

AUSTRALIAN *FLEXIBLE LEARNING*

Managed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group on behalf of all States and Territories in conjunction with ANTA

**The deliberate evolution of a leadership
program:
Flexible Learning Leaders**

**A case study exploration based on the
notions of storytelling, metaphor and
dialogue as explained in *Constructivist
Leadership* by Lambert et al (1995)**

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19 August 2002

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Background

The Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) was one of the responses to the information economy that the government put in place a number of years ago. It is a five year national strategic plan for the Vocational Education and Training system aimed to position the sector as a world leader in flexible learning and the use of new technologies.

The AFLF has five goals – one of those goals is professional development. Flexible Learning Leaders is one of the projects in this group. VET professionals can apply to be part of the program and they get funding of approximately \$20000, plus additional \$10000 from their organisation to pursue a professional development program. Only one person per organisation can be selected. The program has grown from 23 to 30 to 40 Flexible Learning Leaders each year between 2000 and 2002 and introduced new and different levels of funding to meet the needs of different target groups.

In 2000 when Flexible Learning Leaders commenced it was the professional development program that targeted pedagogical and technological leading practitioners in flexible learning. Two other programs were offered; the Flexible Learning Fellowships met the needs of senior managers and LearnScope met the needs of teams and those beginning the excursion into flexible learning. In the ensuing two years the program has evolved. This is a story of that evolution.

“Stories are a powerful tool for understanding our own lives, for organising that understanding... (Stories) carry with them tacit knowledge, knowledge gained through experience that is difficult to explain ... little packages of understanding that not only support the process of constructivism but are essential to it.” (Lambert, 1995, p. 122)

Stage 1 – 2000

A story by the current Project Manager:

‘I joined the Flexible Learning Leaders program in mid 2000 on the invitation of the then Project Manager with a request to run the national workshop for the group of 23 Leaders who had been selected as Flexible Learning Leaders.

My background at that stage had been eclectic – marketing and communication in industry, human resource management, working in private and community RTOs,

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communication teacher and Head of Department Communication and Media at Canberra Institute of Technology, and more recently working on the Networking 2000 online conference.

At the time I'd done a bit in flexible learning – championed it in our department in the delivery of communication, worked on the early toolboxes, run my own programs flexibly using videos, online discussion forums, irregular classes and workplace assessment. But in no way was I an expert – I saw myself as interested in being innovative and understood that not all VET clients wanted to, benefited from, or could attend regular classes. I also believed that our clients were entitled to programs that integrated current uses of technology.

Going to Melbourne in that September to meet the cohort of Flexible Learning Leaders was for me a rather intimidating experience. A feeling I later discovered was shared by a lot of the Flexible Learning Leaders. Among the group

- there were those who had extraordinary technical knowledge,
- there were those who pushed the edges and were then, and continue to be in my view, the most innovative people I've ever encountered,
- there were those who were mainly concerned with technology,
- there were those who trained other trainers in delivering online, and
- there were those who had cross organisational responsibility for flexible learning including developing toolboxes.'

In short, the 2000 Flexible Learning Leaders were characterised by people who had been selected for leadership because they were experts. They were perceived by their organisations as being the drivers of change in flexible learning, although many of them sat outside the mainstream of the organisation's activities.

This group was supported through an online forum and it became apparent early that the skill level and familiarity with working in an online discussion was mixed among the group. However, the online forum and listserv was critical in developing a strong national network – which today continues to provide ongoing support to this group of leaders

This was the inaugural group – a group on whom a lot of eyes were focused. A group of leaders who were encouraged to go out there and explore their own professional development. A group who was told...“this professional development is for you”. A group motivated by achievement whose members did not hold positions of power. Their influence came through their expertise and drive.

While some of the group had been sanctioned by their organisations to undertake professional development activities that would be used internally within the organisation, for many this pathway was not made clear. Many in the group who explored the Flexible Learning Leaders professional development as encouraged, purely for themselves, returned to their organisations, which had not made significant change, to find obstacles and barriers.

What sort of influence did the first group tend to have in their organisations and what were some of the limits of their influence? How did they feel when their new and challenging insights did not always align with their organisation directions?

Dialogue is a technique used in constructing concepts of leadership.

