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Enabling leadership capacity for higher education scholarship in learning and teaching (SOTL) through action research

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ABSTRACT

Action research (AR) offers an ideological fit with the culture and the work of the academy - they share a culture of collegiality, evidence- and theory-based practice, and a focus on reflection and evaluation to inform change and innovation. An AR approach and methodology are also integral to the development of leadership capacity for learning and teaching. This paper focuses on a distributed leadership approach for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) enabled by, and researched through, AR. Discussion and findings are presented through the lens of 20 funded Australian AR projects that used distributed leadership to build capacity for SOTL. These projects have made contributions to SOTL that extend the boundaries of pedagogical AR to a new area of focus: that of a distributed leadership approach to SOTL. An AR meta review of the projects revealed a synergy between AR and distributed leadership. The review generated evidence-based good practice actions for AR that also enable a distributed leadership approach for SoTL. These good practice action statements, together with illustrative vignettes, are presented in this paper. The intention is that the statements can provide a simple guide to using an AR approach to facilitate distributed leadership for higher education SOTL.

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Distributed leadership; higher education; action research; SOTL; good practice

Introduction

The field of action research (AR) provides a strong conceptual, theoretical, and practice- and evidence-based foundation upon which to build pedagogical research. Theoretical development over several decades, from Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Zuber-Skerritt (1992) to Arnold and Norton (2018) provides the basis for application to Scholarship in Learning and Teaching (SOTL). However, there is concern that AR projects tend to be 'small-scale and exclude higher education contexts' (Walker and Loots 2018, 168). Indeed, the application of AR in higher education institutions, policymaking and implementation has been described as 'truly rare' (Greenwood 2014, 410). A recent review of the literature on the use of AR in higher education identified that the existing research is 'clustered' into two main areas of foci: 'pedagogical research as a field of study … [and] … teaching in the transmission and co-production of knowledge with students' (Gibbs et al. 2017, 4). The

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issue of good practice to enable leadership for SOTL in higher education through an AR approach has received less attention.

This paper focusses on a distributed leadership approach for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) enabled by, and researched through, AR. The discussion draws on, and synthesises, the empirical evidence from 20 AR projects undertaken in the Australian higher education context. Each of these projects used a distributed leadership approach, underpinned by AR, to build leadership capacity to enhance learning and teaching across the higher education sector. The projects engaged multi-disciplinary participants in first- and second-person AR into SOTL, with the authors conducting third-person AR on the use of distributed leadership for SOTL.

The experiences and outcomes of these projects have made contributions to SOTL that extend the areas of foci to a third focus – that of a distributed leadership approach to SOTL. Again, the authors conducted third-person AR to undertake a meta review of the projects. The review revealed a synergy between AR and a distributed leadership approach to SOTL. Given this, the six tenets of a distributed leadership approach were mapped against the four steps of AR commonly used in these projects. The review generated a series of evidence-based good practice actions for a distributed leadership approach to AR for SOTL in higher education. These good practice action statements, together with illustrative vignettes, are presented in this paper.

Background

Over a period of a decade the authors led 20 Australian pedagogical research projects on learning and teaching in higher education (Appendix A). The projects were successful in attracting one and a half million Australian dollars in funding. Three research areas were explored: Distributed Leadership, Reflection for Learning, and Quality Learning and Teaching with Sessional Staff. While the research areas were discrete, the projects within each research areas were iterative. The projects all aimed to enable leadership capacity for SOTL through AR. Each project was successful in achieving action for change, especially in developing participants' leadership capacity and assisting them to lead further evidence-based learning and teaching enhancement initiatives (full details available in the project reports). A common and uniting factor across all projects was that they (successfully) used AR while at the same time adopting a distributed leadership approach.

Several limitations of current AR projects identified in the literature (Gibbs et al. 2017; Walker and Loots 2018) were addressed. The projects deliberately moved beyond a focus on 'ethical considerations', personal practice, and the concept of 'insider-researchers' (Gibbs et al. 2017, 9) to a focus on practices at the team, department, faculty, institutional, and sector level, whilst always ensuring due ethical process. Foci moved from the personal to organisational- and sector level policy, strategy, standards, and frameworks. Examples include the development of a new university assessment policy (Fraser and Harvey 2008), a whole-of-university approach to improving student feedback (Barber, Jones, and Novak 2009), and new national standards for sessional teaching (Harvey 2013a).

