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Seducing Leadership: Stories from leadership development

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Seducing Leadership: Stories of Leadership Development

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This article argues that leadership development is a process of seduction. Drawing on some stories of leadership development from my experience as participant, observer and teacher I show the ways in which certain sorts of highly valued leadership teaching contain seductive elements, including sweeping audiences off their feet and, in some contexts, forestalling critique about the content that is offered. The article also considers the extent to which seduction is a gendered performance. I conclude that, while gender and power are defining elements and constraints in how seductive pedagogical relations are constructed, there are opportunities for experimentation and display that potentially subvert gendered stereotypes. Seeing the seduction in leadership can help us understand leadership and leadership teaching better, and can open the way to doing it differently — to experimentation and innovation.

Keywords: leadership, seduction, leadership development, leadership teaching, gender

All teaching, all successful teaching, falls into one of two kinds: abusive or seductive. The rest is merely instruction: tedious, safe, unlikely to make a difference. (Glavin, 1997, p. 13)

This article explores the way in which the idea or metaphor of seduction might be relevant to leadership development. My aim is to open up explorations of leadership teaching to deeper and more embodied analyses. Why have accounts of leadership teaching largely ignored bodies and the psychodynamic processes that we know are often part of education, such as desire, the idealization of teacher authority figure and surrender to it (Barreca and Morse, 1997)? What is the impact of the teacher’s gender in the potentially seductive aspects of leadership teaching and how do these differences in

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leadership teaching affect leadership learning? Exploring seductive dynamics may give us new ways of investigating the burgeoning territory of leadership development. I also argue that these seductive processes can either inhibit learning or open up new ways of experiencing and knowing about leadership.

The article draws on several stories describing seductive leadership development experiences. The use of stories and writing this article in the way I have reflect my own desire and efforts to participate differently in the leadership development (the academic and indeed, the life) ‘space’. By using the story as a mode of exploration, I am better able to declare my own responses rather than hiding behind a curtain of empirical distance. My interest in writing differently aims to offer critical perspectives, but to do so in a way that explicitly locates my embodied self among the ideas I am canvassing (Grey and Sinclair, 2006; see also Brewis, 2005 for a good example of this reflexivity). I am an actor and also scriptwriter, improviser and director of this article, alternately staging, editing and being surprised by the meanings that emerge (Czarniawska, 1998).

The first story is about a senior executive programme that I observed over a period of 2 weeks. I show that both the content and the method by which the content was taught were (perhaps inevitably) instrumental in seducing the audience towards a view of leadership as英雄ism, which, not incidentally, was also intensely masculine. The very success of the pedagogy here was part of the problem — seduction par excellence — as it had the effect of also silencing alternative views.

In a second story I draw on another leadership programme where I was a participant. This time I was collusive in supporting the elevation of the male teacher to guru/hero status: I was a fawning groupie in the institutionalization of a kind of gender segregation in leadership teaching, swept off my feet by the power of the leadership model presented. I seek here to dissect my reactions in order to tease out some of the interrelationships between leadership, leadership pedagogy, heroism and gender. Finally, in some slices of stories from my own teaching, I inspect opportunities for and reservations about a seductive intent.

Is seduction in teaching a bad thing? In presenting these stories, I do not wish to unilaterally condemn seduction or suggest that it should be banished, if that were possible, from leadership relations. By connecting the (slightly illicit and sexualized) idea of seduction to the (usually cerebral) idea of leadership development, it becomes possible to reveal hidden dimensions of that experience, to show another side of what may be going on. Nor will I suggest that seduction is simply reducible to gender regimes — that men are the seducers and women surrender or resist. It is more complicated than this and I want to begin to deepen our understanding of the complexity of gender relations in pedagogy and leadership pedagogy here.
Unveiling seduction

To seduce is to lead astray. ‘Seduction’ and ‘leadership’ have common origins. The Latin root of seduction is *se ducere*, meaning to lead. Historically, the meanings of seduction and leadership have changed together with particular assumptions about gender. In the 15th century, seduce had a masculine application, meaning the process whereby men (leaders) seduced other men from their earlier allegiance or loyalty. By the 16th century seduction was being applied to women, specifically meaning to induce a woman to surrender her chastity. In contemporary usage, it is women who are more likely to be described as seductive — alluring and enticing. This adjective is, in contemporary use, rarely attached to men. While seduction has become associated with private sexual relations, the word leadership has its roots in the public world of manly endeavour and the recognition that men were seducible by other men.