2000 Flexible Learning Leaders have participated in a dialogue over a couple of years about their roles and the opportunities and obstacles they have encountered. Some of the comments below are taken from this dialogue and some have been made in separate conversations. Elizabeth McPherson, Margaret Aspin and Jo Murray are thanked for their willingness to share their insights. These comments were made in August 2002.

Elizabeth: 'In some cases, although the individuals had gained extra skills they often didn't have places where they could express it. In my case my professional development year had been specifically focused on introducing a new department into our organisation. This organisational support and purposefulness helped me after the Flexible Learning Leaders year finished.'

Margaret: 'However, the fact is each one of us came away with a great deal more synthesis of the environment, new skills, and in most cases has made changes as a result.'

Jo: 'Where individuals had the freedom to influence their organisation they were able to introduce innovative change. I guess some of the group had the strength to move on to places where they could influence change and innovate. In terms of the overall move to flexible learning in VET I think the 2000 year of Flexible Learning Leaders was pivotal.'

While there is no question that the 2000 Flexible Learning Leaders group was pivotal in propelling the change to flexible learning what did we, as managers of the program, learn from their experiences and what did we do?

Stage 2 – 2001

Our principle piece of learning was that innovators and change agents had to be enabled through a deliberate strategy to develop their personal skills of influence if they were to successfully be leaders. As the Karpin Report identifies

'excellent leaders and managers require well structured, systemic education and continual development so they can add maximum value to the national economy through their performance within their enterprises' (Karpin:1995:2).

In planning the 2001 Flexible Learning Leaders group we made some deliberate attempts to unravel our actions and reflections from the first group and decide where to take the program. The project deliberately set out to evolve the Flexible Learning Leaders program in a way that would attempt to remove some of the obstacles the first group had

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encountered on returning to their workplaces and to diversify the type of VET professional who could be selected as a Flexible Learning Leader.

Firstly, in 2001, we tried to help the Flexible Learning Leaders consciously develop skills of influence. In 2000, leadership and attributes of leaders had not been a focus. In the second year the selected group

- experienced an induction workshop where the term 'leader' was discussed
- were encouraged to align some of their professional development funds to improving their own skills eg many did professional speaking courses, some were encouraged to do negotiation skills training, others paid for a mentor or a coach
- were able to reflect a second time on what it meant to have the title 'leader' at sharing workshop at the end – the sharing workshop had not been in place for the first group
- participated in two leadership discussions with key stakeholders at each of the workshops to help clarify expectations

Secondly, diversity of leadership role was encouraged in the second year. While the focus still remained on leading practitioners as the ideal profile for a Flexible Learning Leader, the emphasis shifted toward practitioners whose concern was pedagogical, rather than technological. The strong focus on expertise in using technology was less important in the selection of the 2001 Flexible Learning Leaders than it had been in 2000 and there was some encouragement of people in middle management roles to apply. These people might not have had any specific track record in flexible learning, but were committed to organisational change.

In summary, 2001 saw the project make some significant changes.

1. An increased number of Flexible Learning Leaders – the group moved from 23 to 30. This was seen as important to swell the number of people, and more importantly, increase the number of organisations who could influence the change to flexible learning and be influenced by the role of Flexible Learning Leader. There was a deliberate attempt to grow the number of organisations who would benefit from the Flexible Learning Leaders funding and to include a range of organisation sizes, profiles and scope.
2. The selection of a more diverse group of Flexible Learning Leaders with a specific attempt to identify people from different levels in an organisation. Many of the nationally recognised expert leaders in flexible learning had been part of the first group. The selection in 2001 was specifically aimed at trying to diversify the type of profile of a person selected as Flexible Learning Leader. In particular there was a softening of the focus on technological expertise.
3. A continuing focus on the need for the individuals to explore their own professional development programs and to remain connected through a national network. There was and continues to be no prescribed body of knowledge that the Flexible Learning Leaders need to gain from their professional development. This individual ability to work out their own development was seen as essential for those who were to be given

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the title of Flexible Learning Leader. This was important in both the knowledge component of their learning and in the development of their leadership skills. The project worked within the guidelines suggested by Alistair Mant in *Intelligent Leadership* 'Our way of developing leadership is not to impose anything ... if you want to carry weight as a leader you will never achieve it in a miscast part. If you find the right part that is true to your inner self, then you have a good chance' (Mant:1997:302).

