Leading in Changing Times

Building a Transformative Culture

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Contents

Abstract

This chapter reflects on the challenges and opportunities of leading educational change in today's digitally connected world. It offers personal insights and critical reflections on learning leadership framed by a wide-angle, multifocal lens that helps zoom in and out to visualize preferred futures. Before outlining a collection of leadership touchstones and critical questions for guiding institutional transformation and then reporting their application in the practice of digital education, the chapter begins by illustrating how the new learning ecology is complex and entangled in competing images of the future. Efforts by educational leaders to build agile and sustainable transformative organizational cultures need to be guided by a clear sense of direction and anchored in a living institutional mission. The role of the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL) hosted at Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland is central to this story, as harnessing the transformative potential of new digital technology is at the heart of its change

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agenda. After briefly introducing DCU, the chapter reports how the NIDL's commitment to leadership development and active engagement in global networks are helping to reshape the higher education landscape with a critical digital edge. However, forging a future-focused mission based on multifocal criticality and transformative leadership is not something for the faint-hearted; it requires agency, relational capital, and strategic foresight to move from digital in part to digital at the heart of your organizational culture.

Keywords

Leadership · Organizational culture · Digital learning · Learning transformation · Human capacity · Strategic partnerships

Introduction

The need for leadership has never been more apparent. Even before the global pandemic, the demand for more flexible models of higher education was growing worldwide. In most countries, there has been a significant COVID bump adding to the drive for greater flexibility, with online education having never been more in focus. Indeed, it remains high on the agenda as educational leaders grapple with the forces of digital disruption and how to respond to the "great onlining" of higher education (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Steering a path from being a COVID fixer to visionary future-maker with a compelling narrative for learning transformation is challenging work, especially as digital higher education is entangled within a complex constellation of change forces. The current language of reimagination set against the legacy of the pandemic needs problematizing as it reflects a kaleidoscope of competing perspectives with different images of the future. A unique type of multivision is required to critically "read" these images and help paint your own preferred learning futures, combining strategic big picture thinking with local foresight. This type of wide-angle, multifocal lens enables those in leadership roles to view different perspectives and navigate a path between the language of opportunity, set against the need for deeper criticality.

The chapter begins by challenging one-sided distorted images of the future. Importantly, it rejects sweeping generalizations of the field as digital education is not a single uniform entity. Indeed, Singh and Thurman (2019) reveal 46 different definitions of the term "online learning" alone. Without adding fuel to the definition wars, the chapter argues that binary debates and polarizations of the field are unhelpful. They do little to critically untangle the tensions and many different threads of digital education as educational leaders attempt to craft their own counter narratives. Instead, higher education needs to be understood as a wider social practice. The future is rarely black or white, as leading change usually requires trade-offs, blurring of boundaries, and the weighing up of alternative options guided by longer-term desired outcomes.

From this multifocal perspective, educational leaders need to focus on the big ideas they want to achieve as well as the smaller details of how they plan to put them into practice. To this end, building a culture of learning transformation depends on developing leaders throughout an organization with a strategic mindset and agile implementation playbook. To help shift current thinking away from higher education being in a state of change to the enabling language of higher education for change, a collection of leadership touchstones and critical questions is described to help frame future thinking. The chapter situates this leadership perspective in an institutional context by reporting several examples of learning transformations in action. Through the DCU/NIDL experience, it illustrates the value of cultivating critically, growth minds and strategic networks, and partnerships to support organizational development. However, leading transformative change in such uncertain times is not for the faint-hearted. Promoting learning transformation that places the ever-changing digital world at the heart of your mission depends on untangling competing futures, a strong sense of agency, and the actions and relationships forged with many different people.

Competing Images of the Future

New models of digital education are often portrayed on a binary axis rather than reflecting a far more messy and complex reality. This false binary operates on several dimensions. The most obvious form is across delivery modes (i.e., online vs. off-line). Pedagogically, the binary is often framed in terms of the distinction between acquisition and participation metaphors of learning (Sfard, 1998), or put more simply, teacher-centered as opposed to student-centered learning. This distinction rarely acknowledges:

> Because no two students have the same needs and no two teachers arrive at their best performance in the same way, theoretical exclusivity and didactic single-mindedness can be trusted to make even the best educational ideas fail. (Sfard, 1998, p. 11)

Ideologically speaking, the discourse surrounding digital education is usually framed within one of two basic worldviews: the tradition of the Learning Society; and the influence of the Knowledge Economy (Brown, 2016). Although overly simplistic, these worldviews serve as a metanarrative that simultaneously infuses and funnels the competing languages of persuasion which seek to establish the common sense, define what counts as legitimate areas of agreement and disagreement, and shape the future choices and opportunities facing educational leaders.

