



Kawalilak, C., Brown, B., & Roy, S. (2023). In service of others – Connected leadership in a post-secondary context. *International Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 23(1), 136–154. <https://doi.org/10.29173/ijll35>

In Service of Others – Connected Leadership in a Post-Secondary Context

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Abstract

In this article, three associate deans, who each lead one of three Academic Support Offices in a School of Education at a Canadian research-intensive university, feature their reflections, leadership approaches, found synergies, and collaborations to cultivate and advance connected leadership and resilience. The Offices of Research, Teaching and Learning, and Internationalization are located in a common physical space. Each associate dean manages their own portfolio in addition to collaborating with one another on identified points of intersection and joint initiatives. These three Offices were formed to support faculty members and students in the two program areas in the School—Undergraduate Programs in Education and Graduate Programs in Education. The work of the Academic Support Offices is supported by two administrative support individuals and two facilitators who work across all three Offices.

Over the past 23 months, this team of seven transitioned to remote and virtual work in response to COVID-19. Opportunities and challenges pertaining to communications, collaborations and how leadership and resilience is lived amongst the three associate deans, in particular, are discussed. Authors apply the lenses of relationality and connectivism to make meaning of and reimagine their leadership through reflections on foundations of learning, such as autonomy, connectedness, diversity and openness, and how these essences contribute to collective and collaborative leadership and resilience. Authors assert that building on the relational and connectivity to support collaborative and generative work and learning communities that thrive is essential, moving forward.

Keywords: leadership, relationality, connectivism, higher education, post-secondary, workplace culture, COVID-19

Introduction

In this article, we the authors reflect on the essences of connected leadership—what this means, how this is fostered and experienced, and how relationality is foundational to informing our respective leadership roles, styles and practices. We also share insights gained as we continue to navigate challenges and opportunities shaped and impacted by COVID-19 and how our virtual connectedness has, in many ways, contributed to a more focused and intentional commitment to co-creating a safe and trusting space that supports dialogue and collaboration.

As associate deans who each lead one of three Academic Support Offices in a School of Education at a research-intensive university, we reflect on and discuss leadership practices across our three offices during the global pandemic, a time when there was a necessity to focus on digital learning in education, and when many post-secondary institutions were required to work remotely.

Positioning Ourselves

Our University and School

We are three tenured academics from the Werklund School of Education (WSE), University of Calgary. Ours is a diverse campus of 14 faculties that serve over 26,000 undergraduate students and 6,000 graduate students. Of these, the WSE supports the learning and research of approximately 1500 undergraduate and 1200 graduate students each year. The 98 WSE academic staff are actively involved in teaching, research, scholarship and service with an additional contingency of 20 non-academic support staff. In 2019, our three Offices—Internationalization, Research, and Teaching and Learning underwent a major restructuring and moved into a new collaborative workspace called the WSE Academic Support Offices. The work of our Offices provides WSE students, staff, and faculty with opportunities to participate in discussions, events and workshops on online pedagogy and use of technology, research, intercultural capacities, awards, grants, knowledge engagement, and partnerships with schools and communities.

Additionally, we are members of the WSE senior leadership team. This team, led by the dean, includes the vice dean, two additional associate deans (one for undergraduate and another for graduate programs) and seven program specialization chairs. Beyond the Werklund School

of Education, we make a strong commitment to our institution by contributing on various university-wide committees pertaining to: ethics; equity, diversity and inclusion; internationalization; advancing intercultural capacities; Indigenous education; research; and teaching and learning. This commitment of time and focus is important to support the creation of strategies and models of connectiveness, diversity, openness, and collaborative leadership in our school and across campus.

Academic Support Offices

As three associate deans with our own leadership portfolios, we also work collaboratively to support our undergraduate and graduate programs. Additionally, as members of our school's senior leadership team led by the dean, we provide support in development and advancement of the WSE Academic Plan.

