Speaking from within a Trickster Tale: Reflections from Leadership Learning

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Abstract

This paper uses the indigenous tale of the trickster to develop a deeper understanding of facilitating liminal spaces for leadership learning. The paper places the trickster role within the facilitation of any leadership learning experience and therefore reflects on the anxieties and frustrations that may be felt by both the programme delivery team and the participants themselves. The paper therefore reviews literature on the ‘Trickster’ from indigenous stories and relates these to experiences of facilitating leadership learning both within a university context and within a training organisation specialising in executive education. The paper then makes some tentative conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Keywords  Leadership development, experiential learning, liminality and tricksters
Introduction

The focus of this paper is to further explore notions of liminality and leadership learning. In particular it uses the notion of the ‘trickster’ to explore the role of facilitator within leadership learning programmes. Recently consideration of leadership learning has taken a distinct critical focus (e.g. Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Cunliffe, 2009; Edwards, et al., 2013; Ford and Harding, 2007; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014; Sinclair, 2009) which has developed themes around aesthetics (e.g. Schyns et al., 2013; Sutherland, 2013), identity (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013), gender (Kelan, 2013), resistance and struggle (Carroll and Nicholson, forthcoming) 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 (Hawkins and Edwards, forthcoming) and on a developing paper on critical leadership theory and leadership learning in a university setting (Sutherland and Edwards, 2014). Hawkins and Edwards (forthcoming), for example, discuss how undergraduate students develop an understanding of leadership through overcoming particular threshold concepts. They emphasise the inherent appreciation, by both the learner and the educator/facilitator, of issues of liminality and doubt. Within their paper, Hawkins and Edwards 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 within this present paper.

Within this paper then we firstly 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, experience of designing, developing and facilitating leadership development programmes in an executive education setting. It is these experience that will help us inform the use of trickster tales as a way of surfacing tensions and dilemmas in leadership learning.
The ‘Trickster’

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). See figure 1 for images of the trickster from indigenous folklore.

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. To do this we explore reflexive accounts of facilitating leadership learning from our own experience.
Our Experience

When we (the authors) have been involved in leadership learning exercises, particularly those associated with an experiential methodology there have been times where we feel delegates see us as the ‘Trickster’. This was our starting point when searching for examples that could be used in this account. We therefore discussed certain instances on programmes and in classes that seemed to resonate with developing a liminal space for participants and instances when we particularly felt trickster-ish.

One aspect of our experience that seemed to resonate with being trickster-ish was in the design, development and delivery of experiential interventions for leadership learning at executive, undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For example, when designing experiential methodologies three aspects of delivery aimed at providing a liminal space for leadership learning seem important.
In an experiential programme the facilitator will typically try and provide an experience, some level of review of that experience and then some form of theoretical input into the conversation. This is typically and widely recognised as an experiential intervention (e.g. Kolb, 1984) and is suggested that this leads to greater self-awareness and self-confidence and hence enhanced leadership capacity (e.g. Edwards et al, 2002). The time frame for experiential interventions has been anything from a half day workshop through to a week long experience. Some aspects of this delivery mechanism from these interventions seem to resonate more readily with our reflections on liminality and the trickster tale.

The first is the use of a non-intervention facilitating style. If, for example, delegates sought approval from the facilitator regarding certain actions and decisions the stock response to such queries has been ‘...Everything you need to know is provided’. This response was continuous throughout any programme delivered (whether it be a one day or five days) as part of an experiential intervention. This is also a technique used when using projects with undergraduates and postgraduates in a university context. This led to resentment by delegates and students as they were frustrated in not being given the ‘answers’.

The second area was seemingly being ‘set up to fail’. Challenges and projects given to programme participants were ‘achieve-able’ but difficult and complex. Furthermore, in executive programmes the complexity of projects increases as the programmes proceed. This increased complexity, in conjunction with the first observation, above, therefore leads to even greater frustration on the part of participants and students.