4. An acknowledgement that the national network each group of Flexible Learning Leaders became part of enabled collaboration and enriched their capacity for leadership

In the words of Allan Parsons, a 2000 Flexible Learning Leader to his 2000 network in August 2002

I have been following the conversation with great interest but have really had no time to get involved (same as you all - still I know!). Meeting up with Greg yesterday enabled me to reflect on how much we did achieve personally and professionally and how much I still value the networks that we have although many of us have moved on in a range of areas.

And Donna Hensley , a 2001 Flexible Learning Leader writes

'one of the main benefits of being part of this program is developing networks all over Australia'.

5. An intentional program to clarify the expectations of leadership among all stakeholders. Certain symbols were used to facilitate this process, such as in 2001 the Flexible Learning Leaders received a badge which was presented to them by Moira Scollay, CEO of ANTA at the National Induction Workshop. Both the badge and the presentation were important symbols of successful selection and were designed to encourage the group to understand that they were both privileged and responsible.
6. A focus on the importance of sharing. This occurred through both a final workshop where the group shared with one another, through the online forum and at a series of State presentations where individuals shared with other members of their VET community.
7. A conscious effort to enable past Flexible Learning Leaders to provide support to the new group through a mentoring program.
8. Attempts to propel the Flexible Learning Leaders into the limelight by publishing and distributing glossy booklets about them, hosting a series of State based presentations where they could demonstrate leadership by sharing what they had learnt with others in VET, featuring them on the website, and writing stories about them

The Final Evaluation report of the 2001 program, released in February 2002, by Palmieri and Skippington states that much of this was achieved. However, it also identifies

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‘Not all Leaders, however, have yet developed a clear understanding of how their new knowledge and skills can be applied in an ongoing leadership role either within their own organisation or to the wider VET sector’ (page 37).

Some of the 2001 group were conscious of identifying how they would demonstrate ongoing leadership. Janice Anderson was one of these Flexible Learning Leaders from 2001.

Janice how did you interpret your leadership role at the end of the year?

‘My Flexible Learning Leaders year was about exploring creative online assessment, so the idea that pedagogy was important, was critical to me. In terms of achieving the goals then I think the focus on leadership was insufficient. While the network was used to raise the discussion and became and still is an important part of this program, more could have been done on leadership. After the Flexible Learning Leaders year my real focus was on how was it going to happen.’

As another technique of constructivist leadership Janice was asked to tell her to share her understanding of leadership applying the metaphor Peter Senge uses in *The Leader’s new work: Building Learning organisations* (1990)

‘Each large ship has the chance to be a QEII or the risk of being a Titanic. The success of the journey depends both on the technology of the vehicle and the commitment of the passenger.

As a leader in charge of passenger Entertainment, Development, Goal setting and Energy (EDGE), I see myself as giving them the EDGE in maintaining their excitement about the journey.

It is the role of the leader to provide new strategies to encourage those confining themselves to their bunks to open the door and walk up to the main deck to dive in the pool of flexible learning and swim successfully. Few of us in education are going to be the race winners, we are happier in the role of coaches, providing opportunities and support for our passengers to enthusiastically buy their next ticket on the space vehicle and amaze us with their discoveries.’

This notion of being a coach was a developing concept in this second group of leaders. Those who worked with a coach or employed a mentor reflected on how useful this was for them. Many of them then saw their own leadership as coach of others in their organisations. Their conclusions were consistent with the development transitions change leadership style proposed by Stace and Dunphy

‘Effective leaders of development transitions are focused primarily on creating energy and momentum for change by developing voluntary commitment to change ... the

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leadership of change therefore becomes analogous to coaching' (Stace and Dunphy:1994:135).

Again what did we as a project team learn?

Our observations led us to conclude that while leadership discussions took place throughout the program we had only introduced a token amount to meet the real needs of the group. We were conscious that in many cases we had not succeeded in enabling the Flexible Learning Leaders to develop functional or personal skills that would ongoingly enable them to influence change. They continued to feel frustrated with the obstacles they encountered. This pushed us to realise that raising the discussion about diversity of leadership styles and encouraging the group to construct and implement individual leadership action plans were essential for this group to become leaders of learning.