Much water has flowed under various leadership bridges since these early usages. However, in a bold and prescient article published in 1991 Marta Calás and Linda Smircich reconnect the two ideas, arguing that leadership writing can be read as seduction. Deconstructing sections of four texts from leadership writers (Barnard, McGregor, Mintzberg and Peters and Waterman) whose work spans more than 50 years, they suggest

> leadership feeds on the denial of consummation while constantly playing on the edges of transgression. Rather than suppressing desire ... leadership works because it embodies desire, while covering its traces with the sign of truth. (Calás and Smircich, 1991, p. 560)

Calás and Smircich show how each of the four texts accomplish seduction in historically contextualized ways, meanwhile often presenting themselves as new and urgent knowledge about leadership. For example, Barnard takes the high moral ground, imbuing leaders with the aura of superiority reserved for father confessors deserving of reverence, while MacGregor’s text appeases ‘the ambivalence felt by those in dominant positions — American corporate bosses and American heterosexual males — when the winds of equality [blow] too close for comfort’ (Calás and Smircich, 1991, pp. 582–3). For Calás and Smircich leadership writing is complicit in reinforcing ‘the homosocial libidinal economy of competitiveness and glory’ (Calás and Smircich, 1991, p. 593) as if it were the truth, and indeed, with each new discourse, a kind of deeper and more powerful truth.

Motifs or concepts like leadership do not stand outside history (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1991). The way in which leadership is defined and understood is the result of power, not the of uncovering truth. There is an important historical story not yet told about how leadership came to leave
seduction behind — and in the arms of women — or perhaps how leadership continues to seduce but does so invisibly (Sinclair, 2007a).

Leadership teaching, learning and seduction

Turning from leadership writing to leadership teaching and development, perhaps there may have been a similar ideologically driven effort to suppress the recognition, but not acts, of seduction? The rise of management education and business schools, in the USA particularly, can be interpreted as a political and ideological effort to tame and transform tuition in the use and exercise of power into an activity that is replicable, respectable and commodifiable (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1991; Grey, 2004). Just as leadership writing has been put to an ideological purpose, so too, I suggest, may the burgeoning industry of leadership development function in ideological ways.

There has been a great deal of research on leadership development, yet much focuses on techniques. Overviews of leadership development and discussions of leadership learning provide a sense of the scale and diversity of this industry (Antonacopolou and Bento, 2004; Day 2000; Hirst et al., 2004). In the early 1990s Conger (1992) identified four approaches in this field: conceptual (focusing on transferring concepts and leadership theories); skill-building (providing practice in leadership competencies or capabilities); personal growth (developing self-awareness including via outdoor and out-of-comfort-zone experiences); and feedback programmes (relying on instruments such as ‘360 degree feedback’ or emotional intelligence scales).

The question of whether leadership can be taught has provoked extensive debate among leadership practitioners and scholars (Daloz Parks, 2005; Day, 2000) but a great deal of this research, including the contents of a recently launched International Journal of Leadership Education, focuses on the content, techniques and applications of leadership teaching rather than on the roles of the more submerged and visceral dynamics of passion, desire, sexualities and bodies. A recent overview (Doh, 2003) presented definitive responses by six distinguished academics to the question of whether leadership can be taught. In a departure from convention, photographs of each of these experts (and the author) are included, potentially providing a more ‘embodied’ response than usual. Disconcertingly, or perhaps tellingly, each is a White man, and their responses offer ‘a kind of orthodoxy’ about leadership development (Gabriel, 2005, p. 148).

Leadership Can be Taught by Daloz Parks (2005) documents the case-in-point approach to leadership teaching developed by Heifetz et al. at the Kennedy School, Harvard University. The book explores a central challenge for leaders and teachers of leadership: to resist the belief or the perception of being single-handedly able to move a group to a new way of doing things. Heifetz argues that it is the job of the leader and teacher to anticipate likely audience
reactions such as dependency and instead to give the work back to the group. Yet there is a paradox here: the more skilfully the teacher resists pressures to be God, the more God-like they can become. Though Heifetz makes explicit effort not to feed an audience’s dependency, and despite the efforts of commentators such as Daloz Parks to avoid perpetuating adoration of the leader (Heifetz in this case), these dynamics are very hard to avoid. Indeed a subtle, impressionistic photograph of Heifetz appears on the cover of the book — perhaps indicative of the tension in contemporary leadership teaching between providing a nuanced account of the field while also capitalizing on the guru status of some leadership teachers.