Associate Dean Internationalization. Colleen Kawalilak, professor and Associate Dean Internationalization was appointed to this leadership role in 2013. She will step down from this role in 2023 after having served two, five-year, back-to-back appointments. The work led out of this office is collaborative and supported by an international facilitator, administrative support staff, and an International Advisory Committee (IAC).

The Office of Internationalization supports students, staff and faculty by providing leadership, support and resources pertaining to internationalization and intercultural (at home and abroad) initiatives and in capacity building. This mission aims to fulfill the promise of a significant school (faculty) of education, engaged with local and global communities in relevant, responsible, and reciprocal relationships by engaging in collaborations with teaching and learning, research and scholarship, service and community in advancing and practicing just and equitable global citizenship. Colleen's leadership role and commitment also include liaising with the University of Calgary International Office (UCI) and the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

Associate Dean Research. Sylvie Roy, professor, and Associate Dean Research has led the Office of Research since 2018. She is supported by a research facilitator, administrative support staff, and an Research Advisory Committee (RAC). Through this office, support is provided to faculty members', postdoctoral scholars' and students' research programs. The Office of Research also assists with the preparation of research grant applications, proposal

development, and award nominations, in addition to discussing research needs and future impactful ideas. Under Sylvie's leadership, interdisciplinary work is promoted and numerous community partnerships are forged that focus on an array of research projects. Additionally, through this office, faculty members are connected with government, organizations and community partners by way of a Research Partners and Communities Program. Research-related activities and events are promoted and supported and funding opportunities that best suit faculty members' research interests are identified. Sylvie provides further leadership by liaising with the University Research Services and the Office of the Vice-President Research.

Associate Dean Teaching and Learning. Barbara Brown, associate professor, was appointed as Associate Dean Teaching and Learning in 2020. She started in her role at the early stages of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In collaboration with a Teaching and Learning Advisory Committee, the office provides oversight and manages support for curriculum quality assurance and ongoing professional learning to advance online and on-campus teaching and to activate the physical and digital modularity of teaching and learning spaces in the education complex. A range of professional learning supports are provided to instructors and students including individual coaching, group learning series and communities of practice, with a focus on incubating teaching innovation in undergraduate and graduate programs, and during pre-service teacher field placements, and graduate teaching assignments. The Teaching and Learning Office also manages a loan pool of equipment accessed through the Doucette Education Library (e.g., iPads, laptops, GoPro Cameras, VR Headsets, etc.), and supports technology-enhanced classroom spaces in education, and a dedicated Digital Lab that can be reserved by academic staff and students. Additional learning supports are provided through a new faculty network, sessional instructor network, and a micro-credential program for graduate teaching assistants. The Office of Teaching and Learning aims to elevate the recognition of teaching excellence and research in the faculty of education through engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and through supporting faculty and students when applying for internal and external teaching awards and grants. Under Barbara's leadership, this office also liaises with the Vice-Provost for Teaching and Learning and the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary.

Then Came the Pandemic – A Shifting Landscape

In early March 2020, most programs in our university transitioned from face-to-face to online delivery in response to the global pandemic, COVID-19. Our school was fortunate in that we were able to respond quickly to this shift—we already offered several graduate programs and courses by way of online or blended delivery. Case in point, some of our graduate programs incorporated online coursework in fall, winter, and spring terms, with an additional face-to-face, on campus component over the summer months. Due to our experience with the design and delivery of online programs, we transitioned more easily than many other faculties across campus.

This transition was not as seamless for our administrative support and facilitation team members, however, who were more accustomed to working daily on campus. To support these individuals, we ensured they had the equipment they needed to work from home and access to online university systems. Further, we prioritized attending to the well-being of selves and others by organizing frequent and regular times to check in with one another, both as a full team and individually. We also scheduled more formal meetings that focused specifically on work tasks.