While respecting and drawing heavily on reflective processes, pivotal to each of the projects was 'detailed critical evaluation of the intervention/innovation and methodology' (Gibbs et al. 2017, 9) made possible by the 'reflect and evaluate' phase of the AR cycle. As

these were all funded projects, there was a requirement by the funding bodies to include a formal critical evaluation process. This requirement extended to including an 'external' evaluator to assume this formal role.

In addition, all projects adopted a mixed methods approach to widen the 'impact and scrutiny' (Gibbs et al. 2017, 9) of the research outcomes. These methods included, but were not limited to: appreciative inquiry, national quantitative surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, scaffolded reflection sessions and reflective journaling, communities of practice, experiential workshops, and summits.

While much AR may be undertaken with a single cohort and/or as small-scale projects (Walker and Loots 2018), most of these projects included a minimum of four core universities, and all projects were multi-disciplinary and multi-level. The projects were large rather than small-scale, with each relying on the involvement and active participation of people across their institution, across multiple institutions, and nationally. For example, one phase of the sessional staff project alone engaged 227 people and 30 national and international universities in workshops (Harvey 2017). Ultimately, the projects engaged all Australian universities and disseminated and workshopped research outcomes to over 20 international universities.

Challenges and conflicts

As leaders of 20 AR projects, we were presented with challenges, barriers, and obstructions. A discussion of these is informed by key challenges of pedagogical research identified by Norton (2014) and applied to AR for SOTL.

Firstly, the terms of AR (Norton 2014, 6) and SOTL are poorly understood. Across the projects we did not encounter participants who were aware of, knowledgeable about, or experienced in the concepts of AR and SOTL. We, therefore, had to encourage and scaffold our AR communities in appropriate developmental stages of professional learning opportunities, but only after they had self-identified a need to address their knowledge gap in AR and SOTL. This was particularly important given the distributed leadership approach being implemented, which requires the active engagement of all participants. As participants identified their needs, we offered tailored sessions to address them.

In universities it is argued that the 'Fordist model of higher education works against AR' (Greenwood 2014, 408); that is, many university workload models reward individual achievement, such as research publications, rather than collaborative outcomes. Participants were consistently facing the conflicting demand to use workload hours to produce discipline research instead of SOTL. This aligns with Norton's challenge of SOTL being perceived as 'less privileged than subject research' (2014, 6). The faculties' traditional support for discipline-focussed research heightened participants' reluctance to engage in AR projects. Before the start of any project we ensured that we met with faculty leaders to gain their overt support for SOTL. This support was documented in project notes.

Appreciation of the methods associated with AR was another challenge, as there were perceptions by the wider faculty that AR is viewed as 'amateurish' (Norton 2014, 9). In addition, as the projects engaged cohorts of participants from diverse disciplines, some of the participants themselves objected that AR was not 'scientific' (Norton 2014, 8). To overcome such objections, we actively involved all participants in the ongoing methodological design of projects and built environments of trust where there could be open, but

respectful, debate about the research process. It was important to ensure that methods were robust and reliable.

The projects moved the research beyond disciplinary silos and engaged multi-level and multidisciplinary teams of participants, who were themselves the AR practitioners. While many sub-project activities were indeed discipline-based, this was always located within an ecology of a broad multidisciplinary team, ensuring that diverse perspectives were available to critique and provide constructive feedback. Participants valued the multi-disciplinary networks; for example:

> For me I think the most positive experience has been sharing the experience of other departments and faculties, which is unusual, because usually we are so caught up with our own (participant TD).

> Well, the meetings are always a positive experience. It is always interesting to get in touch with others in other departments … I think the interaction is working quite well. Everybody is bringing something. Every time we have a meeting I think there are new ideas … good input from everybody, to do something that is quite nice and working …. Yeah, so definitely positive (Participant DE).

