

# **Leaders for good in a post-crisis world: Designing transdisciplinary and resonant leadership education programs in transitional spaces**

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## **Abstract**

Developing business graduates to have the transdisciplinary and resonant capability to be leaders for good throughout their career is a complex curricular challenge. The design of leadership education programs is impacted by two dissonances (the resonance dissonance and the transdisciplinary dissonance) that emerge between the transitions students are experiencing as they journey through higher education and the transactional behaviours engendered by policy and institutional practice. This paper will interrogate the challenges and affordances of designing a leadership education program that purposefully creates transitional spaces for students to integrate, repurpose and share their transdisciplinary knowledge, skills, and experience as they develop their skills to be leaders for good. Using the evaluative and reflective outputs from a participatory action research project, a single instance case study has been developed on the Leading in a Post-Crisis World program at the University of Sydney Business School (Australia) to interrogate the positive and negative impacts that the resonance and transdisciplinary dissonances have on the successful design of a leadership education program. The paper will posit the notion of resonant learning as a way of enhancing the efficacy and longitudinal benefits of leadership education to effect social change and address current and *yet to be experienced* critical global, local, or personal crises.

**Keywords:** Leadership education, leadership for good, social responsibility, transdisciplinary education

## **Introduction**

Many leadership education programs are built ecosystems of abstracted skills, the virtuousness of the ideal of leadership and the expectation pressures of graduate employability, leading to what Petriglieri & Petriglieri (2015) refer to as the *dehumanization of leadership*. This is where business school programs in leadership become a ‘poor preparation for the ambiguity and precariousness of leadership in contemporary workplaces’ (p. 625). The design of leadership education programs is made more complex by the pervasive influence of government industry and education policies that reward the immediate gratification of graduate employability metrics and the recognition from industry that their skills needs are being met by the university (Hogan et al., 2021; Rosenbaum et al., 2021; Shankar Nayak & Powell, 2022).

The challenges that students will face after graduation are *yet to be experienced*. The exemplars and cases that underpin leadership education teaching are abstracted from the unknown realities of future crises. The leadership skills of social responsibility, ethics, sustainability, and citizenship are transdisciplinary principles that require the integration of skills, knowledge, and research from across disciplines into a leadership education curriculum that builds skills for the students future career (Hughes et al., 2018). There is an overt focus in many programs on disciplinary analytical skills over transdisciplinary skills such as social interaction, governance and problem solving. This focus leads to socially responsible leadership skills being untested, underdeveloped, and not integrated across the program. Students enter a betwixt and between state where the disciplinary knowledge they acquire is inadequate as a threshold concept that would initiate the transitions (or rite of passage) required to be a leader (Irving et al., 2019; Meyer & Land, 2005)

Writers like Giroux (2007) and Hill et al (2016) argue that the knowledge, skills and experiences students bring to university, however nascent, construct frameworks and connections that enable an experiential learning benefit. These situated lived experiences are critical to developing the transdisciplinary skills of resilience, creativity, and intuition in business students (Kerr & Lloyd, 2008; Laughton & Ottewill, 2000; Penaluna, 2022). Hill et al. (2016) argue that by engaging with the experiences of students, borderland spaces are created where ‘the traditional power hierarchies of higher education may be scrutinized and destabilized, enabling students to draw more freely from their own experiences and to work in partnership with each other and with faculty, prompting the construction of new identities’ (p. 379). For designers of leadership education programs the creation of borderland spaces enable students and staff to experiment and leverage the hybridity and fluidity of their identity as leaders (Place, 2022).

Winnicott (1953) theorised transitional spaces as a way to represent how children transition to adulthood by equally leveraging the hybridity and fluidity of identity. Through actions such as play, experimentation, intuition and the taking of risks in which children can ‘bridge the gap between ego-centricism and recognition of an external world, and how they negotiate and renegotiate the relations between self and other’ (Aitken & Herman, 1997, p. 65). There have been several studies that have recontextualised transitional spaces for higher education students (e.g. Dubouloy, 2004; Ellsworth, 2005; Irimiás et al., 2022). Transitional spaces in higher education are as Ellsworth (2005) notes ‘...entertaining strangeness and playing in difference. We are crossing that important internal boundary that is the line between the person we have been but no longer are and the person we will become’ (p. 62). Transitional spaces ‘facilitate experiment, openness and confrontation with others, production of meaning and understanding of the Self and the world’ allowing graduates of business schools to work

through the experiences they have already had in the work, life, play and learning to reconstruct and define reality and their identity as leaders as and when it happens (Dubouloy, 2004, pp. 469-470). The embedding of transitional spaces in leadership education programs embodies curriculum with a deep sense of humanity, of sociality and of lifewide learning, where learning is a transformation that has no end. It affords learners an opportunity to develop and translate frameworks for making a difference to a civil society throughout their lives. Leveraging transitional spaces in the design of leadership education curriculum requires changes to the way power and authority are enacted, and a radical rethinking of the relationships of disciplinary skills and knowledge to the transdisciplinary, transitional heuristic (Kets De Vries & Kovalov, 2012).