It soon became clear that what we often take for granted in our day-to-day on campus interactions—seeing one another and having informal chats, popping into one another’s office to seek another opinion or to simply connect, and meeting up in the mailroom over a cup of coffee, provided those significant, but less-formal, opportunities to interact with one another. With each of us now working remotely from home, these daily spaces of informal connection were no longer available. How to create these spaces virtually became a priority.

What we thought might span a few weeks or months, extended far beyond what any of us had imagined. We are now entering our twenty-third month of the pandemic—the fifth wave here in Alberta, Canada and we continue to work remotely. It was within this space and time, and particularly over this past year, when we reflected on what we were all doing as associate dean leaders to navigate this new landscape of challenges and opportunities. Through reflection, we came to realize that focusing on and connecting with one another in meaningful ways— ways that fostered care and support of one another was critical.

Our reflections described in this chapter emerged from this awareness and commitment to connectivity and relationship building. It was at this time that we began reviewing literature on relationality and connectivism that provided a foundation for our reflections.

A Leadership Paradigm: Relationality and Connectivism

Particular dimensions of our individual leadership styles are both similar and different. What we have come to know and appreciate, however, are the shared values and common philosophy that binds us. We recognize knowledge as “grounded in the idea that we come into being in and through relationship...[and that] all knowing and learning comes from our human need for connection with others and with the world” (Belenky et al.,1986, p. 187).

Relationality

Relationality resides at the heart of a relational epistemology and praxis (Thayer-Bacon, 2003) and is rooted in learning from one another, with students and colleagues as authentically engaged, lifelong adult learners to support the co-creation of healthy and diverse work and learning communities that thrive. Theorists who support relational epistemologies promote that relationships and learning are deeply interconnected. (Hinsdale, 2016) and that by locating the human relationship as central, as a particular educative space in educational exchanges, honours the ethic of care in the teaching-learning dynamic (Noddings, 2005). Inherent in taking up *the relational* is also to recognize that, as social beings, our individual narratives are complex and inexplicably connected to one another and to the social context where each of us is situated (Thayer-Bacon, 2003).

Looking back, our three Academic Support Offices typically operated relatively independent of one another. Granted, there was communication across our three Offices, however, as is often the case, coming together was mostly visible at monthly leadership team meetings and bi-monthly faculty council events. We were also competing on budget allocation each year when each of us would meet with the Dean to discuss resourcing current programs and proposing new initiatives.

One year prior to the onset of COVID-19, our three Academic Support Offices moved to a common physical space. Although we each led our respective portfolios, we aimed to work more collaboratively to provide support to the programs and faculty in our School. To guide our

collaborations, we engaged in authentic and generative dialogue, shared our knowledge and experience, and offered mentoring and personal and professional support to one another. It is important to note that, before generative dialogue and knowledge sharing took hold, we found ourselves focusing more on getting to know one another beyond what we had come to learn from working together. We virtually met one another's children; we laughed when a cat walked across someone's keyboard in the middle of a zoom meeting or when a dog barked, non-stop, wanting attention or to be let outside. We celebrated birthdays and other special occasions over zoom with themed backgrounds on our screens. We also took turns, as associate deans, to organize the delivery of a small "surprise" to the home of each team member to combat feelings of isolation and to communicate appreciation for the good work they continued to do during very challenging times. These small surprises spanned doughnut deliveries, assortments of chocolate, and cards communicating the significance and valuing of each person on our team,

Our weekly, full team meetings were generally not agenda driven as we would schedule additional meeting times with selected team members to discuss items relevant to a particular portfolio or work task. We expressed a common need to connect, albeit remotely throughout the pandemic, and during these "agenda free" meetings, we listened; we shared; and a safe and trusting space was co-created. In this space, our understanding that "our individual, unique ideas are caught up within webs of related ideas" (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 73) was realized in deeper ways and that "we need[ed] [one another] to help us gain a better perspective on our own situations" (p. 126). Our understanding and appreciation of one another— challenges faced, navigating tensions, juggling our family, and our academic roles and responsibilities were deepened and we offered support to one another.