People involved in leadership development have often been keen to construct it as a tough, disciplined, cerebral and masculine endeavour — just like leadership itself. Such emphases in leadership teaching are unsurprising. There has been a very large and sustained investment in the teaching of leadership by corporations (and corporate universities), business schools and, not least, military organizations, which few have an interest in questioning. And although there is now a tradition of applying critical perspectives to management pedagogy and education (for example Currie and Knights, 2003; Grey et al., 1996), such critical perspectives have rarely been applied to deconstructing leadership pedagogy (Sinclair, 2007b).

The cerebral and masculine emphasis in leadership development has involved the not-so-subtle jettisoning of practices associated with women, including desire, bodies and sexualities (Sinclair, 2005). But leadership development is also education and, as Barreca and Morse remind us:

> Whether it is perceived as an instrument of domination or a mode of revelation, the educational process involves an emotionally suffused link between human beings.... In our culture, the idea of education is inextricably bound up with constructions of power, governance, and an erotically charged allegiance or submission to the father (or, with increasing frequency, mother —) teacher. (Barreca and Morse, 1997, p. vii)

What these insights suggest is that overly strenuous efforts to make a tough science out of leadership and teaching about it may, at some level, be a defence against more dangerous possibilities. By fighting so hard to remain uncorrupted by lust or submission, perhaps leadership development demonstrates its vulnerability to those very possibilities.

Meanwhile, as an observer, participant and teacher of leadership development myself, it seems that focusing on the cognitive information transfer misses much of what happens. Indeed, it might be argued that teaching leadership relies on seduction more than other kinds of teaching, particularly because leadership teachers often aim to demonstrate leadership as well as deal with it. Leadership development often works, or does not, to the extent that it satisfies audience desires: desires to be entertained, transported and transformed, to feel greater mastery and glimpse the lusted-after power to be
in control, but also to flirt with vulnerability, sometimes pain and loss, before being brought to consummation (see Gallop, 1997, for reflections on sexual desire in teaching).

Psychodynamic studies have long shown that emotional, irrational desires play out in groups and organizations (Denhardt 1984; French and Vince 1999; Hirschhorn 1988). Equally, the appeal and the risks (to society, groups and individuals) of masterful — paternal or godlike — leadership, has been widely documented in fields such as political psychology, psychoanalysis, feminism, cultural and literary studies (for example Barreca and Morse, 1997; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Mitscherlich, 1963; Yalom, 1996). Analyses of leadership and following alert us to the risks of narcissistic leaders who elicit hero worship in followers (Gabriel, 1997; Kets de Vries 1994, 2006; Krantz, 2006; LaBier, 1986). For example, it is not uncommon to encounter transference and counter-transference. Transference occurs when a follower transfers to the leader primitive feelings towards an all-powerful parent which belong to childhood but are reactivated in unbalanced power situations. Followers can unconsciously attribute to the leader omniscience or omnipotence while exhibiting childlike emotions and behaviour themselves, for example, passivity, obedience or overdeveloped loyalty. Counter-transference occurs where the leader also unconsciously transfers feelings from other contexts onto followers. Such dynamics can feed a leader’s appetite for power, which research shows is frequently and paradoxically accompanied by an extremely fragile leader ego (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005).

Despite this rich psychodynamic understanding about how people position themselves in and around authority (Hirschhorn, 1997), leadership development studies usually ignore such insights. I am suggesting then that behind the leadership development veil of objective knowledge-building and information transfer there are rich emotional, political and psychodynamic relations that deserve attention.

How might the idea of seduction introduce new insights to what may be going on in leadership development? The following are examples from my field notes in observing leadership teaching:

Leadership gurus often pay great attention to the physical selves they project: what they are wearing; their gestures; the way they surprise and engage audiences with their bodily repertoires; their use — in some cases command — of the space available to them. It is very rare to go and listen to someone talk about leadership who merely stands woodenly behind a lectern. Far more often, the body is part of the performance. When an esteemed leadership professor appeared before an audience of which I was a part for the first time, he had on a suit with a black T-shirt underneath. He was accomplishing something about leadership in this dress and a demeanour of sitting on the front desk cradling one knee with his arms. It said more than he simply didn’t have laundered shirts.
The amounts paid to consultants and others who work in leadership development indicate that, though perhaps not on the same scale as Mussolini, these gurus are worshipped. Followers are led astray, not always by the content of the ideas presented, but by the power and aura of the personality presenting (for a powerful analysis of how Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin seduced through aesthetics see Gronn, 2006). Executives travel the world to glimpse the great ones, companies compete to get an exclusive deal or audience with a renowned consultant and his secrets. For example, a doctoral student who had worked in the Singapore army had observed Peter Senge (of ‘Fifth Discipline’ fame) working with Singapore’s military elite. Senge’s methods are distinctly Californian and New Age (lying on the floor, visualizing images), yet his reputation was such that officers dutifully accepted the need to not only submit to them but to re-enact them with their own troops.