Acting as counter-pressures to the experiences afforded by learning in transitional spaces are the government policy and institutional ecosystems of governance, certification, and accreditation. The kinetic force of these ecosystems has fractured and reoriented the agency business schools have over the design and teaching of their curriculum. Measures of activity and success in business education have pivoted towards outcomes-based metrics such as graduate employability and research assessment exercises to measure performance and success (Martin-Sardesai & Guthrie, 2021; Wilson et al., 2017) and the attainment of high rankings on comparative institutional indices (Maričić et al., 2016). Students are faced with curriculum and learning outcomes that privilege the immediacy of employment outcome (with its assumptions of career certainty and single-minded purpose) over longer term altruistic ambitions such as lifelong learning and the creation and proliferation of social good (Clarke, 2018). Field (2012) argues that the changes in government policy globally have moved higher education away from its goals of individual development and sustainable

societal benefit towards being a means for asserting a countries economic, innovation and growth *bona fides*.

Governments and policy makers have also advocated and in some cases mandated business schools to engage directly with industry and produce graduates that address their immediate recruitment needs (Parker et al., 2021). Shifts in the funding of higher education teaching and learning, with their emphasis on student fee income and the rapid increase in market competition for students across the sector globally, have created transactional spaces that define the relationship between business students and the institution, applying the modalities of the market to the design of a business education (Nixon et al., 2018). The skills they are acquiring are not always seen through the lens of the job they will do after they complete university, but through the lens of transactional performance (in the form of grades, recognition, value for money or certification) as a way of demonstrating and developing the capital that helps them acquire their desired graduate job (Singh & Fan, 2021). The marketisation of business education has impacted on the design of curriculum incorporating the need to ‘entertain’ students and achieve better performance against nationalised student satisfaction metrics (Vos & Page, 2020). The engendering of neo-liberalism and corporate cultures in universities has imbued leadership education programs with a positivist privileging of the status quo (Mirabella et al., 2022). Marketisation has corrupted the efficacy of business education programs as a transitional space creating, as Scott (2022, p. 15) argues a ‘new symbiosis’ that catalyses ‘transgressive State-market spaces’ producing rather than educating graduates as a means to an (employable) end.

The lived and educative experiences that students use to construct their identities. motivations and skills as leaders are complex, personal and not as nomothetic as policy-makers and

graduate recruiters might infer (Bond & O’Byrne, 2013). Leadership learning evolves through trying to find pragmatic ways of being, belonging and becoming part of a community (Meehan & Howells, 2018) from the earliest experiences of transition through to the exposure of graduation and challenges of becoming and remaining employable. If we view employability through the frame of a graduate career as a lifelong journey and not just the immediacy of being work-ready, the explicit skills and knowledge within curricula and how they integrate at a program learning outcome level do not adequately explain the portfolio of capabilities developed by the student through their leadership education journey. This tension between the present and the *yet to be experienced* future creates a dissonance of expectation about the current and future relevance and resonance of the content and activity in a leadership education program (the resonance dissonance). There is a disconnect between the expectations of employers regarding graduate leadership competence, the student perceptions of their employability and how their capabilities evolve and transform over time as they gain more lived experience.

A second dissonance that arises from a curricular focus on assessable disciplinary skill rather than on the less defined and transdisciplinary or transversal graduate qualities such as leadership, self-efficacy, vision, and resilience in the face of crisis (Audibert et al., 2020; Azevedo et al., 2012; Multan & Sobotka, 2022). This transdisciplinary dissonance privileges the logic of the management of skills and job roles “while simultaneously forfeiting those broader values both central to a democracy and capable of limiting the excesses of corporate power” (Giroux, 2011, p. 113). These dissonances leave the designers of leadership education programs with a particularly pernicious challenge, threading the needle of transactional and transitional spaces to develop future leaders that can lead organisations, people, and themselves through the maze of intersecting global crises, both predicting their yet to be

experienced impacts as leaders, as well as navigating their current ones as they transition into employability, lifelong learning and citizenship, creating their capability to lead social change.

### **Transitional spaces and leadership education**

Returning to the theoretical frame of transitional spaces, the design tensions that emerge between the efficacy of transitional space and the efficiency of transactional spaces are not a new problem. They exist because the constraints of the traditional levers of transitional pedagogy (curriculum, teaching, content, and assessment) are closely aligned and deeply influenced (often in negative ways) by the institutional (or transactional) constraints of higher education (budgets, timetabling, quality assurance, scale). Malcom Knowles (1970) in his seminal text on adult learning *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* observed the developmental and ethical difficulties that these internecine tensions create for curriculum designers, noting:

*Not infrequently the needs and interests of individuals come into conflict with the needs and interests of their institutions, as when a member develops an independence of thought that contradicts the established doctrine of the institution. In such cases the adult educator may have to make a choice as to which mission to serve: helping individuals to grow or helping the institution to survive. (p. 34)*

Knowles argues that curriculum designers can navigate these kinds of tensions by focusing on the experiences of the learner in and through learning. As learners grow through their journey their experience becomes a ‘increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning for themselves and for others’ (p. 44). The design challenge as



Knowles sees it is to provide active as opposed to passive opportunities for students to attach meaning to learning through experience. He describes the creation of learning experiences as the art, the design, and the creativity of teaching. Learning experiences fit into teaching and learning process as connective tissue and sinew, weaving the gaps between knowledge, skills and lived experiences, integrating problem solving, scenario building, applications, and schemas through the thematic links within and between disciplines.