It is also important to recognize that it is through sharing our experiences with one another that we are provided a lens through which to better understand ourselves and our own experiences. This understanding also encompasses our belief that we are *all* learners— lifelong adult learners and the *teacher* and *learner* resides within each of us (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014).

Our beliefs and commitment to relationality continues to be guided by the work of Noddings (1984) in what she referred to as an ethic of care. Noddings connected caring to relationality and referred to the one offering care and the one being cared for and aligns with her belief that "we are fundamentally interdependent, relational beings, not separate autonomous

individuals” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, pp. 109-110). Further, the reciprocity of care and our shared commitment to fostering supportive relationships deepened our understanding and appreciation of relational ways of knowing. We also considered how relationality and connectivism were intertwined.

Connectivism

Harris and Jones (2020) discussed leadership insights within the pandemic landscape and noticed there was a requirement for leaders to work in different ways. They also speculated that many of the leadership practices cultivated during the pandemic may not be reversible; hence it is important to reflect on leadership practices and consider implications for the future.

When we started examining our collective leadership practices and team-based model that commenced prior to the pandemic and then continued to flourish during remote working conditions, we found Corbett and Spinello’s (2020) application of the principles of connectivism as a helpful lens for our dialogue and reflections. The principles of connectivism are described as follows:

- Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivism learning activities.
- Decision making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through a lens of shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. (Siemens, 2018, Connectivism section, para. 2).

Corbett and Spinello (2020) also described four foundations for learning—(a) autonomy, (b) connectedness, (c) diversity, and (d) openness—that offer a leadership perspective whereby leadership is not situated in a hierarchical organizational map and authority is not situated within a single heroic leader. Instead, leadership is situated as a team-based model for making decisions

and a collective approach to influence change. First, autonomy is rooted in terms such as *self* and *independent* and is used to describe power structures that ensure no single person has power and influence. Second, connectedness refers to connected peers and networked learning communities that describe learning structures that are also absent of hierarchy. Third, diversity recognizes the value of different perspectives and expertise instead of one source of authority. And fourth, openness values accessibility and offers multiple entry points for engagement “based on the individual’s pace, preferences and desire to participate” (Corbett & Spinello, 2020, p. 3). Applying the principles of connectivism to leadership guided by the four foundations for learning offered us a way to conceptualize and articulate our leadership approaches particularly during a time of change, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a “leadership paradigm for the 21st century, by recognizing that leadership is dynamic, connected, and [a] collective influence process” (p. 8), provided us with a leadership framework to guide our collaborative inquiry and reflections. Further, we recognized the importance of connectivism and relationality beyond the online environment, intent on incorporating insights gained, moving forward, when we all return to campus.

Reflections

As three associate deans, we decided to meet every Tuesday morning at 8am to provide support to one another and to share our thoughts, frustrations, insights and experiences while navigating this new and challenging terrain crafted and contoured by COVID-19. We looked forward to these gatherings and it was within this space that trust grew as we came to understand and support one another. These informal meetings prompted us to reflect and write about experiences of our own choosing. We thought this might help us to better understand how we had come to this place of care, connection, and community at this challenging time when we were unable to connect with one another in person. What factors contributed to this?

Colleen (Associate Dean International)

It’s hard to believe that I have been in my role as associate dean international since 2013. In June 2023, I will step down after serving two five-year terms. Looking back, my first term felt quite different from what I am experiencing now. We were a small team then, physically located in our own space, separate from the two other Academic Support Offices—the Office of Research and the Office of Teaching and Learning. Although we all gathered around the

leadership table alongside associate deans of our two program offices, my experience was that of being quite separate from the other associate deans. Indeed, although we were encouraged to collaborate, the structures in place fostered more competition than collaboration. In spite of these challenges, I remained committed to fostering relationships with my colleagues in other leadership positions as relationships rooted in an ethic of care has always been foundational to how I approach teaching, leadership, and service.

