

# Storytelling and Design: the problem of leadership

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## ABSTRACT

*"Stories provide a good first pass at what is important, from the point of view of the users; they provide the designer with a glimpse of what the user's terrain feels like, and thus provide a starting point for further exploration."* (Erickson, 1996: 3)

This paper treats leadership essentially as a design problem. Taking Thomas Erickson's study of the design of software for information systems as a somewhat unorthodox starting point we ask whether the production, telling and re-telling of stories can be used as a resource for making a 'good first pass' at what is important to those who are faced with the challenges of leadership in the UK learning and skills sector. Drawing upon a series of ethnographic studies of leadership in further education, we analyse the different ways in which everyday practices are made 'storyable' by participants and how different stories and storytelling practices are 'occasioned' through the practical accomplishment of everyday leadership work. In doing so we reflect on the extent to which the documenting and analysis of storytelling practices may provide 'teachable moments' through which to inform programmes of leadership development and create links between leadership training, research and everyday practice.

## Keywords

Further Education, ethnography, leadership, stories, storytelling, teachable moments

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine the [leadership] styles, then, as the array of clubs in a golf pro's bag. Over the course of a game, the pro picks and chooses clubs based on the demands of the shot. Sometimes he has to ponder his selection, but usually it is automatic. The pro senses the challenge ahead, swiftly pulls out the right tool, and elegantly puts it to work. That's how high-impact leaders operate too. (Goleman, 2000: 80)

This quote is taken from Daniel Goleman's influential work on leadership styles and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000: 80). In this article Goleman puts forward six leadership styles that capture the essential 'tools' of leadership. Accompanying each style is a story of how such tools can be put into practice. So we have the CEO of a computer company illustrating *coercive leadership*; the vice president of a large food retailer demonstrating *authoritative leadership*; and a host of other characters (including a nun managing organizational change in a Catholic church) who each embody *affiliative*, *democratic*, *pacesetter*, and *coaching* styles of leadership in action. In short, what Goleman provides throughout his article is a series of short stories that seeks to capture something of what it is like to be a leader. This includes the story quoted above which itself is designed to impart a inspiring image of the leader as a golf pro able to select instinctively from an array of tools which can be elegantly put to work. Such images are certainly attractive, which is perhaps why Goleman's work in particular informs many programmes of management and leadership development, but the question we ask throughout this paper is how useful are such stories for the training and developing leaders in the UK post-compulsory sector? Is *doing* leadership in this sector like playing golf? Can the

everyday experience of being an FE college principal or senior manager be reduced to the intuitive combining of a finite number of leadership styles? If not, then is this a limitation of storytelling, or is it perhaps a limitation of the kinds of stories that are told? In this paper we seek to use storytelling in a way that is slightly different to the kind used by Goleman and others in the leadership development literature. In what follows we use the telling of stories as a way of revealing the diversity and complexity of everyday practices, rather than reducing them to labelled styles, prescriptions for best practice, or components of wider conceptual schemas such as emotional intelligence. We do this by eschewing the usual approaches to the study of leadership and storytelling in organizations by drawing in particular on the work of Thomas Erickson (1996; 2000). In his article 'Design as Storytelling' Erickson suggests that stories provide a non-formal method of understanding the needs of users and for providing a common ground for interdisciplinary dialogue between researchers, designers and practitioners. His field of study is interaction design in computing, but as we will suggest, the challenge of designing usable technologies is remarkably similar to the design of usable courses for the training and development of educational leaders.