Effective and lasting leadership education is predicated on learning experiences that draw in the lived experiences of students, and integrates their acquired and current knowledge and skills to emerging experiential contexts, both being and yet to be experienced (Knowles et al., 2014). The creation of pathways from experiences already gained by students in leadership, either explicitly or tacitly through following leaders of heroes of their own, into opportunities for experiential learning about leadership during their degrees represents a significant design opportunity (Chung & Personette, 2019). Theoretical and abstract learning is not enough to develop the capabilities of leadership, especially with students in transition. It needs to have experiential learning opportunities deeply embedded in the fabric of the learning experience (Buchanan, 2017; Wildermuth et al., 2015). Even with these experiential opportunities in place, graduates are not ‘oven-ready’ as their capacities to be leaders for good extend throughout their career, in future and unknown contexts, with the experiences of their learning offering a spark or a catalyst for their capabilities (Andreu et al., 2020). Ellsworth (2005) notes that ‘transitional space opens up the space and time between an experience and our habitual response to it. It gives us time and space to come up with some other way of being in relation to that moment’ (p. 64). Transitional spaces in leadership education programs effect deeper transdisciplinary connections within the cohort, that whilst potentially fragile and transitory, can generate lasting influence through the creation of emotive, expressive, and

personal learning experiences that span far beyond the engagement with disciplinary knowledge.

### **Introducing Leading in a Post-crisis World**

The University of Sydney Business School (USBS) is a faculty of the University of Sydney, Australia, a research-intensive institution that delivers programs for over 75,000 domestic and international students. USBS enrolls 15,000 students, primarily in pre-experience undergraduate and postgraduate commerce programs. In mid-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created several parallel crises for USBS with over 70% of the cohort unable to return to Australia because of border restrictions, the closing of the campus for extended periods due to lockdown and the lasting impacts of social isolation on student retention and attainment. The transitional experiences of students were fractured, stripping their education of the assumed safety afforded by being part of a community of business students learning collectively on-campus and in traditional classroom settings. The impacts of the pandemic broke down many of the social structures underpinning business education, with the university experience becoming rent with uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness. Transitional spaces became liminal ones, with students thrust into a learning journey shared only in their isolation, asynchronous interaction, and a deep fear that this way of learning might become the new normal. The immediate impact of this liminality was a significant increase (around 35%) in students suspending their studies in Semester 1 2020, which risked both their progression and the financial viability of the university. A strategic approach to recreating the sense of belonging that could help mitigate the effects of social isolation, fear and uncertainty and enhance the connectedness of the cohort and the effectiveness of their learning, especially through the unknowns of a global pandemic (Johnson, 2022) was deemed critical by the university leadership to ameliorate the risks for the student and the university.

USBS designed a program of leadership education called *Leading in a Post-Crisis World* (LPC) which through a purposeful curricular experience developed a stronger sense of a connected cohort amongst a student population locked down and studying remotely around the world. The aim of the program was to make manifest the University of Sydney mantra of 'Leadership for Good' by engaging a large cohort of students in an interconnected series of extra and intra-curricular experiences. These experiences were deeply rooted in the critical skills required to support students to reflect on the impacts that the pandemic was having on them personally, their communities and their ambitions post-study. LPC made students part of a dynamic and aspirational movement for personal and global change, empowering them to find solutions for the most wicked challenges created by crisis. The program supported students to apply transdisciplinary knowledge to understand the liminality of crisis and to navigate and lead others through the rites of passage crisis triggers. LPC was comprised of two primary pedagogical interventions built on different perspectives and transdisciplinary capabilities critical to being a leader through and past crisis. Each intervention was designed to encourage students to explore, discover, play, take risks, feel a little unsafe and uncertain and through their learning experiences in transitional spaces, enabling the opportunity to explore their fluidity of their identity as a leader for good. The experiences gained from being part of the program became the narrative thread that helped the students weave their story as they graduated into an uncertain world.

The first intervention was the **curricular program**, a series of for-credit units of study, delivered in the major pre-experience undergraduate and postgraduate programs of the Business School. The units were built on the perspectives, stories, and experiences of over 100 industry, academic and community voices in lieu of the traditional lecture delivered in

over 300 chunks of short video, podcasts, and narrations across the duration of the unit. These perspectives were purposefully unstructured in each week encouraging students to find their own pathways through the stories. Students then integrated what they discovered with their own unique portfolio of knowledge, skills and experience in collaborative workshops focused on global and local crisis such as the pandemic, inequality, domestic violence against women and digital poverty. The intersection of the lived experiences of others applied to situations that simulated to varying degrees the experience and stresses of being leader planted rhizomatic seeds that spawned insights and new shoots of co-created knowledge at later points in the units or through the assessment tasks generated by the students and the community themselves.