Shortly into my second five-year term and under the leadership of a new dean, all three Academic Support Offices were moved to a common physical space. Although we each maintained our own leadership portfolios and had separate offices within this common space, being in closer proximity provided more opportunities to connect both formally and informally to share our work and to engage in meaningful dialogue. Further, this new structure provided us the opportunity to gather together with all members of our three Offices to map out how we all might benefit from reorganizing some of the work tasks of our two administrative support personnel and the two facilitators who provided support. This resulted in the mapping of some tasks (e.g., grant applications, event planning, website development)—tasks that each of our individual Offices took up but could now be delegated to a particular individual who held expertise in that area. In this way, we benefited from pooling resources, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and forged a new path where we experienced more connection with one another and benefited from the supports each of the other Offices provided. Opportunities to collaborate on initiatives became visible and we began welcoming one another into certain projects and initiatives we were leading. Many of our colleagues began commenting on the cohesiveness of supports provided by our Offices and their appreciation for having this “common space” where they could come to seek support, resources, and expertise.

In retrospect, the mapping and reassignment of tasks was the easy part. What took time, thoughtful attention and commitment was to create those spaces of time to connect with and get to know one another— time to listen, thoughtfully attending, and learning from one another. Our connecting times that took place several times throughout each week were not driven by agenda items. Rather, these spaces of time were held to foster a sense of belonging and community amongst us. Out of this, a deep sense of trust and belonging was experienced. I have always believed that wherever we gather with others be it in our personal or professional lives, it is that sense of belonging and being included and valued that form the essences, the foundation, of what

building community truly means. Also, within this space of trust, supported by this foundation, we are more willing to take risks, to be open to feedback, to be challenged, and to aspire to be the best version of ourselves. It is such a privilege to be a part of this thriving community.

Sylvie (Associate Dean Research)

I became the Associate Dean Research in January 2018 when the previous leader left for another opportunity. I was also one of the Graduate Program Directors replacing one of my colleagues who was on research leave for one year. I had 6 months left in that position. Being the Graduate Program Director and working intensively with graduate students, programming and relationship issues between supervisors and students, I didn't have a lot of time to focus on my new position. I needed to learn it quickly without too many support from my colleague who left the University. At the same time, the Office of Research was unstable and had several staffing changes. Three administrative assistants left in a 6 month time. After two years of making sure the Office of Research was stable and provided the support for colleagues and students, we were asked to move with the other support offices. I was looking forward to the opportunities as I always like to work collaboratively with colleagues as ideas are always stronger with others. I always believe that, in any situations, there is always someone who will take the lead or will make the last decision. This idea was a belief of mine before I started to work with my two colleagues. I still believe that, at one point, consensus will need to be achieved in order to move forward. Each offices had one facilitator who would work specifically with each Associate Deans on their portfolio and we had two administrative assistants for the three offices. After one year, we were left with only two facilitators instead of three and we needed to discuss how we were going to manage our portfolio with one less person. At the same time, in 2019, the School leadership changes with a new Dean and a new Vice-Dean in addition to a new Associate Dean Teaching and Learning changed and Barb came on board with us. These times of change made it difficult to ask for a new research facilitator and as soon as the pandemic started, our work became very different. We needed to find a way to work differently. We sat together to align the expertise and interests of our staff with the work in and across our Offices.

Working with Colleen and Barb allowed me to learn a new way of leading and collaborating. Instead of stressing for who is right or wrong, I came to trust my colleagues with my ideas and welcome their comments and suggestions especially when it comes to my own

portfolio. I became a better leader when I could trust that they were just looking after me when proposing a different idea or viewpoint. The opportunity to learn is grandiose. They both two different people whose experiences, insights, ideas and also feelings allow me to grow as a person and as a leader. It is by working with them that my ideas can flourish and that I can grow as a person. I learn that being a leader is not to be alone in the process of decision-making or planning but by working together, we can come up with better strategies, better and different ideas and a greater understanding. Collective decision is enhanced when three heads come together. I think the challenge for anyone wanting to work that way is to find the right people and build the right relationship of trust and friendship. I don't agree all the time with my colleagues, but I care enough to share my frustration and disagreement and continue to work with them in a collegial fashion. It might take more time to meet and discuss but the results are better and people around us notice it.