Research funding bodies require an external evaluator for projects as part of an accountability process to ensure that the projects are implemented according to the processes and intended outcomes identified in the funding applications. The notion of an 'external' evaluator can be viewed as an anathema to the very concept of AR, as evaluation is already embedded the AR cycle, and it may appear to compromise the ethical and social underpinnings of all participants' roles. However, this dilemma was addressed by lengthy and open discussion (even debate) through formal sessions with all participants to discern a point of intersection, where the value of participatory formative evaluation would not be jeopardised by the spectre of externalised summative evaluation by a neutral inspector. The consensus reached was a resolution that the external evaluator become a 'participant observer', even a critical friend, providing a meta-evaluation and an additional lens, or perspective, with which to examine the project. As the name implies, the evaluator as participant observer, therefore, becomes an active member of the project, a witness with empathy for the actions being enacted (Saldana 2015).

Why distributed leadership?

Designing pedagogy appropriate to a changing global work and educational environment is complex. Traditionally the focus has been on individuals who design and deliver a curriculum, working within policies and processes ratified by university leaders of learning and teaching. This hierarchy has resulted in a separation of decision making and implementation regarding teaching transmission, and encouraged pedagogy-based learning design and delivery. Adopting a distributed leadership approach moves these interactions towards more shared decision making. An outcome of this is that pedagogical decisions benefit from the strength of more people contributing a diverse range of ideas and perspectives.

Discourse upon more shared approaches to leadership is not confined to higher education. Rather, it is part of a spectrum of new approaches to leadership designed to address

complexity. This includes discussion on shared leadership (Pearce and Conger 2003), relational leadership (Fletcher and Kaufer 2003; Hunt and Dodge 2000), complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey 2007), and transpersonal leadership (Knights 2016).

It is claimed that distributed (or shared) leadership accords with the more engaged approach to leadership needed in higher education (Gentle 2014; Bolden et al. 2012). It is particularly appropriate for higher education given the collegiality that underpins the sector (Woods et al. 2004) and the array of levels and functions that structure higher education (Ramsden 1998). Furthermore, a distributed leadership approach is implied in Raelin's (2011) promotion of leadership-as-practice as practice in which leaders are 'more concerned about where, how and why leadership work is being organised and accomplished than about who is offering visions for others to do the work' (p. 196). Interestingly, Zuber-Skerritt's (2018) definition of AR also eschews 'the hierarchical structure usually associated with leadership and is based instead on democratic values of freedom, equality, inclusion and self-realization' (p. 516).

Despite recognition of the value of a distributed leadership approach, it is an elusive concept to define. From their UK research Bennett et al. (2003) concluded that 'there is little agreement as to the meaning of the term … distributed leadership is a way to think about leadership' (p. 2). To address this, based on Australian empirical research, Jones et al. (2012), chose to describe, rather than define, a distributed leadership approach as:

> a leadership approach in which individuals who trust and respect each other's contributions, collaborate together to achieve identified goals. It occurs as a result of an open culture within and across an institution. It is an approach in which reflective practice is an integral part enabling action to be critiqued, challenged and developed through cycles of planning, action, reflection and assessment and re-planning. It happens most effectively when people at all levels engage in action, accepting leadership in their particular area of expertise (p. 10).

Critique of a distributed leadership approach has included not only this lack of a concise definition, but also concerns about changing decision-making powers, and the need to develop a new set of relational skills (Jones 2014). Despite such critique, the evidence from the 20 AR projects indicates that adopting a distributed leadership approach results in positive outcomes for SOTL projects.

Why action research?

AR has been identified as an approach suitable for higher-education research (Zuber-Skerritt 2018), and specifically as a methodological approach for SOTL (Hubball and Clarke 2010, 4). Pedagogical research, and in particular SOTL, is 'distinctive in that it is shaped by multi-disciplinary contexts and focusses on practice-driven … inquiries with an explicit transformational agenda' (Hubball and Clarke 2010, 1). The aim of transformation closely aligns with the AR concepts of 'change' (McTaggart 1997) and of making 'improvements' (McNiff and Whitehead 2011).

AR is an approach that relies on collegiality and collaboration for success, thereby offering a good ideological fit with the culture of the academy (Gappa, Austin, and Trice 2007; Rytmeister 2009). As AR 'seeks the development of theoretically informed practice for all parties involved' (McTaggart 1997, 30), it aligns with academics' demands for evidence-based practice. Acknowledging the ever-changing landscape of higher

education, another benefit offered by AR is its inherent flexibility: as participants move through multiple steps of Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect, they are able with each cycle to adjust, adapt, and respond to the shifting demands of the academy.