In what follows we present several examples of storytelling gathered as part of our ethnographic research of everyday leadership in the UK learning and skills sector; stories that we have used ourselves to inform the design of leadership development courses in the sector. We focus not only on the content of such stories, but also on the occasions in which particular stories are told and re-told to audiences both inside and outside the boundaries of the organization. We begin by examining data taken from semi-structured interviews carried out with further education (FE) college principals and senior managers. We describe such accounts as 'invited stories', that is, 'storyable' moments that have been packaged and to some extent rehearsed for the purposes of being retold to others (such as inquisitive researchers). Often such accounts take the form of 'war stories' (Orr, 1996) or 'sagas' (Clarke, 1972) which have a clear purpose, structure and moral lesson learned that can be passed on to the listener. They provide a rich insight into how practitioners see their role within the college, as well as how the phenomenon of leadership is conceptualised and drawn upon to describe past experiences. Having collected and analysed such stories of leadership, however, we find that we are frequently left with a set of statements, metaphors and images that say very little about what leadership actually looks like in practice, and perhaps more importantly, how leadership (in what ever form it takes) helps to get work done. In short, we doubt the value of these accounts as an insight into the *doing* of leadership work. Instead, what these stories appear to offer is a rich rhetorical landscape of leadership discourse - a discourse the mastery of which is an essential skill in itself - but a discourse that is designed to be heard by a specific audience. As such, in the latter half of the paper we compare our 'invited stories' with others we have collected during our observational fieldwork. In contrast to interview-based accounts, such stories could be classed as 'naturally occurring' in that their elicitation did not rely on the direct questioning of the researcher. These kinds of story can be analysed for their content - as with 'invited stories' - but crucially one can also examine the way in which such stories are 'occasioned'. That is, we can examine how and when certain stories and storytelling practices are used by college principals, senior and middle managers to get other kinds work done (work outside of the formal research interview). This ethnographic method of story analysis, we argue, can provide researchers with a powerful tool for understanding leadership in action; leadership as a job of work that needs to be done. The paper concludes by reflecting on the extent to which our research of stories and storytelling in FE may provide a 'good first pass' at what is important to those who are faced with the demands of leadership in their own institutions. As potential users of our research material, we ask in what ways both invited and naturally occurring stories might provide trainers and participants with 'teachable moments' that can inform and enrich the design of programmes for leadership development within the sector.

## TELLING STORIES ABOUT LEADERSHIP

My previous college was very, very heavily influenced by one man. He had a vision for [the college] and he dragged it kicking and screaming into a new era. It really did need a root and branch look at it. It was in very poor condition, and he did that, it was his vision, his drive, and being a very charismatic leader, and so on, he did all that. But, I mean, a personal view is, I think, he's a bit of Winston Churchill character, y'know, and of course you venerate him and so on, but he's not a particularly good leader in the peace, I don't think. Because I don't think he knows how to deal with that, I think constantly he's, he's looking for change rather than

consolidation, and I think sometimes the college just lost its way a bit on systems and written down procedures and so on. It took its eye of the ball. **Principal, Sixth Form College**

Yeah, there was blood on the carpet in the old days, but I think that it's quite a comfort having such explicit values. It's like having Ten Commandments that you and the students can work within, and I really think that that creates a mutual respect. I mean, I teach history so I know something about political systems and I think that this system really does work. That's why it's true what [the principal] was just saying, we really don't need a lot of rules here because we have such explicit values. It's now a well-oiled machine. **Lecturer, Tertiary FE College**

[The principal] came with a very, very clear vision and with a very great emphasis on the importance of culture and people and bringing people along with you rather than imposing systems and so on, and he's had a huge impact on this place, and the place has improved enormously over four years, it's just beyond recognition. It's now nearly three times as big as it was then. I think you'd understand it better in financial turnover, I think it was £3.8 million, was our financial turnover in 2000. Now its £11 million ... He was seen as the 'inspirational leader', y'know, at staff meetings, he'd give speeches and so on, and went into the community and made loads of friends – huge impact – but distanced himself a little bit from what was going on inside, on purpose, as a plan. **Senior Manager, Tertiary FE College**