Barb (Associate Dean Teaching and Learning)

I started in the Associate Dean role during the pandemic when we were all working remotely. My office space was filled with packed boxes that were moved from my old office on the 8th floor to my new space in the Academic Support Office on the 3rd floor in the education tower. I learned that part of my role involved working closely with the two other Associate Deans located in the Academic Support Office and that we would all share responsibility for supervising and overseeing the work of four employees providing a range of supports. All three of us needed to share and divide the allocated tasks with the support staff. I initially thought this would be an easy and straightforward task that would not take very long to discuss during one of our meetings. In my previous leadership appointments in K-12 and in post-secondary learning environments, I regularly worked alongside other leaders and easily managed to share administrative supports. This generally required a meeting with the team to discuss and negotiate how resources would be shared. I thought we might follow a similar process. We had a meeting that led to creating a detailed spreadsheet outlining all the tasks according to each support position job profile. Further meetings were required so each member of the team could contribute to the spreadsheet and identify tasks they were already doing and express interest in tasks they would like to learn. A series of subsequent meetings were then held involving discussions about how tasks would be dispersed and what tasks would be shared. This was a lengthy process with numerous meetings that were scheduled in addition to our weekly check-in meetings for the three of us and weekly

check-in meetings with all the members in the Academic Support Office. I viewed this time commitment and number of meetings as a challenge considering I already had over 20 other monthly committee meetings blocked in my schedule. I recall feeling like I was attending full days of back-to-back zoom meetings with little time to lead any of the work. These additional meetings with my colleagues felt inconsequential and without purpose as they were not driven by an agenda. After further reflection, I recognized that meeting with my colleagues for check-ins and dialogue provided a foundation for our trusting relationships and collective leadership approach and now if we move or cancel one of the meetings, I find myself missing our time to connect. I have come to realize that effectively leading both individually and collectively may not have been possible without the time commitment for these relational moments. We needed time to dialogue about the convergences and divergences of our leadership work together and to establish a shared vision. Arguably, our present engagements together would likely look and feel much different without a continual investment of time for developing relationships and connectedness to help situate and strengthen a collective leadership approach.

Reflecting on Interconnections

By reflecting on our own experiences and sharing these reflections with one another, we made deeper meaning of our work, our learning, and the leadership culture in our School of Education. We also recognized that reading our reflections aloud and being listened to gave agency and voice to our experiences, emotions, and perspectives. Sharing our own storied experiences prompted the listener to reflect more deeply on their own stories. Within this space of storied experiences shared and received, the trust and safety we felt with one another prompted dialogue. In dialogue, we let go of tightly held agendas to gain a deeper understanding of another's perspective rather than spending time trying to convince the other that our own held beliefs should be adopted. David Bohm (1996) differentiated dialogue from conversation and discussion and said,