Stage 3 - 2002

So, with all this in mind at the end of 2001 we once again deliberately set about to evolve the project in a way that leadership became a stronger focus and the individuals were encouraged to not just focus on developing knowledge and skills in technology or pedagogy for flexible learning but in developing their functional and interpersonal skills to be effective leaders.

In 2002 the program was expanded to forty Flexible Learning Leaders and different categories of funding were created to meet the needs of diverse applicants. Categories for senior and middle managers were established, along with categories for innovators and experts in either technology or pedagogy, and categories specifically for large and small organisations wanting to introduce flexible learning.

In 2002 we merged the old program of Flexible Learning Fellowships with the Flexible Learning Leaders program thus creating in the body of Flexible Learning Leaders a significant group who could not only write about change, but who could drive it. These people are strategically positioned to bring about organisational change.

Some members of the Steering Committee acknowledged that some of those selected in 2002 were not in fact perceived as leaders in flexible learning, but were positioned to influence change in their organisations to flexible learning. This development has brought about the criticism that the naming of the program is no longer appropriate. However, expert leadership was now not the only pathway into a program that has been branded as Flexible Learning Leaders. Positional power and commitment to change was now a legitimate source of influence for selection.

In 2002 participants have been encouraged to spend some of their funding on leadership programs and to use the funds to allocate time to participate in national online networks. An allocation of project funds was also made for a leadership development consultant to work with the group of Flexible Learning Leaders.

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In addition, in 2002 the reflection of what is meant by leadership has grown. Strategies have been put in place to help develop the leaders understanding of leadership. Literature such as the work of Senge (1990) and Goldman (1998) is discussed on the online forum. At the sharing workshop in October the Flexible Learning Leaders will be asked to tell their stories. The purpose of the Sharing Workshop will be to 'elicit tacit knowledge through reflective writing, narrative and dialogue' (Lambert:1995:128).

One of the overwhelming strengths of the program is that reflection and shared dialogue between the participants in communities of practice allows them to construct their notion of leadership. Opportunities for dialogue are promoted to enable Flexible Learning Leaders to learn from one another. As a reflection of this in 2002, the Flexible Learning Leaders past and present will be connected through an alumni association that will provide ongoing support for the group.

Stage 4 – the future

As a project team our approach has been to model leadership as we are continually learning from the participants what it means to be a Flexible Learning Leader. We have tried to shape the program in a way that meets their needs and to support them accordingly. In addition, we have attempted through the national workshops and online networks to provide the leaders with models of effective leadership.

An ongoing challenge for the project is getting organisations to realise that Flexible Learning Leaders need time to undertake their professional development. One of the essential factors of the program then and now is that individuals 'buy time' (Carol Hampton 2001 Flexible Learning Leader) to reflect, to strategically think, and to participate in creating new knowledge. This is essential for leaders who are VET professionals - whose lives tend to be dominated by operational issues.

Peter Veenker, Director and CEO of Canberra Institute of Technology and recently elected President of the Postsecondary International Network (PIN) agrees that the two essential ingredients of leadership are strategic thinking and reflective conversation. It is both these aspects that the Flexible Learning Leaders program sees as priorities for its participants.

In this paper we have reflected on what it means to be a leader in the VET system by telling the story about Flexible Learning Leaders. The program is a deliberately evolving program – for those who have been selected in 2002 their experience is different from those who were selected in 2000. This has come about as we shape the program in response to the experiences of its participants and attempt to provide new and past participants with the skills to influence organisational change. The Flexible Learning Leaders program, through dialogue and narrative with its participants, constructs, encourages and enables diversity of leadership in VET.

Therefore the Flexible Learning Leaders program has understood the need to evolve to facilitate the development of its participants in a broader way than was conceived in 2000. The development of pedagogical and technological knowledge and skills for flexible

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learning are still paramount to the program but they now work alongside the need for Flexible Learning Leaders to develop functional, personal and leadership skills. While this second group of skills will not eliminate organisational obstacles they will enable the Flexible Learning Leaders to better be able to influence change.

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