When companies develop new leadership development initiatives the process is often shrouded in secrecy. In early stages a selected few are taken on retreat and undergo intense processes akin to rebirthing or being awakened spiritually (Bell and Taylor, 2003, 2004; Casey, 2004). Participants are initiated into a brotherhood of confidential insights with languages, acronyms, retreats and rituals that perpetuate the exclusivity of those in the know. These experiences can be seductive because initiates feel a special part of something that is far removed from organizational routines. Later, leaders may go on road shows — highly performative opportunities designed to convert disbelievers and make the latest leadership insights irresistible to the rest of the organization.

Notes about method (or where I am coming from)

Having been interested in leadership for a long time, my general observation is that a great deal of the writing about leadership is either inert or aims to take the elevated high ground far away from desire or emotion (James and Arroba, 2005). The manoeuvre associating leadership with elevated moral ideals and dissociating it from bodies and desire does not occur by chance. It accomplishes superiority. It is also in sharp contrast to what I have often observed when people are doing or being instructed in the doing of leadership. These performances are often highly dramatic and full bodied (Sinclair, 2005). They hinge on a number of seductive elements, including possibilities of surrender on both sides. The presenter reads and responds to clients’ desires. Audiences are carried off by powerful and compelling visions, enacted as well as instructed in the immediacy of the classroom.
My own journey as a teacher and researcher of leadership provides a thread running through these reflections. At the start of 2004 I returned to Melbourne Business School after a year’s leave of absence (during which I had finished training as a yoga teacher). I hesitantly re-immersed myself in the journal issues and books that had accumulated in my absence. In many areas I felt as if I could have slept for a hundred years and woken to find that little had changed apart from increasing encrustation. However, in critical theorizing it seemed that new territory and legitimacy had been annexed and new respectability acquired.

I found a lot of this new work alienating. It seemed that one needed to know a lot of theory to appreciate the nuances. And much of the critical literature continued to deny the visceral and emotional hungers that seemed to me to reside frequently in leaders and followers including adulation, sexuality and longing.

As a scholar who takes a critical and feminist perspective (at times in sympathy with each other and at other times in conflict with each other), I have felt increasingly disconnected from the way the leadership (and the entire organizational) story is told. From the business cases and the Boys Own adventures told in the Harvard Business Review to the empiricist language of psychologically oriented research papers on leadership, the effects seem to be to render leadership ever more elevated, more invincible and increasingly beyond critique. Employing different methods of writing leadership experiences may perhaps permit finding and enacting different discourses of leadership development (Calás and Smircich, 1991).

The two main stories below focus on successful male presenters working with large groups on the topic of leadership. The first takes place in Australia and the second in the USA. I chose them as vivid examples of dynamics that my research suggests are common in leadership development but are largely unstudied.

Story 1: Observing the teaching of leadership on an executive programme

I looked around me at 43 rapt faces: captivated and enthralled. These were the faces of senior executive participants in a 3 week executive programme and they were learning about leadership. The person holding their attention was a master leadership teacher hailing from a most prestigious university. He was immersing them in cases, or more particularly, in stories of amazing heroes — of great men doing great deeds against enormous odds. You couldn’t help but get involved in the unfolding story — the extraordinary stakes and monumental egos, the moments when all was almost lost, the flaws revealed (not fatal, thank goodness) when the chips were down.
I sat watching — dazzled and, I have to admit, deeply envious of the apparent ease with which this teacher held his audience. You could have heard a pin drop: there was no shifting in the seats or the other signs of boredom and distraction that a female presenter had elicited. The theoretical and learning points were powerfully delivered and felt, but they were not particularly profound, as I saw on looking back over my notes. The leadership was going on at two levels here — in both the content of what was being taught and the way it was being taught. And it was utterly seducing.