Nine of the projects identified in the research for this paper specifically focussed on reflection for learning in higher education, and all the projects embedded reflective practice. The obvious relationship between reflection and AR is shown in the naming of the basic steps that make up AR: Plan, Act, Observe, and *Reflect*. Thus, reflection is integral to AR: it is part of its 'structured framework' (Hase 2014, 677). Both AR and reflection are 'part of a family of approaches to developing practice' (Arnold and Norton 2018, 13). An AR framework provides a 'link between action and theorizing, and reflection' (Hase 2014, 677) and for AR projects that are investigating the role of reflection for learning, this relationship presents an obvious – that is theoretically aligned – choice of approach and method.

Relationship between distributed leadership and AR

A distributed leadership approach focusses on the actions, rather than positions, of leadership. This is recognised in Marshall's (2006) claim that distributed leadership is about 'complex multifaceted process[es] that focus on the development of individuals as well as the organisational contexts in which they are called to operate' (p. 5). From their UK-based research Day, Gronn, and Salas (2004) claim that given the focus on actions, a distributed leadership approach encourages the emergence over time of different leaders as circumstances change. This characteristic of distributed leadership lends itself to AR.

Between 2006 and 2019 the authors led 20 empirical projects that adopted a distributed leadership approach (Appendix 1). These projects focussed on the issues of enhancing quality learning and teaching, reflection for learning, and standards for sessional staff. The first set of projects (to enhance quality learning and teaching through a distributed leadership approach) initially included four institution-based projects undertaken between 2006 and 2009 (Barber, Jones, and Novak 2009; Chesterton et al. 2008; Fraser and Harvey 2008; Lefoe and Parrish 2008). Between 2010 and 2013, three multi-institutional project were undertaken: to identify synergies between those initial four projects (Jones et al. 2012), to develop good practice benchmarks for a distributed leadership approach to learning and teaching (Jones et al. 2014), and to identify national examples of the use of a distributed leadership approach for improving learning and teaching (Jones et al. 2017). Concurrently, between 2010 and 2019, nine smaller institutionally funded projects integrated AR with distributed leadership and reflective practice. These projects resulted in a range of contributions to SOTL published as peer-reviewed journal articles (20), book chapters (5), books (2), and research reports (12).

Each cycle of the AR added a new understanding to that of the previous project cycles and outcomes. In relation to the successful implementation of distributed leadership, this included identification of the dimensions and values of a distributed leadership approach, together with the development of the necessary criteria. Cross correlation of these dimensions and criteria resulted in design of an Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT), with16 actions required to enable a distributed leadership approach (Jones et al. 2012). Underpinning this ASERT was a self and team reflection process (Jones and Harvey 2017). This was followed by a conceptual model of distributed leadership (Jones

et al. 2014) with associated good practice benchmarks. These resources have since been used to underpin a range of projects to enhance learning and teaching in higher education institutions in Australia (see, for example, Patrick et al. 2014; Beckmann 2017; Carbone et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2017; Sharma et al. 2017). Given this impact, the authors engaged in a meta review of the 20 projects, with the aim of further exploring the relationship between distributed leadership and AR.

Progressing through multiple AR cycles of many projects, working towards enhancing learning and teaching while addressing numerous challenges, the authors conducted a meta review as part of a third person AR process, engaging in ongoing experimentation of solutions. These solutions were tested, workshopped, documented, and reported. New learnings emerged about what constitutes good practice in leading AR for SOTL. This meta-review enabled a synthesis of the key learnings, which are now presented as good practice action statements.

Good practice action statements: achieving a distributed leadership approach to AR for SOTL

The meta-review of the projects adopted the method of AR through iterative cycles. The first cycle collated and reflected upon the identification of good practices from each of the 20 projects.

The second AR cycle focussed on a mapping exercise. The six tenets of a distributed leadership approach – Engage, Enable, Enact, Encourage, Evaluate and Emergent (Jones et al. 2014) – were mapped against four steps of AR. The aim of the mapping exercise was to extrapolate from the research what practices were identified as 'good' in achieving a distributed leadership approach for each of the steps of AR. While there are many models of the AR cycle, ranging from four to six steps (Arnold and Norton 2018), our projects adopted a four-step model of Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect (after the Spiral of Action Research, Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014, 18–19). Good practice was defined as a practice that 'has been proven to work well and produce good results … . It is a successful experience, which has been tested and validated, in the broad sense, which has been repeated and deserves to be shared so that a greater number of people can adopt it' (FAO 2014).