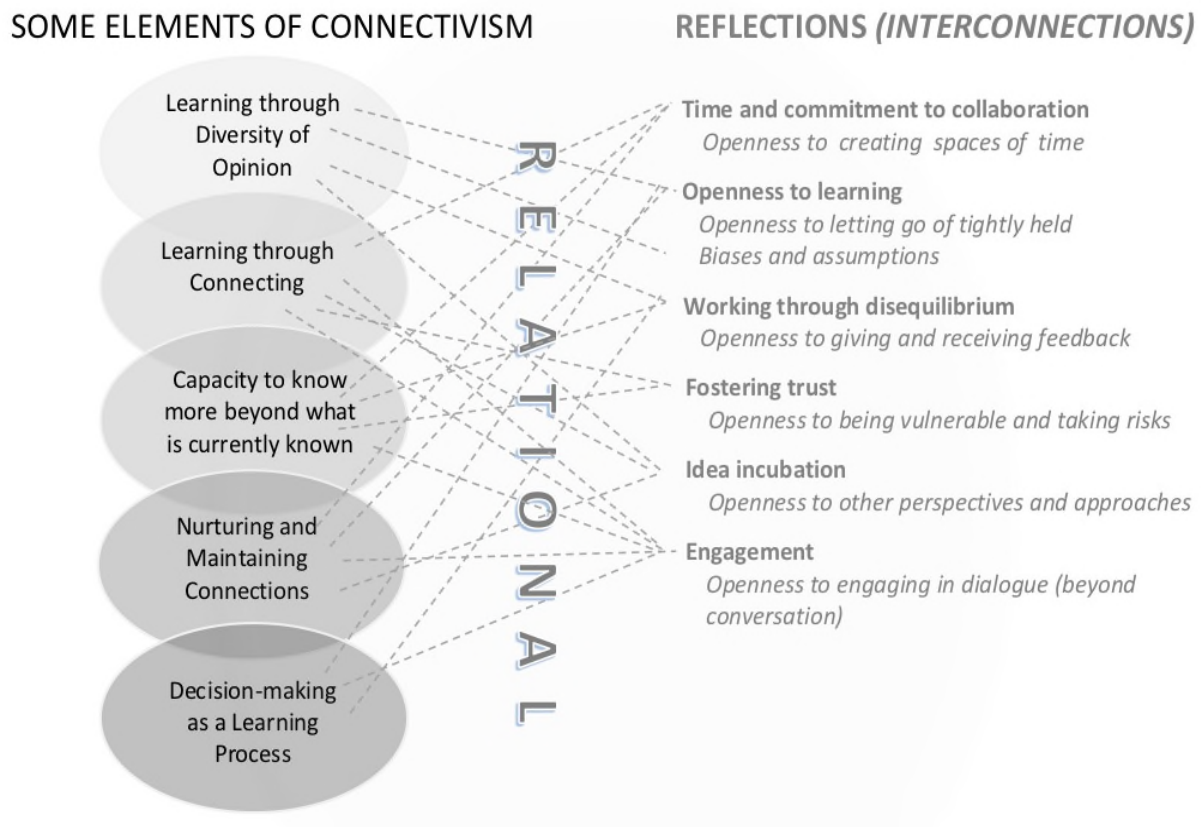
In dialogue...nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it. In dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail...dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins. (p. 7)

Through dialogue, we recognized several common themes that emerged from our reflections—themes that were visible in each of our individual writings. These included significant core essences of relational development that we had co-created while working remotely during the pandemic. Additionally, we were aware that these were not commitments we were able to articulate at the onset, when we first started working together or when we transitioned to working remotely. Rather, our awareness that developed over time was illuminated when we individually and collectively reflected on how we had grown, risks we had taken and, in retrospect, unforeseen insights gained. These generative commitments included:

- Time and commitment to collaboration *Openness to creating spaces of time*
- Openness to learning *Openness to letting go of tightly held biases and assumptions*
- Working through disequilibrium *Openness to giving and receiving feedback*
- Fostering trust *Openness to being vulnerable and taking risks*
- Idea incubation *Openness to other perspectives and approaches*
- Engagement *Openness to engaging in dialogue (beyond conversation)*

We then revisited Siemens (2018) principles of connectivism and Corbett and Spinello's (2020) application of the principles of connectivism to leadership to see possible intersections with the dominant themes that had emerged from our reflections. There were five of the seven connectivism principles (Siemens, 2018) that intersected seamlessly with the commitments that had emerged from our reflections (*see Figure 1*): 1) learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions; 2) learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources; 3) capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known; 4) nurturing and maintaining connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill; and 5) decision making is itself a learning process.

