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Humility and Vulnerability, or Leaning in? Personal Reflections on Leadership and Difference in Global Universities

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An "Accidental" Leader

In higher education and academia, not everyone wants to be a leader. Apart from scholars in fields related to educational or other leadership, many professors are drawn by other aspects, process, and functions of the higher education community. In a university or college, most academics are expected to spend the majority of their working hours doing some combination of teaching and research. Many prefer one of these vital functions over the other. Some love to get lost in the data and ideas of their field. For others, being around young people, and helping them to achieve their goals through lectures, discussion, and other training, is the best part of the gig. It would be foolish to desire to become an academic if neither of these things excited you, because this is the "bread and butter" of the occupation.

On the other hand, if you want to be a leader, becoming a professor may not be the first job to aspire to. For most academics, who are research and/or teaching oriented, they may rather find leadership thrust upon them. If they are good at research, they may be asked to take leadership roles in developing the research agenda for their academic unit and colleagues. Strong teachers will be pulled into curriculum and program leadership, to discuss the big ideas around organising and conducting teaching and learning in their department or university. This can sometimes seem paradoxical: Why would strong, engaged teachers be pulled from classrooms? Why should focused researchers be dragged from their labs? I found in my own experience that the skills honed in the process of enhancing my teaching and research over time (i.e., particular modes of classroom and publishing communication, pedagogical practices, research methods) have not been obviously transferable to leading and managing groups of my peers. Many universities do not have a culture or structure for cultivating leaders among academics. At the same time, the community has faith in leaders based on their demonstrated capabilities. A community values, recognises, and trusts leaders who "know what they are talking about".

The preceding paragraphs are written based on my personal experience. I love research; I transitioned from working in international development in South Africa and higher education administration in the United Arab Emirates to working in research-intensive international universities, because I would naturally spend my "free time" writing and publishing, and I was able to prove competence in that area. I never saw myself as predisposed to academic leadership, but instead have felt that it was thrust upon me. Whenever someone has mentioned I should become the director for a large academic program or research centre or president of an international professional society, I have felt deeply incredulous. I have often felt nauseous and unwell when I accepted such prestigious roles. By comparison, I was quite happy in my office cave, surrounded by my data and the wisdom from my field.

I said yes to these roles out of a sense of commitment and service to communities I had benefited from myself, and due to my respect and trust for those authoritative, leading scholars in my field who asked me. Another factor was recognition that these communities were not necessarily enhancing opportunities for all their members equitably. I was the first woman Director for the Comparative Education Research Centre, and the youngest and first scholar from outside Australia and New Zealand to become President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia. Why should I, a research-loving younger woman in the field, take on such roles? The best reason I could think of was to open doors for others, to increase inclusivity and relatability or organisations, by being a relatable and inclusive leader myself. This was my main rationale for taking on leadership roles that I did not feel particularly well qualified for and did not specifically or intentionally aspire to.

Humility, Vulnerability, and "Leaning in" Diverse Contexts

From another perspective, one could describe me as a modest or humble leader. It has not been part of my personality or professional development or training to become a forceful, visionary leader: the kind who persuades others around her to join her orientation to varied challenges faced. Instead, my view of my appropriate leadership style reflects the value of intellectual humility, which can be characterised generally as being civil and interpersonal in orientation, but also curious and question oriented and learning oriented (Church & Samuelson, 2017). Intellectual humility can be contrasted from intellectual arrogance and price as well as self-deprecation, as an epistemic virtue.

Because I got into academic life due to a love of research as love of learning, this was a key transferable disposition to academic leadership: to be open to others, recognising that my own assumptions and views were not the "view from nowhere," but based in my own embodied historical experience. This is usually obvious to me when there are disagreements about important matters in academic life. Sometimes some people are clearly wrong, and others are right; but usually it is more complicated than that, especially when everyone has "done their research."

A related concept is epistemic vulnerability (Gilson, 2014; Jackson, 2020). According to Gilson (2014) vulnerability is essential to education and to learning, as "openness to being wrong and venturing one's ideas, beliefs, and feelings nonetheless … the ability to put oneself in and learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign, and perhaps uncomfortable party" (p. 309). This seen as a virtue not only among students but among policy makers and other social leaders (Jackson, 2018). A commitment to questioning and the possibility of being mistaken is prized in liberal philosophy, including contemporary liberal political theory, which upholds the views and positions of the most vulnerable members of a community as part of ethical decision making (for example, in Rawls's veil of ignorance, 1993; Nussbaum, 2001). Thus, the "vulnerable leader" has been commended in some research (e.g. Fuda & Badham, 2011; Brown, 2014). Palmer's *Courage to Teach* advocates a similar orientation, wherein courage is associated with recognising the limits to one's own knowledge and views (1997). This can be contrasted with militant, resolute, "cruel" variants of courage, where one is bold, rash, and possibly self-sacrificing, battling others rather than connecting (Berlant, 2011; Stengel, 2018).

Studies of the cultivation of intellectual humility suggest that personal character and disposition qualities as well as situational and environmental (educational) factors all play roles (Church & Samuelson, 2017). In the first place, cultural factors can play a role in the development of common understandings about what it means to be intelligent, wise, and a good leader across cultural contexts. Historically, humility has not been particularly valued in western philosophy or education. Before the late nineteenth century, many European philosophers, such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Kant, Sidgwick, and those following liberal or Aristotelian traditions, saw humility as a lack of rational understanding of one's power, or as self-abasement or underestimation (Driver, 1989; Soyarslan, 2018; in contrast see Kristjánsson, 2017). Boldness and a certain quality of resoluteness was historically seen as attractive for leaders within a macho orientation, although rashness, carelessness, and foolishness were differentiated (Sreenivasan, 2020).

