Speaking from within a Trickster Tale: Reflections from Leadership Learning

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Abstract

Recently consideration of leadership learning has taken a distinct critical focus (e.g. Edwards, et al., 2013; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014) which has developed themes around aesthetics (e.g. Schyns et al., 2013; Sutherland, 2013), gender (Kelan, 2013) and liminality (Hawkins and Edwards, forthcoming; Yip and Raelin, 2012). This paper develops considerations of liminality and leadership learning further by drawing on a previous paper on liminality and doubt. In this previous paper we discuss how undergraduate students develop an understanding of leadership through overcoming particular threshold concepts. We have emphasised, however, the inherent appreciation, by both the learner and the educator/facilitator, of issues of liminality and doubt. Within this discussion we raise concerns of the educator/facilitator taking on the role of ‘Trickster’ within the learning relationship. It is this role to which we give further attention.

We develop the trickster concept by reviewing anthropological writing in the area that looks at the narrative and folklore around the Trickster tale. We then use this to highlight tensions and dilemmas in the leadership learning journey. We also use our own reflexive accounts of being leadership educators, facilitators and tutors to develop the discussion. For example, we have, along with experience of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, over twelve years of experience designing, developing, directing, and facilitating leadership development programmes in an executive education setting. It is this experience that will
help us inform the use of Trickster tales as a way of surfacing tensions and dilemmas in leadership learning.

The mythology surrounding the notion of the trickster is complex and pervading in a number of indigenous cultures and is one of the oldest narratives in the world (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975). The trickster has been described as a comic holotrope (Vizenor, 1990), a transitional character and cultural bringer (Lowie, 1909; Ricketts, 1966). It is not, however, a singular character but one set in a dualistic relationship with the ‘Culture-Hero’ (Lowie, 1909; Ricketts, 1966). In this dualistic relationship the trickster is both a teacher of cultural skills and customs but also a prankster, being both deceitful and cunning and hence combining the heroic with buffoonery (Ricketts, 1966), a paradox, a ‘criminal’ culture hero (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975). The trickster’s ‘...beneficence ...results from the breaking of rules and the violating of taboos...and must remain marginal and peripheral, forever betwixt and between’ (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975: 148). Babcock-Abrahams go on to use the work of Turner (1967) to elaborate on this link to the liminal, whereby the trickster is a representations of the ‘peculiar unity’ of the liminal – ‘that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both’ (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975: 161, citing Turner, 1967: 98).

The trickster tale therefore is a tale of continual liminality and has been framed as model of socialization which incorporates the development of a reversible logic and the acquisition of the psychosocial skills of self-management (Abrams and Sutton-Smith, 1977). Here the link with aspirations of leadership learning and development regarding the development of the self (e.g. Bennis, 1984, 1989; Goffee and Jones, 2000) can be seen. We take a critical look at this aspiration and use the trickster tale, which is tale of journey and self development (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975), to highlight certain nuances in experiencing leadership learning as an educator and facilitator.

One of the areas that seems to resonate with our experiences of leadership learning is the resemblance to stages of the trickster tale (Abrams and Sutton-Smith, 1977). For example, the stages identified by Abrams and Sutton-Smith in the trickster tale seem to relate to observations of experiences of managers and executives on experiential leadership development programmes. The stages identified by Abrams and Sutton-Smith represent two phases of the trickster tale – the unsuccessful trickster (stage of physical clumsiness and
stage of moronic self-defeat leading to the stage of unsuccessful trickster) and the stage of the successful trickster. The full paper explores representations of the unsuccessful and successful trickster by delegates and their impressions of facilitators delivering experiential programmes.

Furthermore, Abrams and Sutton-Smith (1977) describe how children acquire development skills through creating fantasy figures that have these skills in exaggerated proportions. This is compared to the trickster tale, whereby the trickster doesn’t just sit down and plan out a logical response to a problem but uses outrageous trickery. Within this paper we compare this to development programmes and leadership learning interventions that use examples of ‘heroic’ and ‘transformational’ leaders to exemplify leadership. We suggest that this is at the level of ‘trickster’, exaggerating for effect. A problem with this, however, is that the counterpart to the trickster, the culture hero, is missing and as Babcock-Abrahams (1975: 186) suggests ‘...the king creates and needs a fool, for one who actually reigns and holds power has little capacity for irony and self-caricature’. The trickster tales therefore point to leadership learning being able to harness the liminal and the paradox of the trickster and culture hero in play within development and learning interventions.

In the paper we conclude that leadership learning can be seen as intricate interplays of representation of the trickster and culture hero by those involved; the course director, the lecturer, the tutor and the learner. Each identity is represented by the trickster and culture hero in a fluid transference at differing stages of the learning experience. From a practical perspective, this may help those tasked with developing leadership to understand how they may be viewed at differing stages of the learning intervention and therefore reduce potentially stressful situation occurring whereby they are frustrated by identities placed upon them by those in learning. Furthermore, this may help those learning to engage in a process that has a hidden narrative, by disclosing this hidden narrative may help learners to appreciate the liminal spaces to which they will inevitably reside in development programmes and university lectures.

Further development of this research will be to take a wider perspective than the reflexive basis of this paper. The aim would be to interview other leadership learning educators and
facilitators to gain a wider data set to draw out further tensions and dilemmas that can be elaborated by the trickster tale.

References