The units were completed with a series of authentic assessment events that encouraged students to reflect on the leadership legacy they wanted to have at the end of their career, and how they could develop and share the skills they would need to achieve that legacy. It was through assessment tasks centred on collectively developing solutions to critical global and local challenges that the rhizomatic learning truly emerged, as it was the social and collaborative conversations of the community of learners built on the perspectives of the ‘experts’ that co-created learning (Cormier, 2008). The thematic ambition of these units was to create a safe transitional space to explore complex crises that were impacting on students, and experiment with solutions, without resorting to hypotheticals or abstract cases of the past.

The second intervention was the **co-curricular program**. This non-credit bearing component of LPC was comprised of a series of innovative workshops, podcasts and networking opportunities that offer micro-opportunities to develop the skills of a leader for good in the context of crisis that stacked together to be credentialed through a digital badge. Students

could attend seminars debating cutting-edge research on leadership and crisis from USBS academics, interact with leaders and practitioners from industry in showcase sessions, co-create podcasts and participate in crowdsourcing projects encouraging students to develop solutions to critical global challenges from disciplinary perspectives other than their own. There were also several interactive workshops spun out of the curricular program on the transdisciplinary skills of pitching and developing your own leadership legacy.

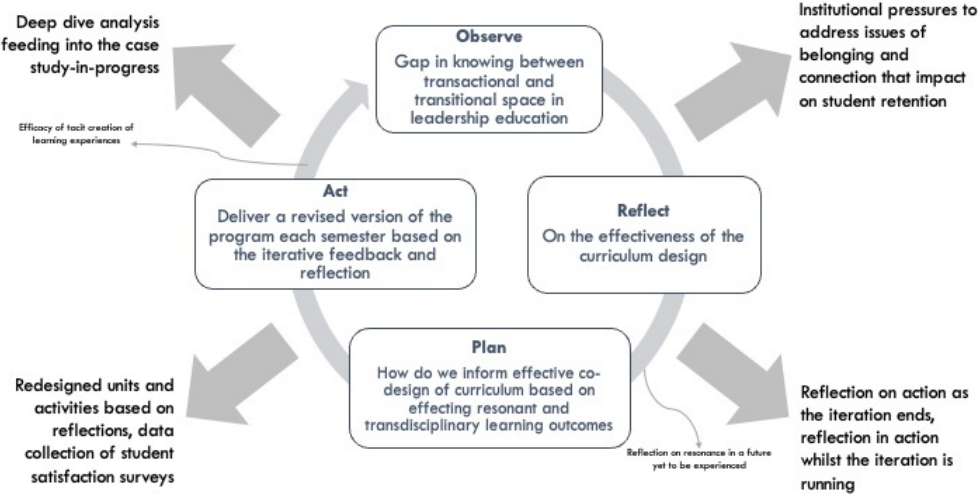
Building on the success of the initial program in 2020 (called *Leading in a Post-COVID World*, over 3400 students enrolled during the three months the program ran, contributing significantly to the reduction of the suspension rate by over 90%), the University funded the roll-out of a more ambitious, longer-term program that provided more opportunities to develop students as leaders for good, across their whole degree. Renaming the program *Leading in a Post-Crisis World* in 2021 represented the expansion the ambition past the immediate consequences of the pandemic and into the challenges of a lifetime that will be filled by successive and unknown crises. In 2023, LPC has four units of study, running twice a year, a program of 25 intra-curricular and extra-curricular events annually and 2000 students participating in or completing the program annually.

## **Methodology**

This study is based on a participatory action research (PAR) project that has informed the iterative development of the LPC program over the last three years. PAR was the most appropriate methodology to evaluate and design the program as LPC was designed as an educational intervention in the field addressing a specific pedagogical problem (Kemmis, 2006; McTaggart, 1991), being the challenges of designing a leadership education curriculum

that navigated the tensions between transactional and transitional space and created opportunities for a large cohort of students to develop their skills as leaders for good.

Each iteration of the LPC program (there have been five since mid-2020) added to a critically reflective case study-in-progress sharing the reflections-on-action inside and outside the institution (Altrichter et al., 2002). Consideration was given to the political ramifications and complications of the program design recognising that actions had potential political, financial or reputational implications for students and the institution (Costley et al., 2010). The PAR project collected primary observational data from student satisfaction surveys, focus groups and co-design workshops along with critical reflections by the program team to inform the planning and designing of the program and the critical evaluation of its effectiveness. *Figure 1* shows the stages of the PAR approach used in the design and evaluation of the LPC program drawing on the situated practice of the participants deeply embedded in the design and delivery (Kemmis et al., 2014).



*Figure 1: Participatory action research cycle*

## **Designing for leadership learning in transitional spaces: Leading in a Post-crisis World**

LPC enabled transdisciplinary capabilities that offered students a better preparation for the ambiguity and precariousness of leadership. These capabilities were inherently transitional existing at the intersections of the student's current identity and what they hoped they would become. The first capability was the application of learning from the current and past crises to help understand and manage future unknown ones. The second was the capability to reflect on their past experiences and develop strategies to lead through a future crisis. The third was the capability to integrate learning from the units of study they have undertaken (and were currently undertaking) to build the capability to lead others through a future crisis.