During the first few months of our research we spent time interviewing college principals and senior managers to get a feel for some of the issues in the sector that may prove interesting for our more detailed ethnographic studies. In total we conducted over 40 semi-structured interviews in twelve colleges and training providers in the UK learning and skills sector. Later in our research we selected four of these institutions for a more detailed and long-term ethnographic study. As is evident in the above transcripts from these early interviews, the most typical kinds of stories we encountered told of the history of the college and of the individual. A kind of 'how things came to be' story. This is perhaps not surprising for several reasons: Firstly we were interviewing people about leadership in education and so undoubtedly brought into the interview the very phenomenon we hoped to discuss (Hammersley, 2003; Silverman, 1973). Secondly the recent history of further education in the UK is chequered with significant changes following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and the incorporation of colleges. Incorporation brought with it changes in the responsibilities of senior managers, changes to funding structures, governing bodies and the very status of the college as a place of teaching and learning within the local community (Randle and Brady, 1997; Goddard-Patel and Whitehead, 2000). Yet, even setting aside these factors all three stories taken from three different colleges have a remarkable similarity in the language and structure employed to tell the story of the college. The first two explicitly employ epic sounding phrases such as 'era' and 'the old days' to describe the period before a great change (which in both cases is only a relatively short period of around 15 years) and all three employ militaristic and aggressive terms such as having 'blood on the carpet', 'dragging the college kicking and screaming', references to Winston Churchill, 'managing the peace', images of the organizations as machine, the value of strong vision to drive change forward and so forth.

The use of such language is perhaps symptomatic of FE's recent history of change, uncertainty, increased autonomy of management and decreased collective powers of teaching staff (Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998b; Loots and Ross, 2004) and as such these accounts may represent what Julian Orr has called 'war stories' (Orr, 1996) and what Burton Clarke (1972) has called 'organizational sagas', in that each represents, "...accounts of achievements and events in the history of a person or group, [that] has come to mean a narrative of heroic exploits, a unique development that has deeply stirred the emotions of participants and descendents" (Clark, 1972: 178). As Orr and Clarke argue, such stories do much more than pass on information, or tell a history, they define a community, develop a sense of professional vision, and play an important role in the construction of new identities, both for the teller and for the community that such stories represent (see also Goodwin, 1994). In FE the saga of incorporation is one that still appears throughout our fieldwork data and has become something of a touchstone for the current state of the sector and relationships with governing bodies and funding councils (Goddard-Patel and Whitehead, 2000). But what do such sagas tell us about leadership? Each of the three managers above certainly draws explicitly on the language of

leadership to tell the history of their college (indeed, this was one of the reasons for selecting this material for this paper) and yet, we would argue, there is something of a 'gloss' used to construct each story. Each one attributes changes in their college to the work of a single heroic (and in this case male) charismatic leader, but none of them have provided us with convincing evidence for this casual relationship. Instead, the agency of these leaders is apparently self-evident since improvements to the college began with the arrival of a new principal, the implementation of a culture change programme, or the increase in annual turnover. But can the changes in the fortunes of a college be attributable to the actions of a single leader, or are there other elements of these stories missing in the production of the story as a saga?

Leadership is after all an ambiguous and surprisingly malleable concept which can be (and often has been) used to describe and account for almost any kind of personal quality, social interaction and behaviour (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Bresnen, 1995; Pfeffer, 1977; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Since the scientific study of leadership began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of studies have sought to describe the common features and characteristics of individual leaders and the inherent skill of leadership (Bryman, 1992; 1999). In fact, as Stogdill (1974: 259) has famously stated in his review of some of this early research, "...there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." Looking back over the years since Stogdill's review one could also add that there are as many concepts, models, and theories of leadership as there are definitions. What is surprising, however, is how few of these studies have researched leadership in action: leadership as a moment by moment set of practices and work that is accomplished (Gronn, 1982). What seems more common is for researchers to eschew what leaders do in favour of what leadership is. This has traditionally meant constructing questionnaires, categorising behaviours, or structuring carefully worded interviews so that fieldwork can be replicated, findings can be statistically validated, and theories can be rigorously tested. One consequence of this, as with our interview accounts above, is that while no one can question the robustness of the research method, the findings produced often tell us very little about the leadership as it is experienced and how it can be developed in others (Barker, 1997; Gronn and Ribbins, 1996).