Yet I was puzzled. A good third of the participants were senior, articulate women executives whom I had been watching for a couple of weeks already. They were smart and streetwise — earning the respect of colleagues for their leadership work in their organizations and in their contributions to this programme. But I don’t think they had been offered a single example of a woman leader in all their discussions. Further, the model of leadership with which the group was presented was masculine and firmly heroic. Nobody even seemed to notice this, let alone draw attention to it or get perturbed by it. I started to wonder whether I was imagining things — was my lens so overly attuned to gender that I couldn’t see anything else any more?

I approached the charismatic and urbane presenter in a break and commented about the lack of women represented in cases. He concurred consolingly, lamenting the absence of good cases of women leaders. But I wasn’t just disturbed by the absence of women in these heroic stories, it was the way leadership had been constructed and then modelled by the teacher.

This senior group was initially competitive with each other and some competed with the presenter but eventually they submitted to this construction of leadership. A ritual was played out in which male bureaucrats with experience in crisis management asserted their knowledge and expertise. The presenter, drawing on his charm, knowledge and reputation, responded by acknowledging these members of the audience and then regaining his command of the group, by topping them with his own mastery of the content. Although a great deal of important leadership and group dynamics was being played out in the room, none of it was explicitly identified or processed in any way. We seemed to be asked to accept that leadership equalled the lessons we learned from the case studies, disconnected from the pedagogy, the discourse and the processes of learning.

This experience of leadership in the here and now of the classroom was very different from what had been promised in this programme (and in many others that I have investigated). In the blurb and marketing preceding it, leadership was presented in empirical categories that were amenable to structuration: constructs and instruments abounded. Leadership was firm, not fuzzy and potential participants were promised hard outcomes as well
as the very latest in breakthroughs and leading edge advice. There was generally talk of global challenges, promising that the programmes would equip the participants with global competencies. This was part of the recourse to science that I mentioned earlier, but it is worth noting here because it is another, very different, part of the platform of seduction. The pressure to market using this kind of language and set of promises is relentless.

And what can be said about the physical performances of the teachers? I watched two very well-regarded male teachers and a woman teacher with a lower profile but a lot of experience and solid credentials. The men were active, though in different ways, in the physical persona they presented and the way they used their physical selves to get the class in and establish mastery. One was more brash, striding about the classroom, holding up his arms and occasionally pausing to adjust his pants or gaze poignantly at the ceiling. The other was more donnish and diffident, but his presentation was no less physical in its mastery. These physical performances mirrored their implied understanding of the leadership on offer — it was about triumphal individual mastery, despite setbacks and difficulties. Both performances repelled serious challenge and the audience obligingly stayed within the questions and limits set by the presenters.

It was a very different game for the woman presenter. In the content and the class response, as well as in the space made available to her, a heroic individual performance seemed to be impossible. She spoke after one of the male presenters in the session before lunch. Her content in many respects better matched the practical promises of promotional material than that of the other speakers. She provided research findings from large-scale studies of comparable organizations and valuable, practical insights on leading change. But in the discussion afterwards and in evaluations, the content was described by many as dry and theoretical. Early on, it was evident that the woman teacher felt she had far fewer options for her body (see also Sinclair, 2004). She stayed close to the lectern and her physical gestures were muted. Early in the session some male members of the audience, challenged her, using her first name and demanding to know her definitions and towards the end, yawning and stretching.

Although part of what occurred in these sessions may reflect individual differences among the teachers and audience, I am suggesting that there is a bigger pedagogical story to tell. The male teachers were afforded more power and physical options than the woman to establish their relationship with the group and some of these were already set up through their reputation. The content seemed not to be very relevant to the way in which the participants experienced the session. Once the group were seduced there was little that could undermine their response. In contrast, right from the start, the woman seemed to be being tested against a different, less winnable formula for leadership teaching.
Story 2: Being a student in a leadership short course

In this story I was a participant in a prestigious course at a prestigious university. The course was pitched at people who teach leadership to others, so it included consultants, academics and in-house corporate leadership development workers. I had the opportunity during this powerful performance to reflect and learn a lot about my own reactions to leadership and to different pedagogical styles. The two main presenters were male, one of whom I call Don, who has a particularly big reputation in leadership. Also working on the programme and teaching a number of sessions were two other senior and experienced women academics, two consultants who specialized in working experientially with executives (a woman and a man), and a couple of other graduates (a woman and a man) of this programme who joined the faculty as observer/participants.