The mapping activity drew on data that had been tabled in a scoping document (Jones et al. 2012, 34–43), as the indicators of the enactment of AR in a learning and teaching project (Harvey 2013b, 124) and in all the project reports. Each tenet of distributed leadership is now first explained, followed by a good practice action statement, which is integral to the empirical data, for each of the four steps of AR (summarised as Table 1), and illustrated with a vignette that has been synthesised from authentic examples from the research projects. Vignettes 'capture significant moments of action of an extended portion of fieldwork into evocative prose renderings'. They can provide succinct insights into what has been identified through rich data analysis of the 'representative, typical or emblematic' (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014, 182) insights and key issues. Relying on the four steps of AR, while reductionist, was a deliberate strategy to achieve a simple focus on the operation of the good practices identified. This is presented with the caveat that no one step can be considered independent of the other steps of AR. All the research projects had human ethics approval, with all participants in the original research consenting to the use of their data.

Table 1. Good practice action statements: enabling distributed leadership for SOTL AR.

Tenets of distributed leadership	Steps of Action Research			
	PLAN to …	ACT to …	OBSERVE that …	REFLECT
ENGAGE	Recognise, acknowledge and work with hierarchical leaders as well as encourage 'experts' from all levels of the university	Ensure ongoing participation from all levels of the university	Active participation, rather than attendance, is evident for all project activities	That participants are supported to develop a sense of ownership in the project
ENABLE	Achieve active commitment from all levels of the institution	Initiate support to develop a culture of trust, respect and collegiality.	AR project participants are achieving change through collaboration	Through regular collaborative group reflection sessions
ENACT	Structure for multi-level engagement, allow for fluid boundaries and provide adequate time frames	Develop a systematic and robust methodology	Processes are co-designed, flexible and agile	Through individual and regular reflection sessions
ENCOURAGE	draw on existing SOTL theory and research	Design developmentally appropriate learning opportunities	Professional learning opportunities are offered and engaged in	On new insights and learnings from professional and action learning activities
EVALUATE	Build in evaluation from the start	Engage in ongoing formal and informal evaluation	Regular collection, recording, documentation and analysis of data is undertaken	On the evaluation data
EMERGENT	Ensure multiple cycles of AR	Maintain flexibility in response to changing contexts	Over time, participants acknowledge their development of leadership capacity	That leadership capacity has been developed as individuals are acknowledgement as leaders

Tenet 1: engage

A distributed leadership approach engages a diverse range of leaders (formal and informal) and experts from multiple functions, disciplines, groups, and levels across the institution who contribute to learning and teaching. The term 'expert' is used within a paradigm of a strengths-based approach.

Good practice action statements for engage

Plan: to recognise, acknowledge, and work with hierarchical leaders as well as encourage experts from all levels of the university.
Act: to ensure ongoing participation from all levels of the university.
Observe: that active participation, rather than attendance, is evident for all project activities.
Reflect: that participants are supported to develop a sense of ownership in the project.

Vignette – for engage

Aligned with distributed leadership, this research used a strengths-based approach that recognised that every person in the project had expertise that they could contribute (Harvey

2014). In addition to ensuring that formal, hierarchical leaders were invited to project activities and kept updated on progress and developments, everyone could engage as a leader at some point on the project. Participants would identify their strengths and contribute when their expertise best supported the project, and this contributed to their active participation and their growing sense of ownership. Leadership examples ranged from sourcing research literature and contributing to seminars to facilitating workshops and seminars across the university and with other organisations. Through this engagement, participants felt part of the project:

> My experience was that the … AR approach is conducive to fostering a sense of ownership of the project by all participants. Indeed, I think this approach serves to maximise the sense of ownership. (SC Interview 4).

Closely related to using a strengths-based approach, another project had facilitators teach team members how to use Appreciative Inquiry processes to formally document their 'positive' and 'life-giving' observations and their 'shared strengths' (Fry 2014, 44).

Tenet 2: enable

A distributed leadership approach is enabled through a context of trust and respect in which participants achieve change through collaborative relationships.