It could be argued that one of the fundamental dilemmas in much mainstream leadership research is that it treats models, concepts and theories as something that are *in the world*, rather than as something that is the product of the researcher and the research methods employed. As the organizational theorist Karl Weick (1990) has suggested, this is akin to mistaking the 'map for the terrain', leading to the potential problem that the models, concepts and theories eventually become more important than the social worlds they seek to describe, or worse still, that the world under study is pressed into ready made and precise leadership moulds that are barely recognisable to practitioners. As a result, 'leadership' can become a self-reinforcing concept or set of categories and styles, the clarity of which increases as they are separated from the world of practice from which they were drawn. Such criticisms of mainstream leadership studies, however, are not new. In the development of his own 'attribution theory' of leadership Bobby Calder (1977) has suggested that researchers are too preoccupied with the construction of 'second order' reifications of leadership which overlook the common-sense – or 'first order' – ordinary methods of making sense of leadership in everyday life. Likewise, Bresnen (1995) has highlighted the contradictions that exist in leadership research and in the accounts of participants, suggesting that leadership, if it exists at all, exists as a discourse to be espoused, one that can be 'all things to all people', but one which stands in contrast to everyday practices. More recently Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a; 2003c) have questioned the existence of leadership as an observable and researchable phenomenon. In their own interview-based studies of leadership in a large research and development company they found that although managers could talk about leadership, actual examples of leadership in action were more elusive. This led the authors to question the existence of leadership as anything but a discursive game played out in management talk, and in their later work, that observable mundane work tasks would become examples of 'leadership' only when they were done by someone in a leader role. From these early critiques through to contemporary research, then, it seems increasingly to be the case that when studied qualitatively leadership exists primarily as accounts of practice rather than a practice in itself. Could it be argued, therefore, that a fundamental element of leadership may be the ability to produce and mobilise good leadership stories? As Calder (1977: 202) concludes:

Leadership cannot be taught as a skill. Skills may certainly help a person to perform more effectively, but leadership depends on how this performance and its effects are perceived by others. To teach leadership is to sensitize people to the perceptions of others – that is, to sensitize them to the everyday common-sense thinking of a group of people ... If it does nothing more than call attention to the need for understanding the everyday, non-scientific, meaning of leadership for specific groups of actors, attribution theory represents an advance for both leadership research and training.

Since our early interviews it has become apparent in several colleges that to a certain extent we had been told what interviewees thought we wanted to hear, that is, that leadership is both real and that it has had an important role to play in the success of the college. Yet having spent time in several colleges, we quickly become aware of how important the language of 'leadership' and particularly *being seen to be doing leadership* has become in the learning and skills sector. As such there is some evidence to support Calder's claim that leadership in FE is produced through perceptions and attributions, and that the skill of leadership is to be sensitive to the perceptions of audiences inside and outside of the college. As we discuss elsewhere (Atkinson et al, forthcoming) the work involved in being a good leader may therefore depend to a certain extent on how well your organization 'plays the leadership game.'

## STORIES OF EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP WORK

In the above we examined interview-based accounts of leadership, what we loosely refer to as 'invited stories'. Something that is immediately apparent in the telling of such stories is that the language of leadership is commonplace. Yet in our ethnographic data the senior managers and principals we have observed rarely describe themselves and their colleagues as 'leaders', and the work they do as 'leadership'. Instead, membership is defined in terms of being the principal, vice principal, assistant principal, director, head of curriculum, course leader, subject leader and so forth. Yet do such uses of job titles like 'principal', 'director', 'head' – and especially titles that actually include the word 'leader' - denote positions of leadership? And if those at the top of the hierarchy within a college are less likely to be called leaders than those near the middle or bottom (i.e. course or subject leaders), then where does leadership reside in our data, how are we to identify it in order to study it? To put it another way, should we begin to look for leadership in people, positions, processes, or practices (Grint, 2002)?

Perhaps another way to approach this problem is avoid creating new categories with which to order our data (and thus new stories), but instead to attend to the categories present in the data itself. For instance, leadership seems to be a category used by participants only during semi-structured interviews. It is present in certain kinds of talk and such talk does work – in this case satisfying the questions of the researcher. In this way we could argue that leadership is an 'occasioned phenomenon', meaning that in other contexts and situations different categories of talk present themselves. Leadership, therefore, exists as a means of accounting for work, rather than as personal quality or inherent skill (Button and Sharrock, 1998). Instead, any skill perhaps lies in understanding when and where to draw on the language of leadership to satisfy a particular audience. Take the following extract from the fieldnotes of one of our researchers following an observation of a meeting with the principal and his senior management team:

... a useful pre-meeting. For a set-piece meeting like this [with the Learning and Skills Council], it's important to be prepared. I feel I know where we are now and we all know what to say. We did this with Ofsted and got grade 1 for leadership and management.

