the response to resistance can even be overtly autocratic (Bolden *et al.*, 2009). Shared leadership can provide a more positive way of harnessing the potential of groups to drive change. In the face of these divergent models of leadership, our response was to engage with stakeholders by balancing revolutionary and top-down with evolutionary and participatory change. Following Bolden *et al.* (2015, p. 4), we have used the term ‘shared leadership’ while acknowledging that terms like ‘distributed’ or ‘collective’ leadership are also used, both of which denote group process rather than individual positionality or traits.

The literature on interdisciplinary experiments in common curricula (outside the liberal arts tradition) often reflects projects carried out within a single disciplinary field (Blair, 2011; Alix, Dobson, Wilshire, 2010). A lacuna therefore seems to exist with regard to how university-wide modules have been led, delivered and evaluated in the UK context. The dearth of such literature is perhaps due to the very specialised nature of British higher education, where ‘the subject is still king – in the minds of (most) students; certainly in the self-identities of academics; and the organisation of universities’ (Scott, 2002, p. 70). What we did find, however, were a small number of case studies in common curricula, the most relevant of which was the LSE100 module at the London School of Economics. The experience reported by their course convenor offered insights into how an institution-wide module might work across different programmes and overcome resistance to change (Templeton, 2014). The LSE100 offered a clear structure for managing delivery as well as longer term governance to support institutional and cultural change. Staff on the teaching team were required to attend all lectures as well as team meetings and specific training. Getting buy-in from each faculty was perceived to be important in establishing the module: drawing in teaching staff from different departments helped communicate the purpose of the module. The course convenor at the time felt that the greatest strength of the course and its development was working collaboratively with colleagues across LSE, which led to the project being greater than the sum of its parts.

Whilst the LSE model helped us in confirming the need for engagement across the institution, it remains a curriculum rooted in the methods and approaches of related disciplines broadly in the social sciences. The challenge (and opportunity) of the Regent's module, which was not to be linked to any discipline, therefore required a context-specific response. Leading curriculum design in the absence of subject expertise, or – perhaps more importantly – the absence of the subject expert as leader proved key to our development of a shared leadership model.

This early desk research into curriculum change, and discussion with academics both internally and from other institutions, identified three broad areas of challenge for the project.

1. **Logistics:** the new Global Perspectives module had to be incorporated into twelve existing undergraduate degree programmes, with resulting amendments to timetabling, student records, and programme documentation. There existed no precedent for making a change of just one module but applied to all programmes.

2. **Countering subject specialist resistance:** creating space in the curricula required academics from across the University to give up a proportion of their first-year content, a prospect met with responses that ranged from enthusiasm to outright indignation. What would effectively become an internal marketing campaign was required to explain and justify the decision to proceed.

3. **The blank page:** in the absence of a consensus for what might constitute a canon for a cross-disciplinary and intercultural module, we were faced with a blank page in respect of content and learning outcomes, which we could experience as either intimidating or liberating.

The approach we finally adopted in response to these three challenges combined three specific developmental change tools with a broadly shared leadership model which underpinned the whole project. Interestingly, these tools can be seen to map onto the three broad approaches to change management in higher education, described by Marshall (2007, p. 7) in her evaluation of twenty-five HE change projects. The following section summarises our actions and our learning in responding to these challenges. We then conclude with an exploration of outcomes for both students and staff, as well as some reflection on the experience of a shared leadership approach.

A shared model for curriculum design

We made the decision to separate the responsibilities into institutional sponsorship, logistical management and curriculum design. This structured articulation helped streamline decision

making and focus the academic ambitions of the project without being held back by ever-present operational concerns. The response to the logistical challenge was to adopt a project management approach, with the resulting benefits in the clear identification of stakeholders and functional responsibilities (regardless of personnel turnover), scheduling, and the tracking of problems and risk (Kerzner, 2017). A project sponsor at Directorate level (the Deputy Vice Chancellor) secured top-level backing for the initiative. A project owner (the Head of Academic Practice) steered the strategic and consultation work, while a seconded module development leader led the detailed work on the new module. A professionally trained project manager plotted and charted the many strands and contingencies impacting on almost every team in the University. To identify logistical challenges and address any operational resistance in departments such as registry, timetabling, recruitment, student support services and marketing, the project manager coordinated group meetings with these stakeholders.