The main male presenter emerged as a tough but charismatic teacher. The group, it seemed, could hardly get enough of him. He constructed us as adults and he wasn’t going to beat about the bush. He expected to be challenged and was forceful, even occasionally ruthless, in cutting down comments or diversions from some participants. This masterful performance was enhanced by the distance from the group he cultivated outside the class. He was polite but elusive: veiled in a mystique not punctured by too much intimacy. The sessions led by the other presenters were engaging and, in most cases, original and valuable, but it was Don whom most of the audience (including me) had come to hear and his performance was pivotal.

In this programme, the gender dynamics of the group were raised by several female participants who publicly expressed their difficulties in voicing their experience in this context. A number of male participants dominated the group and seemed to be given an inordinate amount of air time. Or perhaps the main male presenters felt that it was responsibility of the group, not the teacher, to identify and challenge gendered group norms.

Over the first few days there were casualties among people who felt they had been ignored or were disappointed that what they were being given was not what they came for. A number of women, in particular, felt put down by Don. The other presenters, particularly the women, did quite a lot of mopping up in groups and one-on-one sessions. I saw them search out individuals after a particularly gruelling exchange and I saw them sacrifice their own sessions to solidarity-building: sessions designed to help everyone feel included and heard. It struck me that Don’s resolute toughness worked because it was counterbalanced by the concern for individual welfare exhibited by the other (mostly female) teachers.

This leadership seduction seemed to succeed because of the gendered division of labour in the classroom among male and female teachers. Even though I noticed this, I said nothing. I may have been scared about raising it, as other women participants seemed to have been singled out for extra
visibility when they drew attention to gender bias. Don demonstrated little skill or interest in working with gender insights. In this story, gender dynamics were rendered hard to discuss and by implication irrelevant to leadership, in both the content and the process of the group and its leader/teacher. And I was a complicit participant in the degendering of leadership.

Discussion: seductive patterns and their consequences

What is going on here? In these two stories of very well-evaluated experiences of leadership development, there are a several seductive patterns. The leader’s performance of mastery and power seduces. It enacts, in the classroom, a form of leadership that is idealized in the content of teaching — the capacity to deliver powerful visions, or insights; the capacity to respond to challenges, to be the hero of the moment, the person who pulls it all together. This leadership mastery is captivating and so powerful (supported as it is by an unspoken gendered regime) that followers who harbour reservations about it censor themselves and outlying dissenters are marginalized in the adoring glow.

These classroom dynamics seduce audiences for a number of reasons and aspects of these processes apply to both genders and various levels of power and authority in the audience. Some identify with the heroic presenter, seeing in him a way to be themselves, and they project onto this leader an idealized version of themselves (Glavin, 1997). Participants in leadership development programmes may be under institutional pressures to find solutions and can collude with these dynamics by demanding lists of tips, steps or cases of what’s worked in well-known organizations. All of us, at least some of the time, are tantalized by the illusion of heroic masterful leadership, the idea that someone powerful will take charge and know what to do and that we can surrender to their guidance. Even if teachers know that the usefulness of their approaches may be limited, it is tempting to provide what audiences say they want.

Such power dynamics have largely been neglected in leadership development. Yet desires, anxieties and frustrations around the exercise of power are almost always re-enacted in some form in the classroom itself as participants jockey for visibility and make use of scarce opportunities to build their reputation. There can be intense competition to attract the presenter’s attention, to bask in the glow of presenter approval and to amass kudos and a reputation as a leader among participants.

The two stories above give us examples of the potentially gendered dynamics of leadership teaching where male teachers dazzle audiences and female teachers are more constrained by the leadership development spaces offered. Pedagogy is gendered (Luke and Gore, 1992; McWilliam, 1999; Sinclair, 2000, 2004) and classrooms provide opportunities for gendered
patterns of transference to occur. As described earlier, the emotions audiences feel towards teachers may have their origins in their relationships with parents (Hirschhorn, 1997; Kets de Vries, 2006). When relatively powerless participants sit in a classroom facing a powerful male teacher, the experience is familiar and though possibly unpleasant, will rarely evoke irrational fear. In contrast, when similar students face a powerful female teacher, more anxiety is typically evoked which may be manifested, for example, as scepticism or anger. I have noted elsewhere that students sometimes see in women presenters the worst characteristics of their mothers: intrusive, bossy and manipulative (Sinclair, 1998). If women presenters do not conform to female stereotypes, such as being maternal, deferential or adoring, fears are fed of what Creed calls ‘the monstrous feminine’ (Creed, 1993). Audiences also notice women’s bodies more, to scrutinize and fantasize about them.