The enculturation of transitional spaces into the curricular and co-curricular experience enabled students to model, play and experiment with behaviours of leadership without fear of reprisal or perfection, and through controlled and contained engagement with the emotional and discomfiting aspects of business, find ways of designing strategies and co-creating knowledge to apply to future crises and challenges (Irimiás et al., 2022; Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015). Designing curriculum and delivery strategies that catalysed the program as a transitional space 'support(ed) meaningful learning experiences, and in which they can take risks and learn to trust their own abilities' (Irimiás et al., 2022, p. 3). In this next section, we will look at three examples that emerged from the PAR of how the learning experiences created in the LPC program enabled the three capabilities supporting students to develop their transdisciplinary and potentially resonant skills as leaders for good within a purposefully designed transitional space.

### *Example 1 – Discovery and discontinuity*

LPC utilised discovery and discontinuity as learning experiences in both the curricular and intra-curricular programs to construct the intrinsic core principles of leadership for good. Discovery and discontinuity are powerful learning experiences that create a sense of curiosity, expose complex linkages and enable independent thinking and collective intelligence by learning through not knowing the answer (or the question) (Mackh, 2018). The experiences of discovery and discontinuity enable the student to enter the challenge or problem in the middle, or at the solution phase and work through it in reverse, identifying and challenging their assumptions. Discovery and discontinuity are critical for the enablement of transitional space, as they catalyse opportunities for students to build confidence in their decision making by simulating the risks and uncertainties of making decisions in the tumult of crisis. For example, in the curricular element of LPC, the chunked videos that replaced the lecture were branched, allowing students to engage with the immersive experiences of peers and experts in any order they choose, to contribute their own experiences and observations through asynchronous interactivity and find and discover their own discontinuous narrative through the content. This was a polarising experience for many students in the program:

*The content being self-paced and delivered in short videos was good because it kept me more engaged than I otherwise would have been if it were in hour-long lecture type videos.*

*Rather than having modules on the left-hand side of the screen that can be accessed from anywhere, transcripts of the numerous videos for those who don't have good internet and coherent lecture slides that summarise the weeks content we were led on a goose chase each week to try and piece together some semblance of learnings.*



For those students who experienced this sense of discovery positively, it was both playful in that it has much of the user experience of choose your own adventure play, but also facilitated the production of meaning in the context of leadership through crisis. They could just start at the beginning or they could follow a discontinuous pathway dipping in and out of the perspectives offered by the unit. Students actively discovered transdisciplinary experiences and perspectives of leadership during crisis that resonated with their own experiences and ambitions, guiding how they transitioned through the unit in personalised and often discontinuous ways, with one student noting *'The video from fabulous leaders gives me huge inspiration in my whole life. I am student and (have) never work before, so it is difficult for me to get to know leaders and their experiences'*.

They shared their discoveries with others through the asynchronous and synchronous interactivity in the unit, and as each complex scenario in the workshops played out, the relevance of the discovered stories and the collective messages of leadership for good informed how they designed solutions to the challenges. The discontinuous approach they took to navigation was unique to each student and when they began to work together, there was no single narrative, but a hybrid of different experiences and interpretations all seen through the filter of their unique lived experience, knowledge, and attitudes. It was in this sense of uncertainty and discomfort that students wanted a more transitional, linear, and predetermined approach to content engagement, with another student observing *'I didn't enjoy all the videos each week. But I don't think this can easily be improved given the nature of the subject. I often prefer watching a 2hr lecture in one block, but this subject had lots of little videos.'*

*Example 2: Storytelling*

Storytelling as a learning experience provided students with a sense of agency over what they shared and how they represented their experiences as future leaders for good, in similar ways to how they use social media for identity making in their work, life and play (Timmis & Muñoz-Chereau, 2022). Each contribution from industry and community leaders represented an authentic experience of leadership in crisis, often highly personal, raw, and emotional but equally illustrative of the complexities of leadership for good. Students told their own stories of their ambitions for a better world post-crisis through interactive workshops, online discussion, and assessment.

Storytelling facilitated learning about leadership through and in transitional spaces in several ways, including the capacity for reflexivity (Majgaard, 2016) and the capability for students to use stories as wayfinding through complexity and liminality. Both liminality and reflexivity are states defined in part by the notion of unsettlement, where through transition learners question the social structures that they are transitioning from and to (ethical and moral structures are good examples of unsettlement in the context of leadership) (Cunliffe, 2009; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). In the Heideggerian sense, unsettlement is not a negative state for learners, but emerges from their feelings of being ‘unhomely’ with their own being or identity. It is this angst at the ontological state of not knowing that can be educative within their learning experiences and thereby positive (Withy, 2015). The ideographic challenge in LPC was to identify methodologies that could embed the reflexive, uncertain, and uncanny experiences of student learning and belonging into how students had agency over how their identity and experiences were recognised and represented in authentic and co-designed ways. As one student observed *‘This unit of study really gives me a chance to think of what the leadership style as a person I want to be in the future, and what characteristics leaders should have in current complex world.’*

One example of this in LPC was an assessment task that asked students to describe their leadership legacy, which represented the story they would want told at the end of their careers about what they have left behind as leaders. It is a reflexive projection into an unknown future and a way of thinking concretely about something that is yet to be experienced. Storytelling was a key aspect of play in transitional spaces, that created opportunities for students to experiment with identity and representation and to overcome the unsettlements of change by allowing them to find commonalities with people and through that discover their sense of self (or their pathway to changing their current self) (Korotov, 2016).