Good practice action statements for enable

Plan: to achieve active and collaborative commitment from all levels of the institution.
Act: to initiate support to develop a culture of trust, respect, and collegiality.
Observe: that AR project participants are achieving change through collaboration.
Reflect: through regular collaborative group reflection sessions.

Vignette for enable

In all projects, the most senior leader of learning and teaching (such as the Provost or Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic) publicly supported the project, often assuming the role of champion or mentor. For some projects, faculty leaders signed a memorandum of understanding as a demonstration and documentation of their support.

Project participants agreed to the scheduling of regular meetings to encourage collegiality. Early in the project a consensus was reached and documented on the scope of roles and responsibilities, clearly establishing boundaries and expectations. Such actions helped to create, establish, and maintain a safe culture. Meetings – and any other activities associated with the project – had an emphasis on providing all participants with a voice and with supported opportunities to work and reflect collaboratively:

> … the reflection as a group, definitely as more than one person, is very, very useful because that is what usually enhances each other's experience, and the sharing of experience, I think, only occurs in those sessions more than anywhere else. Because it's there that we come out and say, 'Hey, I have tried this, this works, do you want to try it?' So [it's] only when we verbalise it, and talk in others' presence, in a supported environment (Interview 10, TW).

In more than one project, participants chose to 'job-share' their role – a powerful example of collaboration.

Tenet 3: enact

A distributed leadership approach is enacted by designing integrated processes, support, and systems to encourage involvement by all participants.

Good practice action statements for enact

Plan: to design a structure of multi-level engagement and acknowledge that boundaries can be fluid to allow for different contextual needs and time frames.
Act: to ensure that the project is underpinned by a robust methodology that has been collegially designed and supported.
Observe: that processes are co-designed and enacted in an agile and flexible way.
Reflect: through individual and regular reflection sessions.

Vignette for enact

Enacting a successful AR project for SOTL is best achieved with good processes and support. At one university, the Heads of Departments/Schools demonstrated their support by providing work load time for project participants.

Processes need to be flexible, and this is most easily achieved through the cyclic steps of the AR cycle. One department has been working towards developing a new policy to support sessional staff. Following months of collaborative work, a formal leader stood up at a meeting and said there would never be a policy to dictate what academics had to do After observing and reflecting on this disruption, the team regrouped and reached a consensus that instead they would implement a new 'procedure' and everyone was in agreement.

Along with AR, reflective practice was a new concept and experience for many participants. One project leader initiated individual 'supported reflection sessions' (Fraser and Harvey 2008, 40) for participants. Sessions were scheduled each month and the project leader provided a few reflective prompts. The participant's responses were recorded, and they were given the transcript. The 'thinking aloud' process provided a scaffold for participants to examine their developing epistemologies:

> Very effective. Recorded sessions performed same function as keeping an individual journal, but they imposed an external discipline that ensured the task got done. Also helpful to have prompts … to draw out insights. (Participant QX).

Tenet 4: encourage

A distributed leadership approach is encouraged through a range of activities and adequate resources (including financial) to support continuous learning and collaboration. Activities included professional and active learning opportunities, communities of practice, mentoring, and recognition processes.

Good practice action statements for encourage

Plan: to identify relevant SOTL theory and research to ground AR projects.
Act: to design and deliver developmentally appropriate learning and development opportunities for all participants in response to their identified needs.
Observe: that professional and action learning opportunities are offered and that participants engage in them.
Reflect: on new insights and learnings from professional and action learning activities.

Vignette for encourage

Project participants located and engaged with the research literature in many ways; for example, in one project a set journal reading was discussed in meetings (in a book club style) as a means of supporting and encouraging new knowledge development on the issues in focus. As participants recognised and identified a need to learn more about their projects, 'developmentally appropriate' (Harvey 2013b, 124) strategies were enacted; for example, in one project, because participants were planning to interview colleagues, a workshop on in-depth interviewing was designed and provided. Of course, experiential workshops on AR were important:

> I don't think I would have been able to make the links with my own research that I have unless we['d] had that kind of training. I really enjoyed the action research training (Participant LF).

As participants progressed through AR cycles, they were supported to reflect on their projects, and to write up and disseminate their learnings:

> The exchange of ideas between all the members of the project has been very useful. Most of the modifications we introduced are the result of this discussion/reflection process (Participant DE).