Something that fell beyond the scope of the project management remit, however, was a strategy to counter subject-specialist resistance, to ensure that all programmes within the various schools were willing to implement the module. The introduction of Global Perspectives meant replacing or shortening existing modules that were felt by subject specialists to be important. One way of mitigating this opposition was by securing the support of at least one senior academic within each subject area. This was someone who understood the educational and administrative mechanics of their programme and knew how to defend the value of the new module. This allowed the module development leader to cooperate with each programme to develop a meaningful, context-specific rationale for the change. Perhaps inevitably, those with programme leadership roles differed in their receptiveness to educational change.

The specific framework for developmental change we selected in response to this challenge was the Leading Transformation in Learning and Teaching programme (LTLT), developed jointly by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Higher Education Academy. This programme requires a case study to engage its participants. For its delivery at Regent's, all programme directors were enrolled on the programme and the Global Perspectives project was selected as the case study. A substantial workshop as part of the LTLT enabled the participants to engage critically (and productively) with the draft outline of the new module, their questioning and ideas generation undoubtedly leading to enhancements. From that workshop, we achieved clearer focus on institutional distinctiveness and geographic context,

as well as a restatement of the commitment to make the module interactive, and some detailed discussion of the developing learning outcomes. But crucially, the workshop functioned as a participatory consultation significantly improving buy-in from programme directors as key leaders of the curriculum. Many of the group became champions of the module, with some eventually becoming part of the teaching team. The decision to significantly widen the pool of creative participants in the design process was an extension of our shared leadership model, the confidence in which drove our willingness to incorporate more voices, in an example of what Bennett et al. (2003, p. 7) refer to as ‘openness to the boundaries of leadership.’

Equally important was the need to address our institutional particularities in establishing curriculum content. One was the need for a Regent’s-specific experience to meet our culture-building aim; the other was what we have termed the ‘blank page’ in designing a module completely outside a subject specialism (and, in the case of the UK, outside QAA-determined Subject Benchmark Statements). Learning design informed by constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2011) ensures that learning activities map closely onto learning outcomes and that assessment evaluates how well these outcomes have been achieved. For a module in which all the learning outcomes were to be in the transferable skills domain, becoming rather than knowing is a key concept, and learning activities must provide a stimulus but also an opportunity for a response; and both activities and assessment must allow students to develop and demonstrate awareness. Rather than debating the ‘correct’ interpretation of learning outcomes (and the institutional values that informed them), the working group decided to explore, through a creative thinking workshop, what success would look like for students completing the module. To facilitate this, we utilised Lego® Serious Play®, a tool for strategic thinking, now used increasingly in business and education. Our rationale for using Lego® Serious Play® was its inclusive, participatory potential for challenging the group’s assumptions and revealing new possibilities to create new understandings for the project. In this sense, the move away from positional subject leadership was key: a shared approach enabled a creative approach and vice versa (Bolden *et al.*, 2015, p. 15).

In this workshop, the working group were asked to construct models of a student who has successfully engaged with Global Perspectives. It allowed for the generation of individual thinking before constructing shared meanings. After a simple demonstration of how to use Lego to build models that are metaphorical rather than literal or realistic, group members worked in silence, using their hands to ‘think’ with the resulting liberation from the limitations of verbal language. Then each participant explained their model to the group before they proceeded to

build a shared model including all the qualities identified by all members. All these stages were video recorded allowing for the subsequent transcription of the explanations, both at individual level and when negotiating their shared models. Analysis of the resulting transcription (which was more than 8000 words in length) produced three broad thematic areas which shaped the finalised learning outcomes, indicative learning activities and the assessment method for the module. The three themes were defined as framing personal and cultural values, intercultural education and self-directed learning.