*The video from fabulous leaders gives me huge inspiration in my whole life. I am student and never work before, so it is difficult for me to get to know leaders and their experiences. This is the most impressive point for me.*

### *Example 3: Transdisciplinarity*

Transdisciplinarity as a learning experience was the critical epistemological hook for the LPC program. A transdisciplinary learning experience enabled students to develop understanding about leadership and crisis, allowing them through action to connect knowledge and being, in the safety of a transitional space (Mustea et al., 2011). The transdisciplinary nature of the program supported students to evaluate their understanding of the ‘present world’ and privileged the unity of knowledge to address critical global, local, and personal challenges. The aggregation of academic voices from across the university to inform, theorise and extemporise their views on crisis exposed students to the complexity and the interconnectedness of the skills of being a leader for good. The workshops undertaken in the

program embedded this interdisciplinarity by asking students to address challenges of a scope outside their expertise and difficulty they may have not experienced in their nascent careers.

Transdisciplinary learning experiences presented a liminal perspective on crisis and how students inhabited and interpreted the changing social structures that crisis creates (Kligyte et al., 2022). Every time students connected with each other the mix of skills and knowledge they brought to bear on the critical global and local challenges and crises were unique and fleeting. Instead of having thousands of students reproducing the same solutions to a common crisis as a case study or exam might, the students in LPC produced thousands of different solutions to challenges that mattered to them as individuals and groups. Transitional spaces de-risked this diversity for students as assessment was not facilitated by the right destination, rather by the processes, lived experiences and connections used to get there.

Returning to the resonance and transdisciplinary dissonances, the enabling of learning experiences within both the curricular and co-curricular programs was not a silver bullet creating for students a truly transdisciplinary and resonant leadership education program. The students experiences in the program, through both focus groups and satisfaction survey data, informed the iterative design with the PAR methodology being used to interpret and translate those insights through a curriculum co-design approach, which embedded student voice and action in the development and enhancement of LPC. There were deeply polarised views amongst students on the structure and the learning experiences in LPC. At one end of the spectrum, some of the students felt a deep sense of disconnection between the teaching and learning activities and the broader intention of the program as they interpreted it. They were unable to thread the needle between their perceptual interpretation of the dominant transactional frames of their degree program and the relatively discursive freedoms afforded

to them in the transitional spaces of LPC. Some students found the discontinuity and discovery experiences disconcerting and bordering on time-wasting, seeking less content and more scaffolding of the required knowledge and skills. Especially with students in the earliest stages of their degree, the autonomy, agency, and freedom afforded by learning in transitional spaces induced immediate and passionate recourses to the norms of transactional space learning, such as the links of action to performance in the unit, the cost/benefit analysis of time taken to do the unit and the direct relationship of learning to the current perceptual frame of their degree, with one student commenting:

*Overall, the content of the unit was not clear. Rather than having transcripts of the numerous videos...and coherent lecture slides that summarise the weeks content we were led on a goose chase each week to try and piece together some semblance of learnings. This unit could be improved by creating a cohesive structure.*

The notion of transdisciplinarity was confusing, in part because each disciplinary perspective being presented in the program was seen by many students as separate rather than connected. They wanted more takeaway or interview-ready skills to build on their current capabilities as a leader. The linkages and connections that should have been enabled by the learning experiences lacked context as the *yet to be experienced* crises were either blurred by the currency of the pandemic or were so indeterminate to be almost fictional, imbuing them with the same sense of disconnection that a case study might possess.

*I did not understand the implication of this unit. As most of us know about leadership skill, the majority have the ability to transfer it into current context (COVID world). The concept is too generalised that I did not learn new things in this unit. Given the*

*context of the unit focus around COVID-19, the concept taught in the unit were not relating to how to use that skill or concept when it comes to crisis.*

For other students, the structure of the program aligned directly to skills they felt they would need throughout their career, or by engaging in collaborative activities on the nature of crisis and developing their capacities to be leaders for good they could reflect better on what they did and did not know or understand about leadership.