Dissemination of key learnings was often through departmental and institutional seminars and fora, and some projects supported participants to present at national and international conferences.

Tenet 5: evaluate

A distributed leadership approach always embeds evaluation, including collating evidence of engagement, collaboration, and capacity development.

Good practice action statements for Evaluate

Plan: to build in formative and summative evaluation from the start of the project.
Act: to engage in ongoing formal and informal evaluation through the steps of AR, and through the project's evaluation plan.
Observe: that regular collection, recording, documentation, and analysis of data (as the basis for evaluation) is undertaken.

Reflect: on evaluation data collected, as part of the steps of AR, so that adjustments can be made to the project to maintain agility and flexibility in responding to its changing needs and context.

Vignette for evaluate

Evaluation was 'built in' (after Wadsworth 2010) when each project was conceived; that is, when grant applications were being developed. Indeed, an evaluation plan was often a requirement of grant applications. In each of the multi-institutional projects, an agreed evaluation plan featured a multi-method approach to formative and summative evaluation. Good evaluation processes included regular meetings to reflect on progress and data.

For all projects, regular meetings enabled ongoing reflection and evaluation across a spectrum that ranged from a micro, or individual, level to the macro perspective of a whole department, institution, or project. Most meetings invited all project participants and stakeholders, as reflective evaluation is most effective when multiple lenses are employed (after Brookfield 2017).

Grant funding was used to provide support for taking minutes or notes that collected and collated systematic and unobtrusive evaluative data. It was essential to have data as a foundation for evaluation. Maintaining a flexible mindset was pivotal when reflecting on the data, as it enabled participants to adjust and fine-tune actions in response to changes in the project and in the environment.

Tenet 6: emergent

A distributed leadership approach involves commitment to ongoing cycles of change underpinned by action research to achieve the development of leadership capacity over time.

Good practice action statements for emergent

Plan: to ensure that the project is committed to multiple cycles of AR.
Act: to work through the steps of AR while maintaining a flexible and agile mindset in response to changing contexts.
Observe: that, over time, participants acknowledge their development as leaders of AR.
Reflect on, and recognise, the leadership capacity development that has been achieved over time.

Vignette for emergent

A common response by participants in all projects was that they were not leaders. There was a strong resistance to identifying as a leader of SOTL; for example, one participant commented that ' … the "leadership" aspect of the project was for much of the time the more challenging aspect for me' (Participant NE).

It was the norm that participants held no formal, hierarchical leadership roles:

> Neither member of the project team holds a formal position of leadership within the department. The model of leadership used involved team members increasing their knowledge of contemporary teaching theory and practice and then applying this to their own teaching practice. (Participant NC).

It took time for participants to observe and reflect that they were developing leadership capacity; for example, participants commented that ' … the breadth of what leadership actually entails has become clearer' (Participant SC) and 'I think that I have also acquired some useful insights into what it means to "lead" … effectively' (Participant NE).

The realisation then moved towards deeper insights:

> [I] grasped for the first time how leadership can work when not positional. Once I understood that modelling, influencing, working with colleagues in my own units, influencing students through teaching, influencing peers through conference work and publications, are all forms of leadership, I was on solid ground. I suddenly grasped the notion of leading from behind/within, not having to lead from the front (positional) (Participant QX).

> … [I] have established a reputation within the department as someone who is worth consulting on matters relating to assessment. Since my involvement in this project I now find that colleagues frequently use me as a sounding board for ideas on assessment. (Participant NE)

Once project participants had assumed the role of distributed leader, they adopted a new mindset about leadership. Within one year, in one project, half of the participants went on to be successful in academic promotions or assume formal leadership roles such as Heads of Departments or Associate Deans of Education. In summary, the six tenets of a distributed leadership approach mapped effectively against the four steps of AR to identify good practices – that is, AR actions – to enable leadership for SOTL.

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on a distributed leadership approach for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) enabled by, and researched through, AR. Cycles of AR structured a meta review of 20 AR projects from the Australian higher education context that have contributed to SOTL. Each project explicitly stated in its original grant applications that the project would be using AR. Further, when communicating about the projects through reports and scholarly publications, outcomes were overtly presented through the lens of AR and its cycles (for example, see: Harvey et al. 2019; Harvey, Baumann, and Fredericks 2019; Jones et al. 2014). A key finding of the meta-review of the projects was the identification of a symbiotic relationship between a distributed leadership approach and AR. This nexus between distributed leadership and AR was unpacked to extend the existing boundaries of pedagogical AR.