The Lego activity was clearly an example of our evolving shared leadership approach in action. In terms of group dynamics, the session ensured all members actively participated, rather than the familiar pattern in which 20 percent of the room does the talking 80 percent of the time (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 49). When academics are accustomed to working in hierarchical systems, it can be challenging to adapt to shared leadership models in which people trust each other and share responsibility for the task at hand (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014, p. 218). While even the most facilitative approach to most curriculum design processes does not altogether negate the positional power dynamics of subject leadership and expertise, in our Lego workshop the facilitators (the project leader and module development leader) were not experts in cross-disciplinary intercultural education. Therefore, leading the group was focussed on managing the process of the activity, and not on the content or the outcomes. The transcript shows that contributions to the discussions were not dominated by the facilitators. The Lego design activity delivered on its purpose of generating a wealth of ideas to inform detailed curriculum design.

Outcomes: for students and for staff

The result of the project development outlined above was a 10-credit, first-year module, with three learning outcomes covering student engagement with diversity, self-awareness and impact on others, and the ability to reflect on their own learning needs. Given the open, developmental nature of these learning outcomes, the learning activities were not highly prescribed by written documentation, allowing for dynamic change agreed by the group in response to student needs, interests and world events. We agreed that the whole cohort (up to 450 students) would participate in five interactive, live ‘lead events’ to act as a springboard for thought, debate and reflection. These would then be followed by weekly, facilitated discussion groups of up to 15 students drawn from a wide range of disciplines. Members of the delivery team were termed ‘facilitators’ rather than ‘lecturers’ as it was felt that this

would encourage a more equal relationship in the learning environment. As intercultural learning creates challenging and unusual situations, facilitators do not always have a solution and therefore need to be in the same learning context as their students, learning with them and from them (Pricope, 2013, p. 78-79). From this perspective, the job of the educator is not to dispense knowledge but to facilitate, providing students with opportunities and incentives to actively build upon what they know (Brockbank and McGill, 2011, p. 27).

The initial response from students was mixed: many enjoyed the lead events but some found the small-group sessions uncomfortable, perhaps where they expected a learning experience based on knowledge transmission. The focus on themselves as learners and the value and practice of reflective writing was a novelty for many, but using prompts as scaffolding helped students build content and confidence. Others questioned the relevance of the module within their specialised programme of study; at points attendance decreased and not all students who attended engaged well with the activities.

In the weeks alternating with the five lead events, the full delivery team met in the same timetable slot to review the effectiveness of the module delivery. Discussions about these initial student responses led to a divergence of strategic opinion: some thought the answer was to provide more content, and more structure, which would have had the effect of making the module more teacher led. And the clamour from some students for the facilitators to incorporate content they considered relevant to their disciplines was loud. However, the counter arguments eventually prevailed: against the call for more teacher-led structure, we reiterated that the learning outcomes intrinsically direct the responsibility for learning back to the students. As Global Perspectives has evolved, facilitators have offered more control to students to determine the content of the sessions, an indicator that the shared leadership ethos of the development team has had a continuing influence on the pedagogy of the module. To address the challenge of reflection and reflective writing, we incorporated explicit writing activities into the sessions, and offered continuous feedback on small formative writing pieces submitted by students online. Some students reported they had learned more from reflective writing than from the group discussions. Regarding coverage of subject specialisms, the team had to remind students that this was incompatible with module learning outcomes which were clearly focussed on transferable, (attitudinal and interpersonal) attributes that transcended their different degree programmes.

In terms of outcomes for staff and for the University as a whole, it was acknowledged early on that a common module should not only bring together staff from different parts of the institution, but also be a vehicle for professional development for teaching and learning. Uniquely for the University, the delivery team included both academics and professional services staff, the latter mostly from learning support departments. Two facilitation workshops were organised which all prospective staff were required to attend. This training established a pedagogical benchmark for how group discussion sessions would run, emphasising the facilitator as *not*-expert, or rather as expert in facilitation rather than in any subject. This approach appears to have mitigated some of the discomfort staff felt at being asked to step outside their subject knowledge and skills in the new role, and simultaneously to have strengthened the mutual support function of the design and delivery team with lasting benefits explored further below.