To better illustrate this binary, new flexible models of digital learning provide a real opportunity to reduce costs, enhance quality, and address increasing global demand for higher education. They provide the opportunity to break the so-called "Iron Triangle" (Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2009) and realize the vision of "universities without walls" (EUA, 2021). In the future, it will be almost impossible to meet the projected growth in demand for higher education worldwide through

traditional "bricks and mortar" models. Despite well-documented inadequacies of emergency remote teaching (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020), the COVID response has demonstrated three key points.

First, online learning was able to successfully facilitate access to higher education for those affected by campus closures. Learning did not stop during lockdown. Second, it highlighted the potential of new digital models of learning to help expand access to higher education for people unable to study through more traditional methods. Third, online learning is now a viable and increasingly mainstream alternative for people wishing to upskill and earn as they learn. Even before the pandemic, Gallagher (2021) reports that about half of all corporate learning in the United States was being delivered in an online or mobile mode, and that this figure has increased significantly over recent years. Notably, in the 30 days prior to June 2020, the major MOOC platforms attracted almost 500 million visits from learners around the globe, up 2.5 times from January (HolonIQ, 2020). Thus, online delivery is now an established feature of the learning landscape and is key to meeting increasing global demand for higher education.

On the other hand, new digital models of education inhabit the contested terrain of marketization, platformization, and commercialization (Brown, 2021a). In many countries, delivery of online education often "…involves public universities partnering with, or using the services of, private companies" (Morris, Ivancheva, Coop, Mogliacci, & Swinnerton, 2020, p. 3). COVID appears to have accelerated this trend with Teräs, Suoranta, Teräs, and Cruncher (2020) claiming that the pandemic has "…created a sellers' market in ed-tech" (p. 863). Williamson, Macgilchrist, and Potter (2021) argue that a key characteristic of the educational response during the pandemic has been the growth of new commercial platforms and public-private partnerships promoting the use of Ed-Tech for profitable market returns. There are also growing concerns about the automation of education (Selwyn, Hillman, Bergviken Rensfeldt, & Perrotta, 2021a), the rise of platform pedagogies (Perrotta, Gulson, Williamson, & Witzenberger, 2021), and the surrender of control to surveillance technology (Selwyn, O'Neil, Smith, Andrejevic, & Gu, 2021b). The rise of "big tech" is often linked to powerful neoliberal forces such as the unbundling movement, which is arguably creating a new learning economy (Ralston, 2021). According to this line of critique, higher education is taking the form of a commodity, a product, or service, marketed and sold to customers like any other commodity.

While these are important concerns, despite such broad generalizations, the pandemic has also reopened old debates about whether traditional ways of teaching are better than online learning. By analogy, imagine for a minute that following the lifting of COVID travel restrictions, two tourists have flown to Ireland (Brown, 2021b). On the same day, they are standing on the famous Ha'penny Bridge on the river Liffey in the center of Dublin looking upstream into the future. While they are both standing at the same vantage point, what they see is quite different. One sees sparkling water reflecting off the bright sunshine. In contrast, only hours later, the second tourist sees dark shadows and a dirty, polluted river, as the tide has turned and the sun has disappeared. The Liffey does not look very attractive. However, both are accurate reflections of the Liffey.

   The two images illustrate how the good, the bad, and the ugly of new models of digital education coexist simultaneously. They also serve to illustrate how digital education is part of a complex learning ecology and why such binary positions are unhelpful. The reality of the hope and the hype of digital education is far more muddied as the current flows both up- and downstream with increasing leakage across the different places and spaces of learning. This point is illustrated in Fig. 1. It shows four quadrants of learning where students can learn on campus in formal classroom settings, on campus in informal out-of-class contexts, off campus in formal in-class settings, and off campus in informal beyond class contexts (Brown, 2015).