The meta review generated evidence-based good practice actions for AR that also enable the development of a distributed leadership approach for SOTL in higher education. These good practice action statements, together with illustrative vignettes, were presented in this paper. The intention is that the statements can benefit others by providing a simple and logical guide for using an AR approach to enable a distributed leadership approach for SOTL.

The relationship between distributed leadership and AR is bi-directional. If participants in AR SOTL projects enact the good practice action statements, they can then proceed with confidence knowing they are also enacting distributed leadership. Adopting a distributed leadership approach to SOTL projects results in 'increased engagement in learning and teaching', and in 'building collaboration' and 'sustaining collaboration' (Jones et al. 2014, 22). Overall, distributed leadership for SOTL AR projects can 'sustain improvements in teaching and learning' (Jones et al. 2012, 22). Conversely, AR sustains distributed leadership. The iterative cycles of AR and the associated reflective practice 'build leadership for learning and teaching' (Jones et al. 2014, 43).

This review addresses the concern that AR projects tend to be small scale and to exclude the higher education context; however, the limitations of the research need to be stated. They include the fact that the 20 projects were based in the context of Australian higher education, and thus the transferability of the good practice statements to other cultural and environmental contexts needs to be further investigated. Acknowledging that a reductionist model (of the four steps of AR) was used to align and map the good practice statements to the tenets of distributed leadership, future AR can expand upon and develop a more holistic emergence model. The challenge for developing this model is the requirement for a thorough understanding of the complex context of each of the three conceptual areas – distributed leadership, SOTL, and AR – together with the alignment among all three.

The experiences and outcomes of the meta-review have made contributions to SOTL that extend the boundaries of pedagogical AR to a new area of focus: that of a distributed leadership approach to SOTL.

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Appendix A. Higher education funded SOTL Action Research projects by theme

Distributed Leadership
2014 Office for Learning and Teaching Extension Grant *Develop a cross-institutional network of experts in the use of the benchmarks for distributed leadership to improve learning and teaching* 2011 Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Grant *Evidence-based benchmarking framework for a distributed leadership approach to capacity building in learning and teaching (LE11-2000)* 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Grant *Lessons learnt: Identifying synergies in distributed leadership projects (LE9-1222)* 2006 Carrick Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Grant *Leadership and assessment: strengthening the nexus* 2006 Carrick Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Grant *Developing multilevel leadership in the use of student feedback to enhance student learning and teaching practice.*
Reflection for Learning
2016 Learning and Teaching Extension Grant *iReflect extension* 2014 Macquarie University Teaching Enhancement Grant *iReflect* 2014 Macquarie University Teaching Delivery Grant *Compressed curriculum, expanded reflection* 2012–2013 Macquarie University Innovation and Scholarship Program Grant *Innovative ways of practising and documenting reflection for learning* 2013 Faculty of Business and Economics, Department of Marketing Learning and Teaching Fund Grant *Student reflection and learning* 2012 Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Competitive Grant *Student reflection and learning: Exploring ethnicity* 2011 Macquarie University Sustainability Grant *Towards a theory of the Ecology of Reflection: Sustainable reflective practice for PACE units* 2011 MQ Learning and Teaching Competitive Grant *Student reflection and learning* 2011 Internal PACE hub award *PACE reflection iLearn module*
Quality Learning and Teaching with Sessional Staff
2014 National Teaching Fellowship *Quality learning and teaching with sessional staff: systematising national standards* 2014 Office for Learning and Teaching Extension Grant *Recognising and rewarding good learning and teaching practice with sessional staff* 2011 Australian Learning and Teaching Council Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Grant *Building Leadership with the Sessional staff standards framework (LE11-1896)* 2009 Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Priority Grant *Sessional Staff: consolidating curriculum renewal and curriculum alignment* 2005 – 2006 Vice Chancellor's Development Fund Grant *Quality Teaching: Professional and Organisational Development Supporting Sessional Staff. Phase 2* 2004 Vice Chancellor's Development Fund Grant *Quality Teaching: Professional and Organisational Development Supporting Sessional Staff*