*Engaging in my leadership capabilities, a skill which will be hugely valuable in my career (and) which I have not really been exposed too at university outside of this unit. It allowed me to have a more nuanced understanding about crisis, and the ways which they can be managed and prevented in the future.*

The transdisciplinarity for these students was critical as they were not often exposed to disciplines outside of their own. They discovered the importance of leadership for good through LPC and how to apply it (through teaching and learning activities) to their context and lived experiences, with one student noting:

*The structure of the unit has been helpful since it allows you to go at your own time while also holding you accountable through assignments and workshops...This was a good experience outside of my area of study which helped me understand the importance of leadership development.*

With many undergraduate students undertaking the program from disciplines other than business, leadership was described by some students as something that business students *do*,

which lacked relevance for those studying other degree programs. Leadership was often aligned with capitalist ideology, finance thinking or managerialism, with the social responsibility and sustainability visible when explicit (the inequities in COVID-19 vaccine distribution, for example) but then diffused by the nature of the players in the scenario (that the inequity was caused by ‘big pharma’ and the unit content vindicated their role). There were clear advantages gained by students debating challenging and controversial topics, with broad cohorts of students from different disciplinary backgrounds using the program as a transitional to form and test out skills, attitudes, and perspectives in a safe way (*The way the unit embraces collaborative peer learning is very effective and encourages students to challenge and build on the insights of others*). In these large cohorts and with a pedagogical model reliant on collaboration these advantages were challenged by students who took the program as a transactional experience, looking for the signposted tropes of passing and criticising activities that impeded their progression towards completion.

*I had to do all the work in my group because none of my group members spoke or wrote English properly. This placed incredible strain on me during an intense exam period - the unit was useless and so vague. Nothing to do with my degree. So, so wishy washy. I honestly have nothing good to say about this unit. I will never be doing a business unit...throughout the course of my degree.*

### **Liminality, leadership, and assessment: Leading in a Post-crisis World**

The tensions between how students experienced transactional and transitional space and the potentialities that arise from transdisciplinarity in a leadership education program were clearly evidenced through the five iterations of LPC. The learning experiences within the program existed within the frames of the lived experience of students, which both helped them engage

in the design intentions of the program as well as close some of them off to the possibilities. It also shaped the dissonances they experienced with the different pedagogies and activities within the program. The PAR evaluation exposed the uncertainty experienced by students in transition or liminality, which could be deeply unsettling for some, as they searched for hooks to illuminate the pathways to a newer, safer set of social structures, or were made aware of the complexity of the societies they lived in and were going to have to help change as leaders. Others did not recognise or accept the transitional space they were residing in or that their extant leadership capabilities were not fully formed and job ready. LPC represented a credentialing barrier to the completion of requirements to enter the workforce or told them nothing they believed they did not already know or understand about leadership.

One specific learning experience (an assessment task) best represents how LPC has spanned the complexity of the cohort's engagement with transitional space and the pervasive impact of transactional action. The Business Not as Usual Forum (BNAU Forum) has been a consistent component of LPC since the first iteration. Small groups of students prepared and delivered a pitch as leaders for good identifying a series of commercial, economic, community, financial, and personal actions they would take to address a critical global, local, and personal challenge that was meaningful to them as a group. These pitches were presented as a cohort to a forum of academic and industry judges who interrogated and critiqued the opportunities and threats inherent in their strategic approach to addressing their selected critical challenge. Peer feedback was also sought through online polling and discussion forums, which then fed into the selection of the most successful pitches which went into a 'grand final' where senior industry leaders assessed them for innovation, feasibility, and ambition. Student groups have designed action plans for global and local challenges such as coercive control, childhood obesity, sustainability, food insecurity, waste implications of the pandemic, global violence



against women, bushfires in Australia, climate change and data poverty amongst dozens of others.

The involvement of senior industry leaders and alumni provided valuable feed-forward to students, offering different transdisciplinary perspectives on the actions they were proposing. It created a realistic simulated environment that used consequence as a method of triggering experiential learning in transitional spaces. But more importantly, the engagement with academic and industry leaders offered a glimpse for students at a future based on the things they were doing, learning, and enacting in the program. These experts had navigated crisis and through the sharing of their own experiences, reflections, regrets, and successes challenged those students who coped with uncertainty by denying its existence and offered an exemplar to those who were struggling to see the light at the end of the liminal tunnel. Over the duration of the program the affordances of engaging students with different perspectives, experiences, and contexts different to their own was considerably enhanced, especially in the BNAU Forum assessment task.

The addition of personal actions to the pitch was an attempt to trigger a specific learning experience that utilised the modality of action, where students had to start thinking about what they and their colleagues could do *now* to address these crises and challenges. In the 2022 iteration this was further developed by asking students to collectively enact their actions, as opposed to just proposing them. This imbued the pitch with a sense of action and immediacy that enabled the opportunity for authenticity, even for those undertaking the unit as a transaction. The other actions in the pitch were predicated on students being able to inhabit the role of the leader in a crisis, and not take a theoretical or consequenceless decision. The bringing forward of responsibility in the actions they were proposing was a type of

discontinuity which can be disconcerting for some students. Taking real personal action and presenting what you and your group *have* done facilitated a transitional space which offered a true integration of actions with and without consequence, whilst still being rooted in the safety of higher education:

*I enjoyed the BNAU forum, it was a bit daunting initially to have to conduct group work over zoom and I think it really challenged all of us to pick a topic and research it and run with it. We still got help if we needed but it felt good to be 'in charge' and to take the leadership role from you to us.*

As each group is made up of students with diverse mixes of experience, the expertise they applied to understanding and addressing their critical global or local challenge provided a unique collective perspective on the both the selection of the challenge and the ways in which they designed solutions and actions. The breadth of challenges addressed by students represented both the multi-disciplinary nature of the cohort and the wider concerns students had about the future (theirs and societies). Their approaches, strategies, and actions they take as they act as leaders represent a positive world view, that through their education and being leaders for good, they can make a difference to business, the community, and the planet.