   In summary, digital education is polylithic with many different faces. While the benefits of new flexible models of education do not disappear on the tide, nor do they magically transform more traditional or impoverished forms of pedagogy. For that matter, on-campus, in-class education also has many different faces and not all of them warrant "Gold Standard" status. Therefore, little can be gained from naïve comparisons or sweeping generalizations of both off-line and online delivery modes, without sufficient consideration of the educational context. Returning to the above analogy, a complex mix of factors add the sparkle to the Liffey, including the role of leadership. Therefore, a multifocal view of leadership is crucial to better understanding these factors and reframing one-sided distorted images of the futures.
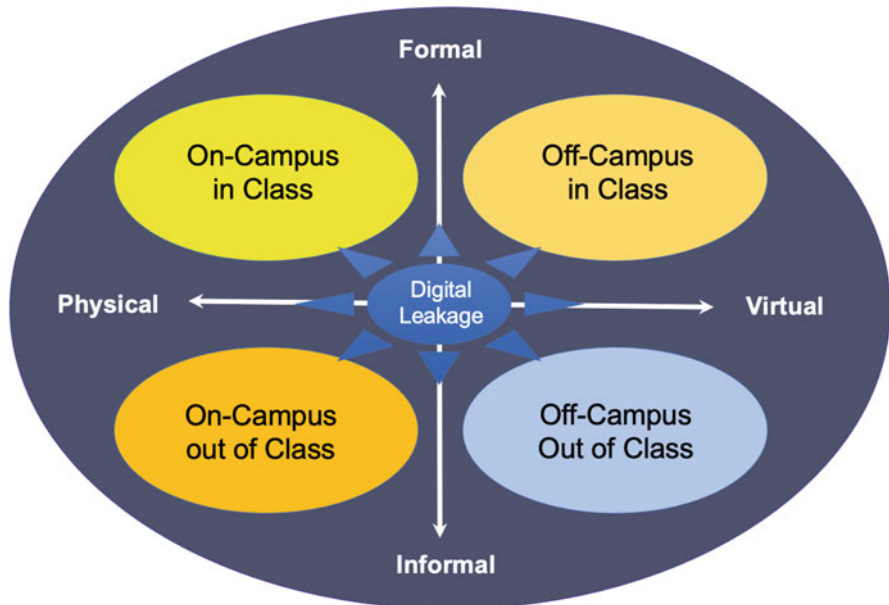

Fig. 1 Representation of the new digital learning ecology (Brown, 2015)

Developing Multifocal Leadership

Good leadership matters. While the interpretation of "good" is open to debate, a wealth of literature exists on impactful approaches to leadership (Fullan & Scott, 2009) and leadership development (Dopson et al., 2019) in higher education. A growing body of literature is also emerging on leadership in the overlapping fields of e-learning (Miller & Ives, 2020), online learning (Fredericksen, 2017), digital transformation (Miller, 2019), and educational technology more generally (Arnold & Sangra, 2018). Moreover, there is evidence of border crossing between this literature and key lessons for leadership in higher education arising from the COVID crisis (Laufer et al., 2021). A detailed review of this literature is beyond this chapter, but there has been a general trend over the past two decades to placing greater attention on microleaders, the role of middle-out leadership, and developing more distributed models of institutional leadership. In theory, gone is the day of the 'lone ranger" leader charging ahead from the front. If the goal is to implement lasting educational change, then leadership depends on the big and small actions of many different people (Childs et al., 2013).

While it is important to intentionally craft your own leadership style, learning to lead is messy. There is no simple manual as educational change is contextual and rarely follows in a straight line. Thus, a wide-angle, multifocal lens helps educational leaders to better see the curves, complexities, inter-dependencies, and underlying tensions of the choices they face in rapidly changing times. Such a lens in one's leadership toolkit helps to reveal possible, probable, and preferred future scenarios that steer a path through tricky political and slippery ideological terrain. This type of lens also helps to examine images from many viewpoints and go beyond false binaries. The ability to zoom in and out and see the challenges and opportunities facing the sector from many viewpoints is central to the concept of multifocal leadership. As Kanter (2011) writes:

> To get a complete picture, leaders need to zoom in and zoom out. A close-in perspective is often found in relationship-intensive settings. It brings details into sharp focus and makes opportunities look large and compelling. But it can have significant downsides. Leaders who prefer to zoom in tend to create policies and systems that depend too much on politics and favors. They can focus too closely on personal status and on turf protection. And they often miss the big picture. When leaders zoom out, they can see events in context and as examples of general trends. They are able to make decisions based on principles. Yet a far-out perspective also has traps. Leaders can be so high above the fray that they don't recognize emerging threats. Having zoomed out to examine all possible routes, they may fail to notice when the moment is right for action on one path. They may also seem too remote and aloof to their staffs. The best leaders can zoom in to examine problems and then zoom out to look for patterns and causes. (p. 112)

A commitment to being a learning leader and leader who learns is foundational to developing multifocal leadership. This perspective recognizes leadership as inherently a cognitive process and involves cultivating an adaptive learning organization.