Thus there is sometimes a great deal of gender-related tension when women occupy a teaching space that is ordinarily dominated by men, even before they open their mouths. This tension is exacerbated, in my observation, when the subject of instruction is leadership. Of all areas of management and business, leadership is particularly seen to be men’s knowledge: taught by men, to men, using the examples of great men. Having a woman teach it is counter-intuitive. It puts power in the wrong hands. Tensions are exacerbated further when, as in so much leadership development, the participants are senior and powerful — already accustomed to thinking of themselves as leaders. Even coming into a classroom situation, for these sorts of participants, often involves a moment of humiliation. In being there, they are (in principle) acknowledging they have something to learn. They are surrendering to the power and authority of another (something they seldom do) and they will surrender only to those who are demonstrably potent themselves. As Glavin notes, ‘successful teaching starts with glamorous self-presentation’ (Glavin, 1997, p. 15) and in leadership development, the size of the presenter’s reputation, the companies they work for and other markers of power are often emphasized in marketing and in introductory remarks. Presenter/teachers usually begin with a version of the following, sometimes tinged with self-deprecation: ‘I am a big and important person’ and ‘the world recognizes me as someone who has important things to tell you’.

Yet, if we accept that self-reflexivity is broadly desirable for leadership teachers, how might this be embodied in the classroom, while also maintaining a basis for authority? As discussed above, researchers in feminist pedagogy have shown that such tipping points are gendered: what might be read as an authentically powerful act of self-reflection in a male presenter may be judged as inappropriately confessional in a woman. Further, structural factors may encourage women teachers to be too ready to delegitimize their knowledge or to opt for fashions in leadership facilitation which inappropriately commodify the personal (Perriton, 2007).
Teachers of leadership are never outside the power relations of the classroom. Their power and authority, or lack of it, precede them and are then actively negotiated and reproduced in class. Gender is an important theme in these seductive accounts as the gender, race and cultural backgrounds of teachers and students become inextricably woven into the power relations. In the stories above the leadership experiences of the women participants were censored and excluded. The class dynamic helped establish and mirror a hegemonic view of leadership, where women’s experiences of leadership were either no different, or where any difference was of so little account that it passed unnoticed. These contextual factors present a particular set of challenges for women, and it is to my own experience, as a woman teaching leadership, that I turn in the next section.

Slices of stories: being a woman teaching leadership

When I think about my own experiences teaching leadership in the Masters of Business Administration and executive settings, the conventional class leadership space does not seem available to me, even if I wanted to occupy it (see Sinclair, 2007b, for a detailed example). My gender as a woman changes what happens in the classroom and it is very difficult to gain the right to dominate the class (if that is what is sought) that I have seen offered to men. These effects need to be understood as having been created structurally out of power and gender relations and that are in place before individual teachers or students enter a classroom. Yet such dynamics have real, embodied effects on us as individual teachers and also prefigure how we take up or attempt to renegotiate expectations and authority in the classroom.

For example, in the first encounters with a class, jokes, a little self-deprecation and assertions of their reputational capital, male teachers often establish bonhomie (literally translatable as good feeling among men). This creation of ease and comfort is never straightforward for me for the reasons described above. With experience I have learned that for me to establish comfort — and it is comfort of a different kind — with a predominantly male group requires much longer than for a comparable man in my position. As a woman, I need to include the opportunity for the class to test out their preconceptions and, at least to some degree, work through their anxieties at having a woman in charge.

In some situations of teaching leadership, particularly with more senior groups in which there are very few women participants, the content of my work comes under increased scrutiny. There is often an expectation that I have a hidden gender agenda and will discriminate in favour of women (again, these occur without my even introducing gender as a topic). The effect of these undercurrents is to make me feel my authority to say valuable
things ebbing away. The very things I thought I knew about leadership suddenly seem not worth knowing, let alone worth sharing. In contrast, there are situations teaching students where structural conditions and preconceptions are less rigid and I have a more extended opportunity to build a relationship and trust (Sinclair, 2007b). Here it is possible to open up some different sorts of leadership knowledge and then negotiate how those insights will be developed and shared in the classroom. The idea is to explore and elicit new forms of leadership partially by changing the way it is taught.5

This different approach to teaching, which aims to mobilize collaborative and critical learning about leadership, can also contain seductive elements. Indeed, it has often been feminists interested in pedagogical innovation who have initiated exploration of pleasure, desire and sexualities (Barreca and Morse, 1997; Gallop, 1995, 1997; hooks, 1994, 2003; McWilliam, 1999). However, as Swan (2005) points out, much of the research around pleasure and eroticism in the classroom has emanated from classrooms devoted to women’s or literary studies, not in management or leadership.