### **Conclusion: Making spaces for resonant and transdisciplinary learning in leadership education**

LPC remains an active and still evolving leadership education program, with enrolments continuing to grow on the back of the university commitment to educating leaders for good. The nurturing and deep integration of the affordances and modalities of the transitional spaces in LPC were critical for the delivering the design intentions of the program. They were

critically, not universally appreciated by students in those snapshots of satisfaction that come from evaluative surveys, though it should be noted that this was self-selecting sample of around 30% of the cohort. From the reflections gleaned throughout the PAR, transitional spaces enabled safe opportunities for experimentation, play, simulation of reality and developing skills as a leader for good forged in a safe fire. It was the activities in the transitional space however, perhaps amplified by the pandemic, that blurred the uncertainty that they were feeling and skewed it towards an uncomfortable liminality in which transactional behaviours seemed safer and more familiar. The PAR evaluation identified that whilst learning in transactional spaces offered surety to uncertain students, they also made the integration and application of transdisciplinary knowledge and skills less efficacious to developing leaders for good. Learning in transactional spaces fractured the relationship between leadership as a skill and leadership as a force for social change and betterment. Learning in transactional spaces also cemented the experiences students were having in the immediacy of bounded timetable and the knowledge acquired and assessed in the very real present. Undertaking activities such as workshops, or assessments like the BNAU Forum were, for some students, a means to an end. Where students broached the learning experience in transitional spaces, they were able to immerse themselves in the imagination of crises yet to be experienced, and in doing so laid experiential breadcrumbs for their journey as a leader for good. It triggered the emotive learning engendered by play, discovery, self-reflection, and connection.

We posit the notion of *resonant learning* to describe the longitudinal epistemic influence for students of learning in transitional spaces. Resonant learning is in effect a counter-concept to the immediacy of the overt focus on the attainment of the first job. In part defined by Rosa's sociological critique of modernity (Rosa, 2019, 2022) where resonance is 'defined by

moments in which one dwells in, feels present with, an absorbing experience—whether it be social, aesthetic, religious, bodily, or environmental’ (Anderson, 2023, p. 2), resonant learning leverages those resonant experiences to represent the lifelong value of learning. Rosa (2018) argues that resonance is an essential aspect of how humans flourish and grow, and is closely linked to our ability to engage with the world and to develop meaningful relationships with others, noting:

*Resonance is a cognitive, affective and physical relationship to the world in which the subject, on the one hand, is touched...by a fragment of the world, and where, on the other hand, he or she ‘responds’ to the world by acting concretely on it, thus experiencing her or his own efficacy. (cited in Lausselet & Zosso, 2022, p. 275)*

Resonant learning is created through learning experiences and the emotions, attitudes and ambitions that are promulgated when students engage with the curriculum and the activities. The impact of the resonant experience lasts longer than the currency of the theory or examples of practice. Resonant learning is more about the ripples that emanate from a rock thrown into a pool of water, rather than the rock itself. Resonant learning experiences in transitional spaces may not surface into practice until five or ten years after the completion of the degree. One advantage of resonant learning is that the discoveries made during the process of learning enhance the generalisability of the insights that were gained, effecting the capability of students to apply skills to different unknown future circumstances (Hibbert, 2021).

DW Winnicott argues that transitional space for a child can be anchored to and defined by an object (like a toy or a teddy bear). That transitional object is not forgotten as the child grows

up and transitions into teenagerhood. Rather it is placed in a limbo state over time. It loses meaning because the experiences lived with that object are diffused but the memory of it is not. Winnicott notes that ‘the transitional object is not significant because it is a thing; its thingness is crucial only because it helps the child to sustain a growing and evolving inner reality and helps it to differentiate it from the not-self world’ (Winnicott, 2014, p. xix). The design of a leadership education program like LPC needs to incorporate both the transitional object and the ‘growing and evolving inner reality’ triggered by engagement and interaction with the object to overcome the dissonances of resonance and transdisciplinarity. This is because the skills and knowledge necessary to be a leader for good reside in the ‘not-self world’, a place where actions and decisions impact on others, directly and indirectly and require the capacity for leaders to adapt what they have learnt to an uncertain and yet to be experienced crisis. Resonant learning is not an easy outcome to trigger and sometimes requires powerful experiences emerging from liminality but in other cases can be constructed through building learning experiences in transitional spaces. There are opportunities to further explore these insights as LPC progresses and the longitudinal impacts and influences of resonant learning can be measured amongst graduates.

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