Lastly, within the design of experiential programmes there would be changes to the programme, whereby last minute changes were made to projects in which participants were taking part. This would either be a change to timings or a surprise appointment of a leader. This was sequentially developed over time in the programme to produce larger scale surprises and schedule changes towards the end of the programme. The idea of a surprise on leadership development programmes is similar to what Carroll and Nicholson (forthcoming) highlight from their study as ‘throwing a shock’. They go on to highlight in their data that this calls for a ‘leap of faith’ by participants, however, these ‘shocks’ are defined and attempted to be controlled by facilitators. We connect this to the role of
trickster and question, as do Carroll and Nicholson, the level of control traditionally expected of a facilitator. Whereas Carroll and Nicholson go on to look at this as part of their investigation into resistance and struggle in leadership development, we aim to look more closely at this facilitator role and the inherent tension and dilemmas that these acts may present in the process of leadership learning.

These three aspects of the design and delivery of experiential programmes for executives and students forms the basis of the material we will draw on to reflect on the importance of understanding the role of the ‘Trickster’ in leadership learning facilitation. All three aspects of programme and project design enable a greater level of liminal space to be created in which participants and students can explore leadership, however, with this there is an increased level of being seen to be a ‘trickster’, when acting in the role of facilitator. We argue that this presents tensions and dilemmas within the enactment of creating these liminal spaces. For example, is it ethical to ‘trick’ participants and students? Is it ethical for training organisations and universities to put facilitators in the role whereby they can be seen as ‘tricksters’? How does this impact our identity as academics and leadership learning practitioners? How do we resolve such issues in the classroom or other learning environment? These are questions we suggest raise from this paper and we hope to respond to them through the continued use of the trickster tale as a paradigm and metaphor.

Reflections

One of the areas from the trickster tale that resonates with our experience 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. These stages seem to reflect impressions of facilitators along the course of an experiential programme or project, whereby participants would be suspicious of facilitators in the early stages of a programme and try to discredit the facilitator. Towards the end of a programme the general trend is one of respect for the facilitator, whereby they are eventually appreciated for holding a liminal space for participants to explore and construct ‘leadership’.

Furthermore, Abrams and Sutton-Smith (1977) describe how children acquire development skills through creating fantasy figures that have these skills in exaggerated proportions. There seems to be a comparison that can be made here to development programmes and leadership learning interventions that use examples of ‘heroic’ and ‘transformational’ leaders to exemplify leadership. 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.

A further point made by Abrams and Sutton-Smith (1977) is that within the trickster tale, the trickster doesn’t just sit down and plan out a logical response to a problem but uses outrageous trickery. This resonates with experiences highlighted above, whereby experiential programmes will try and have a level surprise in the programme, changes in times, rules and locations. The use of these sorts of techniques in experiential leadership development programmes and other learning interventions enable a level of felt responsibility for leadership in participant groups. These techniques also enable the programme to use liminal spaces to enhance leadership learning. However, they also frame facilitators as ‘Tricksters’. This on the surface questions the ethicality of such acts. The name of the ‘Trickster’ itself suggests questionable ethics. However, having reviewed the literature on the trickster above, it seems that the role of trickster is also ‘culture giver’. The question, therefore, for leadership learning practitioners is how to ensure that the second
side of the ‘trickster’, that of culture giver is provided as part of any intervention meant to deliver ‘leadership learning’. Furthermore, it is also worth reflecting on whether the culture giver is also an appropriate metaphor for the facilitating role of leadership learning.

**Further Research**

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. We also recognise the need to further review accounts of the trickster tale in the literature. At present we have only scratched the surface with regards to how the tale is portrayed in the literature. In addition, we propose to explore the aesthetics behind the trickster tale (e.g. the trickster is usually represented as a raven or coyote as highlighted in figure 1) to draw further on the metaphor. Also there are different cultures and sub-cultures that draw on the trickster tale in stories they use in social settings. Further reflection on this area should draw out the meaning and metaphor that is developed in differing cultures and what this may mean for leadership learning theory and practice.

**Conclusions**

We conclude therefore that leadership learning can be seen as intricate interplays of representation of the trickster and culture hero by those involved; the facilitator, 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.

References


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