Despite the obstacles, my sense is that women management educators also experiment with desire and pleasure in the classroom. Swan, for example, describes her delight in enacting, as a woman, a form of masculinity: ‘being loud, taking up more talking time than the men students, flourishing my arms and body to make arguments, and prowling around the classroom to underscore points and to take questions’ (Swan, 2005, p. 327). There is a clear sense of pleasure-in-mastery in that phrase ‘take questions’.

For my part, there are also pleasurable and embodied experiences in leadership teaching. There are the processes of drawing students in, of urging them to drop their defences and ease out of the tightness and rigidity of preconceptions. There is mutual pleasure in the opening up that follows (on both sides, I am sure), in the experience of abandoning old ideas, sharing intimacies, transgressing and charting new territories of awareness and understanding together. So women teachers may also seduce as part of leadership teaching. Yet it would be oversimplifying to conclude that this potential for women teachers means that seduction can be dismissed as gender-neutral. As I have endeavoured to show, the seductive scripts available to, and between, men and women differ.

Importantly, pedagogical seduction by male and female teachers has various effects. A critical question to ask is what the consequences are for those who are seduced. Does teaching beguile and entrance to elicit greater curiosity or daring in the exploration of ideas? Does it encourage learning about leadership to go into new or rarely discussed territory, for example, around power, bodies or gender? Or does it foster quick gratification or confirm preconceptions about the premium of performative leadership?
Conclusion

Leadership and the teaching of leadership work in seductive ways and I have sought to point to some of these seductive manoeuvres: from displays of mastery (the big screens, high tech wizardry and theatricality of road shows); through to moments of intimacy (declarations of personal history or vulnerability) (Sinclair, 2005). For audiences, such performances can make one feel blessed: transported out of the ordinary and responding to desires and longing.

I have also suggested that leadership teaching and learning perhaps should be seductive in the sense of opening up and engaging with new possibilities. However, if those processes invite the audience to surrender their critical faculties and avoid conflict or the deep, confronting but important issues of leadership, they may well be said to neither teach nor instruct.

Inevitably, in an article about seduction, gender is central. We have seen how the words seduction and leadership have become tacitly imbued with gender: indeed, their very separation has been accomplished by constructing leadership as the disembodied project of men. Gender prefigures the way in which seductive performances by men and women teachers play out. Our interest in gendered seduction should not obscure from view the fact that leadership development is often a seductive exchange between men — just as charged and sexualized as any heterosexual seduction.

The dynamics of seduction are present, and are perhaps even pervasive in leadership development contexts. I have suggested that some types of seduction destroy deeper understanding and some reinforce unequal gender and power relations, so that surrendering to a masculine ideal becomes the natural position of women students, making it difficult for women to be seen as adequate teachers of leadership. The masculinities embedded in the accomplishment of leadership teaching remain hidden, just as the masculinities in leadership often do as well.

However, there are also freeing and expansive possibilities in leadership teaching which the lens of seduction may help us explore. We need to attend to seductive patterns — our own and others — in ways that foreground their consequences for gender and power relations, for learning and for leadership. It is critical to provide an analysis that reveals how these seductive dynamics may entrench or help to challenge existing power and gender regimes in pedagogy; how they may perpetuate or overturn received notions of heroic leadership. Beginning to do so has been my purpose in this article.

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Notes

1. How might such a successful presenter incorporate self-reflection in the conduct of the class? Although there are examples of executive teachers doing so, there is also evidence that presenters perceived to be self-reflective are not necessarily rated by participants as valuable or successful.

2. Exceptions to this include leadership development programmes that adopt a more experiential method such as the Tavistock Institute and Group Relations Australia. In such programmes participant dependency and the search for the all-powerful father figure is often a key theme of the process.

3. I acknowledge here that male presenters are diverse and there are some men who also, because of their difference, require more lengthy apprenticeships with groups to establish trust.

4. Such insights are often volunteered after I have worked with a class for some time when they then reflect about their earlier, private expectations and are prepared to talk about them.

5. I acknowledge and seek to avoid the trap that Perriton (2007) describes of believing that only the process of facilitation counts. The leadership teaching I am describing draws on both content and process to elicit learning.

References