### **Principal, Sixth Form College**

Here leadership and management are treated as a performance that requires organization and preparation. As this principal explains, an important factor in the successful accomplishment of leadership and management is that it must be seen to be done. Good leadership and management therefore involve the careful preparation of what can be said and done in front of an audience. Indeed, inspections from agencies like the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) provide

opportunities for leadership and management to be made visible and measurable, and for colleges to be legitimately graded for the quality of their leadership. It is perhaps also interesting to note that 'leadership' itself has only recently become a category used by Ofsted in their inspections. Before the Learning and Skills Act 2000, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) measured colleges on their 'Management and Governance'. After 2000, and the introduction of the Common Inspection Framework (CIF), 'management' has been relegated to second position behind 'leadership' within the new Ofsted governed inspection criteria. Given that this change occurred in a time when other Government reports promoted the importance of leadership for the success of the sector (DfES, 2002) it is perhaps with a fresh perspective that 'leadership' should be viewed, not as characteristics, skills, or styles, but as an organizing device through which other kinds of work is accomplished; work that is a collaborative effort involving staff from across the organization. As this extract from a diary study we have conducted with a newly appointed middle manager suggests, such work may eventually be attributed to 'good' leadership, but the work involved in this performance takes careful preparation at all levels of the organization:

Ofsted inspected the college in December 2001 and another inspection is not due until 2005. However, in order to prepare for this inspection we are having a practice inspection. Of course, nobody is adequately prepared and anxiety has set in. We know what is expected but staff continue to indulge in 'arguing with the ref', inspectors are not going to change their views on the importance of lesson plans or schemes of work, and management efforts to help staff prepare are construed as yet more burdens indiscriminately and unnecessarily placed on already frighteningly overburdened lecturers.

**Head of Department, Tertiary FE College.**

For us such accounts represent a very different kind of story from the ones with which began this paper. These stories here are not organizational sagas. They do not attempt to provide an understandable history of the college, one which uses and supports popular notions of leadership. Instead, these stories tell us something about the work that goes into the performance of good leadership; what classic sociological studies of everyday life have referred to as the 'backstage' work in managing performances (Goffman, 1959), or the 'playing of a game' (Goffman, 1961) by "extending to the rule the respect of compliance, while finding in the rule the means for doing whatever need be done" (Bittner, 1965: 273). Perhaps what data such as this suggests is that storytelling plays a much more important role in the work of FE college senior managers than merely the telling of organizational sagas to interested researchers. Instead, storytelling may itself be a skill that is used by managers to get other kinds of work done. What is perhaps more interesting then is not how principals and senior managers talk about leadership (something that in the right circumstances they are very good at) but instead to investigate the work that the telling of stories accomplishes, the work, we would argue, that stands in for – or perhaps more accurately 'stands behind' leadership:

...you play the game, you see, y'know, ... You see, theoretically what happens is you should put all the figures in and out the end pops what level of support you need. But the reality is you never bloody win, we were told actually if we try to get a thirty-five percent grant that we would never get it, so what we did was we made the figures show that we could just do it on thirty-five, but it is a very tough squeeze. We first of all asked for fifty percent...

**Principal, Sixth Form College**

This extract is part of a more detailed interview with the principal of the college following a lengthy meeting observed by one of our researchers. The meeting took place between the college senior management team and representatives from the local and national Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The purpose of the meeting (described in detail in Iszatt White et al, 2004) was to decide how the financial status of the college should be presented to a committee from this funding council. Several sets of figures could be legitimately used, but each set told its own story. The meeting between the college and the LSC was to discuss which story was most likely to receive funding. As we have suggested elsewhere, such decisions required a sophisticated understanding of the agency of stories, and in particular how certain stories suit a particular audience (Iszatt White, et al 2004). In each of the above extracts it could be argued that 'leadership' is absent in the work described. Instead, we are presented with accounts of 'preparing staff for inspections', 'preparing a funding proposal' and so