The dynamics of the team meetings were pressured and exciting: from the strongly developmental ethos of the project and the emphasis on critical self-reflection espoused by the module's learning outcomes came an impetus to experiential and divergent reflection on practice. And from the context of reflection-in-action came the urgency to determine, refine and sometimes replace the learning activities for the subsequent group discussion sessions. Each member of the delivery team took responsibility, often paired with another member, for designing a menu of learning activities following on from and developing the themes introduced in each of the lead events.

Staff feedback from the first delivery of the module revealed that many enjoyed the collaborative approach which they believed helped build morale and support. In large group meetings, however, with around twenty members of staff, some felt that it was challenging to reach consensus and not all voices could be heard. The large size of the team seemed to have encouraged smaller groups of facilitators to work organically with each other, sharing assessment and clarifying briefs. This experience supports research that suggests staff can learn more when they collaborate in small groups, especially when the tasks they are addressing are context-specific and dialogue is open. Due to the project's development over more than a year, the group became a learning community in itself, fostering a culture of cooperation and allowing them to negotiate and develop their beliefs about teaching with greater confidence (Hunzicker *et al.*, 2018).

This cyclical process of design, discussion, reflection and re-design has been highly collegiate at a time when other, less action-based motivators of collegiality were not as productive. It has brought together academic and professional services staff from a very diverse range of specialisms, and promoted a culture of academic development through collaborative experimentation. This is often harder to achieve in the disciplines, where hierarchies of content (the canon) and of leadership (expertise and position) militate against genuine collaboration. Other educational developers have shown that it is often through private conversations and interactions with respected and trusted colleagues, what Shaw (cited in Bolden *et al.*, 2015, p. 32) refers to as the ‘transformative activity of conversing’ that promotes deeper professional development learning. Such development does not only take place within formalised training spaces of staff development workshops or online training modules, but sometimes more effectively occurs through project-based contexts, informally synthesising learning and work (Hunzicker *et al.*, 2018, p. 208).

Conclusions

Three years on from the launch of the project, the Global Perspectives module has increased its student satisfaction score year on year. Its trajectory is a subject for future research. In terms of the leadership process of the project, the legacy is varied. The project management approach, while no longer supported by a dedicated specialist, has been incorporated into many business processes, ranging from the existing operation of university committees to the implementation of one-off events such as our annual learning and teaching conference. The change capacity generated among programme leaders has not sustained momentum collectively, but individuals have embraced a collaborative, participatory approach to curriculum design. The openness of individual programme leaders to collaborative exploration with educational developers during the process of curriculum design has led to this becoming an institutional expectation. But by far the most significant and enduring legacy of the project has emerged from the deeply collaborative experience of the module working group. That group became the module delivery team, whose practice continues to model a shared leadership approach. This is a good example of what Bolden *et al.*, (2015, p. 3) refer to as the shift from ‘the focus on leadership from person and position to process’. Furthermore, the developmental dynamic created has continued without the involvement of the original project sponsor, project leader and module development leader.

The continued transformative power of this project is, in our view, not attributable to individual, heroic or positional leadership, but reflects, following DePree (cited in Bolden *et al.*, 2015, p. 30) how ‘the signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers.’ In our experience, the ‘followers’ from the project have gone on to become catalysts for change in other areas of their practice. Their use of Lego as a creative tool to unlock thinking has spread across the campus. And some current initiatives such as a monthly teaching forum, where staff are encouraged to bring teaching problems or questions as well as examples of good practice almost certainly owe something to the co-operative culture created by the Global Perspectives project.

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End matter

Collaboration

Collective leadership

Common curricula

Cross-disciplinary learning

Curriculum design

Developmental change (tools)

Distributed leadership

Facilitation

Group process

Higher Education Academy

Intercultural learning

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Lego® Serious Play®

Participatory process

Positional leadership

Professional development

Project management

Regent's University, London

Shared leadership

Subject specialism