From this perspective, the following personal touchstones characterize the qualities of multifocal leadership:

- Being ambitious, developing a growth mindset, and staying at the forefront of the literature to identify new and emerging trends
- Valuing debate, alternative viewpoints, and understanding how the language chosen to use really matters
- Sharing one's own mistakes and creating a culture of openness where making mistakes is a normal part of the leadership process
- Being personally accountable and ensuring open and transparent communication in decision-making
- Understanding that resistance is a valuable source of insight and that the real light comes through the cracks
- Leading with both the head and the heart and helping other people feel the passion and personally walking the talk
- Promoting diversity within one's team, with a particular emphasis on developing agency, supporting emerging scholars and distributed leadership
- Making explicit plans that are fully owned, on mission with achievable goals and sharing regular progress updates with key stakeholders
- Recognizing the power of the network by building strong professional relations and strategic partnerships
- Developing strategic foresight through self-review and scenario planning tools to identify major change forces and preferred futures

While striving to implement these touchstones remains a personal work in progress, the ability to zoom in and out is framed around seven critical questions. The following questions adapted from a seminal book on *Educational computing as a social practice* (Bromley & Apple, 1998) have influenced the author's leadership over more than two decades:

- Who is telling the story?
- What are we being told?
- Why are they telling the story?
- How are they telling the story?
- Who has the most to gain from the story?
- What is missing from the story?
- Whose story is not being told?

These questions recognize that leading any change involves "crucial struggles" over competing futures and who should control the curriculum, indeed the very meaning of education itself (Apple, 2019, p. 277). More recently, Facer (2021) adds an even deeper level of analysis to these questions:

> What and whose knowledges are being used to create these ideas of the future and where are the absences? What processes were used to make these ideas of the future, and why? How

does this work address the necessity of decline as well as the possibilities of the new? What are the injustices upon which futures are being envisaged and how are these being addressed? How do principles of intergenerational justice inform the practice? Who will attend to the consequence of these ideas of the future being put into the world and how? What is the role of these futures in creating hopeful politics and practices in the present? Might these futures be used for pathological and extractive speculation, if so, how might this be prevented? How can the distinctive temporality of education be preserved not subordinated to the futures proposed? (p. 2)

The challenge when zooming out to such big and confronting questions is to steer a path with a strong moral compass that avoids being a leader caught in the headlights. Asking critical questions is one thing but going from critique to action is another. A sense of personal agency is required to develop local actions that move beyond paralysis and the risk of being overshadowed by the pedagogy of the depressed. In this respect, the above characteristics of multifocal leadership are framed in the language of hope and opportunity. Striking this balance is not easy as it requires educational leaders to untangle competing futures, carefully pick their priorities and achieve short-term victories without losing sight of the long view. As Scott, Coates, and Anderson (2008, p. 73) remind us:

Developing and implementing desired change is not an event but is a complex and subjective learning/unlearning process for all concerned.

Talking about leadership theory is one thing, but translating it into practice is quite another. At this point, therefore, attention shifts to how one university with a tradition of expanding access to higher education responds to the challenges and opportunities of the new digitally connected world. This final section reports how DCU endeavors to be a future maker. It briefly describes the strategic architecture and then outlines several recent efforts to harness the potential of new digital technologies to deliver on its core mission of *Transforming Lives and Societies*. In telling the DCU story, the intention is to illustrate multifocal leadership in practice and how the above questions have helped to implicitly guide the actions of many different people in developing a transformative learning culture.

The DCU Story

DCU is a relatively young university. It offers over 200-degree programs to almost 20,000 full-time equivalent students across five faculties. DCU hosts Ireland's only Faculty of Education and one of the largest in Europe, with more than 4,000 students. In 2020, DCU was ranked 84th in the world in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings which capture societal impact based on success in delivering the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). DCU is consistently ranked by THE in the top 100 young universities and was named as Ireland's 2021 "University of the Year."