forth. This is work that could equally be categorised as 'leadership', 'management', 'organization' or 'administration' depending upon the agenda of the researcher. In order to 'see' leadership in these accounts, therefore, one must explicitly adopt one of the many definitions, models and theories that we have discussed earlier in the paper. Therefore, much like the proverbial person with the hammer who can only see nails, when one adopts a theory of leadership to view the data, that kind of leadership can then be seen everywhere. As we have noted, in a political climate where colleges are actively being graded and funded based on their measurable leadership abilities, it is perhaps not surprising that leadership can be demonstrated when required. However, if leadership has a tendency to appear and disappear depending upon the method of research employed (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a; Pfeffer, 1977) then what is left to study? For us, what is left is perhaps the most important – yet most easily overlooked phenomenon – the *work* that is done. What do we mean by *work*? As Harvey Sacks has said about 'being ordinary':

Whatever you may think about what it is to be an ordinary person in the world, an initial shift is not think of "an ordinary person" as some person, but as somebody having as one's job, as one's constant preoccupation, doing "being ordinary." It is not that somebody *is* ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one's business is, and it takes work, as any other business does ... as whatever it is that takes analytic, intellectual, emotional energy – then you will be able to see that all sorts of normalized things, for example, personal characteristics and the like are jobs that are done, that took some kind of effort, training, and so on. (Sacks, 1984b: 414).

As we discussed at the beginning of this paper, traditional leadership studies have for a long time concerned themselves with the personal characteristics of leadership, but what if we were to think about leadership as Sacks think about being ordinary? Are college principals and senior managers working at being 'leaders'? As we have demonstrated, there is certainly evidence that leadership is a job of work that has to be managed, whether this involves managing an interview with a leadership researcher, preparing staff for inspections and meetings with funding bodies, or deciding how to present the financial case for a new building. Just as Sacks advises us to not think of "an ordinary person" as some person, perhaps we as researchers should try to avoid seeing people as the embodiment of 'leadership'. Perhaps instead we should attend to the work involved in *doing being a leader*.

## **TEACHABLE MOMENTS AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

We began this paper by critically examining leadership research and the treatment of the concept of leadership itself. One of main concerns has been that leadership research has focused almost exclusively on the testing out of theories of one kind or another. One problem with this approach, we have argued, is that it provides very little practice-based and familiar case material to those that occupy leadership roles and who want to train and develop their skills. In this final section of the paper we discuss how our own approach to the analysis of stories and storytelling can be used to create a space for a different kind of dialogue; one that is rooted in the work that is done in FE colleges rather than reifications, or idealisations, of that work. Whilst the telling of 'invited stories' provides an insight into being an educational leader, there is little room for the kinds of work that goes into making such performances convincing. As we have seen, much of the work of leadership in an FE college is rooted in such mundane practices as holding and attending meetings, working with figures, preparing for inspections and so forth. While such accounts may not have the inspirational qualities of mainstream leadership development texts, the re-telling of such stories can have a role in programmes of leadership development. As Erickson says in his own use of stories in the design of interaction systems, the specific structure and content of a story is not so important:

The important thing here is not the conclusion that is drawn, but rather that people have engaged, drawn into discussion of ideas about which – before the story – they would have had nothing to say. This is a good metric for stories. I judge the "goodness" of a story by telling it to other people, and seeing how much they nod or laugh as they listen. (Erickson, 1996: 3)

We have used our research-based stories (several of which have been presented in this paper) to generate a dialogue in leadership development programmes currently provided by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership at Lancaster University. During several workshops over the course of a year we have presented our collected stories of everyday leadership work and particularly our evidence that much of the work of college managers involves accounting work or 'playing with figures'. As with Erickson's measure of a 'good' story (1996; 2000), our own stories were received with sympathetic nods, smile's of recognition and laughter. Most of all the sharing of these stories prompted members of the group to share their own experiences:

Researcher: "I mean how much time do you lot spend playing with figures, for example?"

Participant A: "A lot."