Figure 1
Connectivism Principles Related to Reflections



As is often the case in relationship development in any number of diverse contexts, these intersections are not linear or exclusive; are often experienced as messy, sometimes uncomfortable and unpredictable; and take courage and humility to be realized.

A relational epistemology recognizes knowledge that is developed through our interactions and relationships with one another and from our life experiences in the world (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). When we authentically and respectfully engage with one another, there lies the potential to explore diverse perspectives, make deeper meaning of experiences, develop an appreciation of differences, and discover the common ground that unites us as humankind, beyond our differences (Kawalilak, 2006). Engaging and collaborating with others provides further openings to revisit our assumptions, biases and tightly held notions; to extend reciprocity of care and compassion; and to open to lean into what is sometimes unfamiliar and uncomfortable by engaging *with* difference. Azorín and Fullan (2021) asserted that, within contexts of education, “collaboration is needed and the pandemic made this need greater” (p. 10).

By recognizing the interplay of fostering relationality in our interactions with one another aimed at co-creating a collaborative culture, we became aware that our contributions to connectivism theory reside in elevating the focus and commitment to relationality as a way to deepen and strengthen the interconnectivity of the core essences of connectivism theory.

Commitments Moving Forward

We are committed to moving forward purposefully and intentionally by leveraging what we have learned throughout this global pandemic. More expressly, we have fostered a deeper sense of community *with* and care *for* one another and all of our team members. We have come to know that more *informal* gatherings and meetings have the potential to deepen relationality and connectedness. Formal meetings are frequently impersonal, packed with agenda items, transactional, and often orchestrated with anticipated outcomes.

Focusing on relationality and connectivism will continue to reside at the core of how we take up our work and leadership roles in our School. Moving forward, we will engage in dialogue with all our team members and ask the questions: *How do we ensure that lessons learned and insights gained over these past few years are not lost when we return to campus? How do we move forward with purpose and intention by looking back on learnings acquired? What do we each commit to moving forward to foster this ethic of care we have co-created, to ensure we don't revert back to old ways? How might we engage with other colleagues in our School—colleagues beyond our team to share insights and to learn from one another? And, when we observe tendencies to forget what we have learned or imply that there is such a thing as “getting back to normal”, how can we be thoughtfully “irritating”, reminding ourselves and others that lessons learned are not to be forgotten?* We also maintain that continuing to pose these questions to ourselves and others will keep lessons learned, front and centre.

It is humbling to realize that the insights we have gained emerged with clarity when we were only able to connect virtually. Would not meaningful connections be more likely when on campus and physically present to one another? The paradox resides in recognizing that it was in our distance *from* one another, that we came to be more present *to* and connected *with* one another.

Summary

In this chapter, as three associate deans who continue to work and learn in a School of Education at a Canadian research-intensive university, we shared our reflections and experiences of navigating significant and rapid change engendered by a global pandemic. We sought to make deeper meaning of our work, our learning, our leadership roles, and how we lead.

By applying principles of connectivism to make meaning of foundations for growth and learning, we gained a deeper understanding of how relationality resides at the core of our leadership philosophy and approach. By intentionally co-creating virtual spaces that welcomed dialogue focused on challenges and opportunities impelled by COVID-19 that impacted our personal and professional lives, wholesome relationship development was supported and a culture of collaboration and care was promoted (Azorín & Fullan, 2022).

The global pandemic continues to challenge all of us to be more innovative, generative, and intentional in how we respond with care and compassion to the humanity of others and to ourselves. We also encourage ourselves and others to be “thoughtfully irritating” by reminding one another when needed to pause, revisit, and reflect on insights gained over these past two years. We need to be intentional so as not to forget lessons learned from navigating the many challenges during a global pandemic. Being thoughtfully irritating takes courage—listening to and appreciating those who step forward in this way calls forth our openness and humility.

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