   While DCU is a dual-mode university, it has 40 years of experience in the provision of distance education. In 1982, the National Distance Education Centre was established at DCU to provide higher education to adults all over Ireland (MacKeogh, 2003). The National Centre became "Oscail – DCU Online Education" in 2004 to reflect the University's early leadership in new models of online delivery. The term "Oscail" translates to "open learning" in the Irish language. Since its inception, DCU has demonstrated a strong commitment to widening access to university education. Thousands of adult learners have obtained their qualifications through DCU's online distance education courses.

   Over the past 20 years, DCU has developed significant expertise in the design of high-quality online education. It is widely recognized in Europe as a leader in the area and is Ireland's only member of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU). DCU's leadership is further evidenced by its active role in the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and, notably in 2019, hosted the World Conference on Online Learning. DCU is also a foundation member of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU). A strategic partnership with Arizona State University (ASU) in the United States is another powerful innovation accelerator.

Strategically Embedding Digital Learning

DCU's Strategic Plan, *Talent, Discovery, Transformation 2017–2022* (DCU, 2017) was launched in September 2017. Notably, the development of the Strategic Plan included a fully online brainstorming and open public consultation event known as DCU Fuse (Brown, 2017). Over a 24-hour period, coinciding with Open Education Week, in March 2017, almost 7,000 contributions were posted by staff, students, and the wider DCU community in a customized open-source platform. The DCU Fuse conversation in which the author played a leading role trended as No 1 in Ireland on Twitter for much of this period. DCU Fuse was a significant initiative to support critical questions, provide a forum for alternative viewpoints, and promote a culture of openness, accountability, and shared ownership. Also, the initiative advanced digital ways of working and learning as an organization and the power of the network. DCU Fuse is tangible evidence of embracing debate, criticality, and open decision-making along with "walking the talk" of digitalization.

   The Strategic Plan reiterated a strong commitment to harnessing the potential of new digital models of higher education. Importantly, it sought to infuse digital transformation throughout DCU's policy architecture rather than develop a separate stand-alone plan. The intention was to embed digital learning as the "new normal" at DCU and thereby avoid the risk of a "bolt-on" approach. Key actions to achieve this goal included establishing the National Institute for Digital Learning (NIDL) and the appointment of Ireland's first Chair and Professor of Digital Learning.

The NIDL as an Innovation Incubator

In November 2013, the Minister of Education officially launched the NIDL with a remit to "support pioneering, technology enhanced learning and revolutionise the learning experience both for Campus-based Education and Distance Education" (DCU, 2012). Institutionally, the NIDL was seen as a key enabler of DCU's transformative mission. It established a vision to be recognized as a world leader at the forefront and leading edge of new **B**lended, **O**n-**L**ine, and **D**igital (BOLD) models of education. More specifically, its mission is to design, implement, and research new BOLD approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment which help to transform lives and societies.

While the NIDL team consists of several internal service units, its strong external focus helps to foster a growth mindset. Active engagement in European funded projects and a wider community of learning innovation allows new and emerging digital technologies to be piloted and tested locally and mainstreamed within DCU. The NIDL's underlying ethos is that new knowledge exists in the network. No university can afford to be an isolated island if it wishes to foster a rich transformative learning culture. Accordingly, it is no accident that since its inception, several members of the NIDL team now serve on the executive committees of many leading professional bodies. This has been a deliberate strategy consistent with the above touchstones to support leadership development and influence what questions are being asked about digital education.

As further evidence of its commitment to a growth mindset, since 2014, the NIDL team has produced over 1,000 scholarly outputs and key staff play active roles on the editorial boards of leading journals. As a strategic editorial partner of the *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, published by Springer, the NIDL walks the talk of being at the forefront of the literature and makes a significant contribution to the research and professional community. Notably, this Q1 journal is now the number one ranked open access publication in the field and has quickly risen in rankings to 6th place (out of a total of 1,531) in the Scopus list of all education journals.