Participant B: "...a huge amount..."

Participant C: "...yeah..."

Participant D: "...too much..."

Researcher: "And when you say, I mean, why do you say 'too much'?"

Participant D: "...because it can take up so much of the day when there's, there's other things which are piling up, and some of the things are unnecessary if you look. For example there [points at slide on screen], you create a situation and then you'll find that it's wanted in a different way, so you have to do it again, but you continually re-work some of the data to get it into the format which could have been asked for in that format in the first place. Too often you'll ask for something and then they'll ask for it in a different way because it doesn't meet the criteria which the next party up was trying to present..."

The sharing of practiced-based stories such as the ones we have collected have a generative effect, as Erickson suggests, 'good' stories create an opportunity for others to engage, discuss, question and criticise. This discussion around the subject of working with figures as part of everyday work lasted for over twenty minutes as participants discussed just how much of their everyday work was spent working with management information. As with the above comment from Participant D, often working with governing bodies and funding councils is exacerbated by the fact that there are often ambiguous requirements for producing information for reports and as such the lack of clear guidance adds to the workload of senior managers:

Participant H: "Well, I, I've sort of challenged them [the Learning and Skills Council] on some of the things that we have to do for them, like the staff individualised record which is to be done once a year. You collect all the data on your staff and send it off. And I said to them, 'what do you actually do with that when you get it? I'm interested'. And they said, 'well actually, we don't do anything in our office because colleges don't get these back on the deadline', y'know, 'so we get half of them in, then they're coming in dribs and drabs, and we never get in a position where we've got all of the data in at the same and so we don't actually use it'. And I said, 'well, unless colleges use it themselves for sort of like monitoring, ethnicity and general, y'know, different rates of pay and things, its actually not used for anything then, except by keeping ministers happy and telling them 'well, we know the statistics of staff in the sector'. And, there is a sort of like, 'do you realise how long it takes colleges to actually produce this document for you?' and really what you could be doing is actually making it useful for us in terms of giving us comparative data so we can see how our turnover compares with other colleges and sort of benchmark ourselves on what others are doing, but that sort of perception just wasn't there. It was like, 'oh well, y'know, its just filling in a spreadsheet and e-mailing it off, it's not that onerous'. But really, to do it rigorously, it is."

Stories like these are lengthy documents to include in a single research paper, but we feel they are necessary to illustrate the kinds of work that the sharing of stories can perform. For us, the re-telling of such stories as part of a leadership development course, and again in this paper here, provide participants and researchers like us with 'teachable moments'. That is, the sharing of accounts of work done that usually would not be documented and passed on, but which provide a detailed description of work that is done, and suggestions of how such work can be supported by others. In an



interdisciplinary environment involving researchers, course designers, trainers, and sector practitioners, we feel that stories like those above provide a common ground for further dialogue. Unlike, semi-structured interviews, or questionnaires, the gathering of ethnographic data including interviews, but also observations, documents and diary studies etc., can provide rich descriptions of practice which may challenge the status of leadership, but in doing so reveal a more complex world of work that practitioners in the sector must manage, but for which few have been formally trained to cope with (Loots and Ross, 2004). The sharing of such stories, we suggest, provides one method for researchers, trainers and practitioners to critically examine the nature of leadership in practice and reflect on the skills and work that practitioners engage in rather than idealised, or prescriptive visions of what that work *should be*.

## CONCLUSION

We began this paper with an extract from Goleman (2000) discussing the virtues of the 'high impact leader'. While we do not question the ability of such stories to enthuse and inspire, we do feel that a space remains between these persuasive accounts of how leadership *should be* and the personal accounts of how practitioners get work done. We have suggested that leadership might be better thought of as an organizing device around which organizational members orientated their work - rather than as an embodied set of skills or characteristics. Above all, we have stated that leadership could be thought of as a design problem through which stories provide one useful means of understanding the social worlds of users/practitioners; a means through which we as researchers can inform the design of development programmes so that everyday work such as holding meetings, working with management information, communicating with funding bodies, etc. can be supported rather than subsumed within more ambiguous, but politically charged concepts like 'leadership'.

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