Humility in western philosophy has only been explicitly valued recently, with "cultural humility" (Gallardo, 2013), "democratic/civic humility" (Button, 2016), and "intellectual humility" (Pritchard, 2020) increasingly articulated, defined, and defended as important aims of education. But counter views remain pervasive, particularly in the United States. Introversion, quietness, lack of self-promotion, and listening have not historically been valued there, to the detriment of communities where these personal qualities can be of clear benefit (Cain, 2012). In this context, women in leadership have been increasingly encouraged to "lean in" to advance in their careers, under the view that women are less vocal, assertive, and forceful than men in professional settings, and their meekness, shyness and modesty therefore limits their comparative opportunities (Sandberg, 2013; Jackson, 2017).

In contrast, in Confucianism and Confucian heritage cultures, conceitedness, hubris, arrogance and complacence are major vices (Rushing, 2013; Li, 2016). Confucius advocated learning from anyone, even a small child, and to focus on the opportunity to learn from others whenever they are with other people. Understanding the different weight placed upon learning from others across cultures reveals that cross-cultural misunderstandings can easily arise in educational settings in relation to virtuous engagement and self-cultivation (Jackson, 2020). Thus, the stereotype that the "Asian learner" is passive in western higher education contexts can stem from a lack of appreciation for some Asian views of the value of learning from others, rather than forcefully asserting knowledge claims, as a student in a classroom.

Having lived, learned, and worked in the United States, one of the boldest countries (where people claim, "we're number one!") and in more communitarian contexts, such as South Africa and Hong Kong, I have learned to code-switch, to an extent, over time. I am perhaps too arrogant and conspicuously confident in Hong Kong, while I have always been too passive, shy, and modest in the United States. This has also played a role in my development as a leader over time. In Hong Kong, I have been seen by peers as confident and competent, and filtered into leadership

positions over time. However, I can get in trouble interacting in an internationally diverse group. Colleagues I work closely with in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand comment that I seem too passive, agreeable, and quiet as a leader. What I view as a strength, willingness to learn from others and the capacity to model that trait from a position of power, looks like weakness and softness to others with more macho and charismatic orientations.

If you are working in Asia and know many academic leaders, particularly coming from the United States or United Kingdom, you might believe my case is a minority one, and you might be right. In non-western contexts, I often observe my compatriots with embarrassment. From new assistant professors to faculty deans, I find that many Americans come to Hong Kong (and South Africa, and elsewhere) with an attitude that anything that deviates from their view, based on their own personal experiences, deficient: as if those of us who have already been in Hong Kong are too stupid to know "best practices." I find this arrogant in the extreme. In my view, it reflects poorly on them, and bodes ill for their success in contexts where people disagree with them but are not in any critical sense incorrect or "wrong."

Other relevant factors here are gender, age, social class, race, ethnicity, and religion. Not all Americans are the same. The American-based advice for women to "lean in" in professional contexts recognizes that some suffer in that culture from "imposter syndrome," failing to be appropriately confident in themselves and their abilities. That women and minorities in particular face these challenges suggests they are socialized traits. Women and minorities have not been and are still not normally treated as if they are as intelligent or as wise as leaders in comparison with men, across cultures (Jackson, 2017). In fact, women who engage in the same social behaviours as successful men leaders are often seen as "bossy", "pushy", arrogant, and aggressive. When I was a doctoral student, I observed that the women among us were treated and trained differently from the men. Whether we talked with appropriate assertiveness and confidence was a focus of oral examinations, especially if we seemed "argumentative", while being an argumentative man seemed to elsewhere be the norm.

Thus, in a sense, I was trained to be a virtuously vulnerable leader, as an aspiring woman academic and a scholar in Hong Kong. And it may well have been my primary disposition, as someone attracted to learning, above and before all else. This is what I have learned through being dropped into the deep end, as an academic who aimed to do well in their job rather than rock the boat, who was called into leadership, rather than "leaning into" it.

Leadership for Inclusion

Finally, my journey with leadership in global universities has taught me that leaders should be made and are not born as such. Many feel thrown into the deep end, especially leaders sought to enhance new global university values such as diversity and inclusion, and who come from underprivileged or underrepresented backgrounds. Such values demand epistemic vulnerability and intellectual humility because they involve pushing against some prevailing tides and norms, of hierarchy and exclusion, that have historically marked higher education contexts and continue to do so under trends such as neoliberalism.

Pushing against these norms also requires hard emotional labour (Jackson, 2018, 2020). It does not feel good all the time to learn from others; on the contrary, there is a sense of security many high-up people find in resoluteness, certainty, stubbornness, and arrogance. Relationally, this means some are doing a tremendous amount of emotional labour compared to others. Here, the circulation of vulnerability within higher education must be rethought (Jackson, 2018, 2020). It should not be the job of minorities to fix the majority. All need to put effort in.

This means preparing future leaders for the tasks they are likely to confront, which may appear as interpersonal squabbles, but which also reflect global identity politics, of the challenge of being a pushy, bossy woman, versus the expectation that older men are beyond scrutiny in a community, having "earned their way." This may also imply making changes to conceptions of leadership from a relational view, not just focusing on individual qualities that make a difference but also on the contexts in which they can make a difference. In this orientation, a community can be ripe for new leadership in a time of crisis, or rotten in relation to new, energetic, committed voices and views. In other words, cultivating leadership for inclusion fundamentally involves community development and enrichment. Positive change is not in the hands of one person, and certainly not in the hands of those who have not historically

been included. Leadership should thus be cultivated at a community level, as global leaders are sought in universities today.

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