To further support its growth mindset and thought leadership, the NIDL has a high profile International Advisory Board. This Board, coupled with a full professor leading new developments, helps to keep DCU at the leading-edge of digital learning. In response to the first COVID wave, for example, in March 2020, NIDL team members launched a free online course on Teaching Online as part of the externally funded #OpenTeach project (Farrell, Brunton, & Costello, 2020). The course attracted nearly 500 participants. It demonstrates the type of agency and distributed leadership that has grown over time in the NIDL as the author was not centrally involved in this initiative. However, a willingness to lead with the head and the heart in the face of a crisis and help shape the stories being told is evident in the NIDL's wider contribution to the rapid design of *Learning How to Teach Online* offered through the FutureLearn platform (Brown, Nic Giolla Mhichil, & Costello 2021). By the time this course began in early April 2020, over 30,000 educators from more than 130 countries had registered, with this figure quickly increasing to over

90,000 by December 2020. A further example of walking the talk was the NIDL's rapid design, in September 2020, of a FutureLearn course to help promote student readiness for online learning (Beirne, Nic Giolla Mhichíl, & Brown, 2021). Notably, this free course, *A Digital Edge: Essentials for the Online Learner*, was cofacilitated by students. By the time of its third facilitated offering in September 2021, the course had attracted more than 10,000 learners.

In summary, the NIDL has made significant progress in realizing its vision to be recognized as a world leader in digital education. Building on the principles of multifocal, distributed leadership, and the belief that the function of leadership is to develop more leaders, not more followers, the NIDL team has developed its collective capacity and relational capital by intentionally engaging in a wide range of professional networks. Both individually and collectively, the team has moved from being consumers of research to producers, asking critical questions with a growing collection of scholarly contributions. Moreover, through externally funded projects, the NIDL has become an innovation incubator at the forefront of research, thought leadership, and innovative practice in fostering a high performing digital education ecosystem. While the appointment of a senior institutional leader was an important catalyst to these activities, they arise through the efforts of a diverse team.

Shaping the Discourse

A key aspect of multifocal leadership is understanding the power of language. This aspect of the NIDL's leadership is evident in two internal examples.

First, in 2014, *DCU Connected* was launched under the author's leadership as a major new initiative to promote the University's fully online courses. Importantly, the term "connected" was deliberately chosen to shift the focus away from a particular mode of delivery to the transformative nature of the online learning experience. The intention was to encapsulate how in today's digital world learners can be *connected* wherever they study. Distance should not be a barrier to learning as class can come to the learner, thus enabling DCU to widen its outreach. The "connected" metaphor was also intended to avoid the type of deficit language that became part of the COVID discourse around emergency remote teaching. Thus, being connected to fellow students and excellent teachers, wherever students choose to live, is at the heart of DCU Connected.

DCU's 2018 Institutional Review included the following commendation:

> "The Team commends the operation of DCU Connected, its strategic and dynamic approach, and its alignment with the Institutional Mission in terms of opening access and delivering online learning" (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2019, p. 34).

The second example relates to DCU's virtual learning environment (VLE), a core feature of the digital architecture. In 2014, DCU launched *Loop* as an overarching "term" to promote the goal of developing a twenty-first-century digital campus. The term "Loop" was intentionally chosen under the NIDL's leadership as a metaphor to

help move the thinking away from a techno-centric focus on Moodle. Loop was chosen as a term to place greater emphasis on bringing people together through technology to create a loop of learners and rich digital learning communities. The aim was to put people and learning at the core of the "loop" rather than technology. The loop metaphor also served to illustrate the idea of a rich digital learning ecology, with a variety of different tools in the loop rather than just Moodle at the core. While at the risk of overtheorizing loop, the metaphor was intended to support an innovation culture where staff and students were encouraged to push boundaries by using new *edge* technologies to help transform the learning experience.

Loop is now deeply embedded in DCU and is also at the heart of the DCU connected learning experience. DCU has continued to add enhancements to Loop on a regular basis and is widely recognized as a global leader in the Moodle community, having hosted the annual "Ireland UK Moodle Moot" on three occasions. This is further evidence of how being in the network is part of the NIDL's ethos. Additionally, DCU has made a significant investment in the Mahara open-source ePortfolio platform. Known as Loop Reflect, the platform is routinely used by over 14,000 students. DCU is now a leader in the Mahara community, which illustrates how the NIDL's leadership through the work of many different people extends to shaping the international discourse. The key point is that internal transformations are supported by actively engaging in these external communities.

Leveraging Strategic Partnerships

The role of strategic partnerships is another key feature of DCU's efforts to promote digitalization and build a transformative culture. Consistent with the characteristics of multifocal leadership, strategic partnerships have acted as a catalyst for DCU to progress internal transformation. Two strategic partnerships continue to be particularly influential.

First, the decision to invest in MOOCs, and specifically Futurelearn, was not taken lightly. It followed a lengthy process of asking critical questions and identifying the key institutional drivers (Brown, Costello, Donlon, & Nic Giolla Mhichil, 2015). The overriding consideration at the time was to what extent could an MOOC agenda help to advance DCU's commitment to a strong culture of innovation and the goal of a transformative learning experience. Thus, the primary driver was to use MOOCs to support a step change that DCU was aiming to achieve through the NIDL by increasing capability in new digital pedagogies. Consistent with the value of networks, considerable weight was placed on the potential collaborative opportunities arising from joining a global consortium. Since the launch of Irish 101 in 2018, over 140,00 learners from more than 135 countries have taken one of DCU's Irish language and culture courses. While MOOCs continue to polarize the education community, there is no doubt that the FutureLearn strategic partnership has helped to mature DCU's understanding of learning design for online as well as blended delivery.

The second strategic partnership is ECIU University. In 2019, DCU was successful as a member of the ECIU in securing €7 m under the new European University Initiative. Each of the 12 partner universities has a proven track record of innovation, and the ECIU University's vision is to develop smart new transformative learning pathways. To this end, ECIU University has already developed a suite of online micromodules across the partners where students can collaborate to address major societal challenges. On completion of assessment and proof of learning, some of these short courses will earn verified ECIU microcredentials. While the field of microcredentials is rapidly growing, the NIDL's leading role in both critique (Brown & Nic Giolla Mhichil, 2021) and shaping new developments in this area (Brown, Nic Giolla Mhichíl, Mac Lochlainn, Pirkkalainen, & Wessels, 2021) is uniquely positioning DCU to transform its traditional credential ecology.

Toward a Culture of Continuous Improvement

The above examples demonstrate DCU's strong appetite for learning transformation. However, the future often lives in the past, and so an important aspect of multifocal leadership in a learning organization is critical self-reflection. To this end, in 2020, DCU undertook a comprehensive review of digital learning framed around the following questions:

- To what extent are DCU delivering on their strategic intent in relation to digital learning, as envisaged in the 2012–2017 and 2017–2022 strategies?
- How is (and how can) digital learning contributing to transforming both formal and informal learning at DCU?
- To what extent are DCU staff and students prepared to embrace digital approaches to learning, and to what extent are these approaches effective as part of the DCU learning experience?
- How is DCU's approach to supporting and developing digital learning aligned to national and international best practice and research?
- What aspirations should the University have for digital learning over the next 5 years?

Notably, in Europe only 12% of institutions report they have engaged in critical self-assessment in digital higher education (Gaebel, Zhang, Stoeber, & Morrisroe, 2021). The self-assessment exercise was shaped by the NIDL's leadership in contributing to the Digi-HE project and, more specifically, a critical review of 20 different tools for self-assessing the development of a high performing digital education ecosystem (Volungevičienė Brown, Greenspon, Gaebel, & Morrisroe, 2021). The internal self-assessment process culminated in an external review panel visiting DCU and producing their own independent report, which concluded:

> The extent to which DCU has built and developed digital learning partnerships in an internal, national and international landscape is commendable. The learning associated with these

practices is evident right across the organisation and will prepare the university well for the next wave of digital learning development and strategies. (Peer Review Group, 2021, p. 5)

Conclusion

This chapter began by exploring the false binaries, muddied waters, and competing images of the future. The lesson for leading in changing times is that digital education needs to be better understood as part of a wider social practice and transformative change agenda. In the second part, the importance of multifocal leadership with a wide-angle lens and the ability to zoom in and out was illustrated by drawing on the literature as well as several personal touchstones and critical framing questions. Steering a path through many complexities, inter-dependencies, and underlying tensions without losing sight of the end destination is a key multi-focal leadership quality emerging from this discussion. The final part offers a glimpse into how one university with a tradition of expanding access to higher education is responding to the new digitally connected world. Although the story is filtered and potentially distorted by the author's own lens, it illustrates how the notion of multifocal leadership has been influential in a range of digital learning innovations.

It would be naïve to claim that DCU has all the answers. However, many of the touchstones of multifocal leadership and the NIDL's wider remit have been crucial to helping DCU deliver on its transformative mission. This point returns us to the central thesis. A transformative change agenda where digital education is at the heart of the institutional mission is enabled by educational leaders capable of zooming in and out and untangling competing futures. It requires criticality, a strong sense of agency, and the ability to forge strategic alliances and relationships with many different people. A related point is that leaders must be prepared to invite difficult questions and have the courage to walk the talk of learning transformation with their colleagues as it does not happen by leaving institutional plans in the boardroom.

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