

Leading Teaching Excellence in Vocational and Professional Education

Annemarieke Hoekstra¹ and Paul Newton²

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore how department chairs in institutes for post-secondary vocational and professional education conceptualize and enact their role as leaders of teaching excellence in their department. Vocational and professional education (VPE) in this paper refers to education that prepares students to become qualified for a particular profession, regardless of educational level (e.g. tradesperson, health care provider, or human resource manager) (Anderson, 2008). Internationally, VPE is offered at Technical and Further Education institutes in Australia (Adams & Gamage, 2008), Further Education institutes, (Drodge, 2002) and statutory universities (Smith, 2002) in Britain, and Community Colleges in the USA (Crossman & Cameron, 2014). In Western Canada VPE is offered at non-research intensive post-secondary institutions, including Polytechnics, Community Colleges, and Teaching Universities. Those who teach in Western Canadian VPE programs – that is, instructors – are commonly hired for their professional and trade experience but often have not received formal teacher education. Typically the purpose of VPE is understood as both improving the social and economic well-being of individuals as well as serving society by ensuring an educated workforce (Adams & Gamage, 2008). To keep fulfilling this purpose, VPE institutes need to be responsive to changes in society and industry, including increasingly diverse student populations, frequently changing industry standards (Darwin 2007; Harris et al. 2001), economic changes such as dropping oil prices requiring economic diversification, and changes in educational approaches, such as a move to more authentic forms of student assessment, (e.g., Stiehl & Lewchuk 2008). To remain responsive to these changes, leaders and those who teach in VPE need to keep developing themselves and their practices to meet the needs of their learners and society.

Few studies have looked into how VPE instructors develop teaching expertise and maintain currency in their work. Bound (2011) described how VPE instructors' professional learning is determined both by individual efforts and shaped by pre-existing institutional practices and cultures. Hoekstra and Crocker (2015) studied the professional learning practices of VPE instructors in Western Canada in the context of a new performance management process. They concluded that: 1) to support instructors in developing and maintaining teaching excellence, institutions need to augment courses and workshops for instructors with concrete support for learning-on-the-job throughout instructors' careers, and 2) post-secondary department chairs could play a crucial role in removing barriers and creating opportunities in the workplace in support of ongoing instructor learning. These activities would fall into instructional leadership roles. Yet, the leadership preparation of department chairs in post-secondary contexts rarely focuses on improving teaching and learning, and is "widely limited to legal matters, organizational procedures and doing the budget" (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p. 81).

¹ Dr. Annemarieke Hoekstra annemarh@nait.ca is a Teaching and Learning Specialist with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) in Edmonton, Canada.

² Dr. Paul Newton is Associate Professor in the department of Educational Administration of the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, Canada.

Not only is there a lack of preparation for department chairs as educational leaders, there also seems to be little substantive knowledge base regarding instructional leadership in VPE (Burke, 2014). In fact, much of the literature on leadership in post-secondary contexts draws heavily on leadership literature derived from business contexts, and rarely gives serious consideration to issues of teaching and learning (eg. Basham & Campbell, 2010; Crossman & Cameron, 2014; Smith, 2002). In the context of VPE specifically, Adams and Gamage (2008) identified the need for leaders to focus on the educational dimension of their work and suggested that the shift to managerial responsibilities is having an effect on leaders' abilities to ensure quality educational programming. In addition, a recent review of research into leadership in vocational education in Australia, the UK, and USA highlights important issues that leaders in vocational education face (Crossman & Cameron, 2014). Yet, there is no mention of studies that focus on how leadership affects teaching excellence and instructor professional learning. Considering the great need for instructors to keep developing themselves as teaching professionals, and the need for programs to keep their practices current, more insight is required into the ways in which department chairs may support and lead teaching excellence in VPE.

To start gaining such insights, the present study looks into the ways in which seven chairs and associate chairs from three Western Canadian VPE institutes conceive of their role as leaders of teaching excellence, and the ways in which they enact this role.

2. Literature Overview

With a limited body of knowledge on leadership for teaching excellence in VPE, this review is organized around the various conceptions of leadership found in the general educational leadership literature that have been related to teaching and learning, specifically: transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and curriculum leadership.

2.1 Transformational Leadership

One recurring concept in the literature on leadership in a variety of post-secondary contexts includes the concept of transformational leadership. Oude Groote Beverborg, Slegers, and Van Veen (2015) describe transformational leadership as:

- 1) identifying and articulating a vision which refers to the development of goals and priorities;
- 2) individual consideration, which includes attending to the feelings and needs of individual teachers;
- and 3) intellectual stimulation, which entails sufficient support of teacher professional development and the challenging of teachers to readdress their knowledge and daily practice. (p. 25)

A number of studies have correlated transformational leadership with improved teaching and learning. Transformational leadership (TL) is theorized to be related to teacher self-efficacy, which is in turn related to higher levels of teacher learning (Oude Groote Beverborg, et al. 2015a). However, in their study of TVET (Technical Vocational Education and Training) teachers in the Netherlands, Oude Groote Beverborg, et al. (2015a) found little support for the notion that TL is connected to teacher self-efficacy. They hypothesize that (in contrast to previous studies of elementary schools) the complexity of the organizational environment of the TVET institution might decrease the effect of TL due to multiple levels of organization, units and subunits in post-secondary contexts. In a related study, Oude Groote Beverborg, et al. (2015b) found that “transformational leadership practices play a significant role in facilitating teamwork, and sustaining teachers' levels of learning in schools” (p. 187). Sirkis (2011) also promoted a number of leadership skills central to the role of community college department chair, including building relationships and networks, advocating for faculty, creating and implementing a shared vision, developing faculty as teachers, and earning trust.

Other scholars have suggested that university teaching can be improved by encouraging collaboration and collegiality (e.g. Zakrajsek, 2014), influencing the discourses of collegial networks, (Roxa, Martensson, & Alveteg, 2011), and the provision of an “enabling environment” and “supportive workgroup” (Van Schalkwijk, Leibowitz, Herman, & Farmer, 2015, p. 8). Knight and Trowler (2000) suggested that “interactional leadership” would be an appropriate model to support such collegiality. According to these authors, such leadership

is characterised by a concern for teamwork, for collegiality and networking, by an emphasis on organisational learning, and hence, as a result of all of these on personal development as a normal, natural part of the working environment. (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p. 79)

In sum, the literature on transformational leadership highlights the importance of a shared vision, individual consideration in support for instructor motivation, and active support for instructor professional development. As such, transformational leadership may be a promising approach; however, some leadership scholars suggest that transformational leadership in education falls short due to a lack of explicit attention to teaching and learning processes and outcomes (e.g. Hallinger, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The next section describes research on instructional leadership, which is much more clearly focused on quality teaching and learning.

2.2 Instructional Leadership

Robinson (2006) suggests a shift from a generic leadership model to an educational leadership model that takes into consideration pedagogy and content knowledge. The central premise of a number of formulations of instructional leadership is that teaching and learning processes ought to be at the core of any conceptualization of leadership in education (Blase & Blase, 1999; Hallinger, 2001; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003). Based on an extensive literature review, Hallinger (2005) concluded “school principals contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through actions they take to influence school and classroom conditions” (p. 229). Martin, Trigwell, Prosser and Ramsden (2003) found a relation between how university department heads and subject coordinators themselves conceptualize and report to enact their role as leader of teaching, and how their followers perceived that leadership. Ramsden, Prosser, Trigwell and Martin (2007) subsequently established that university teachers’ experiences of academic leadership (leadership of teaching) relates to their approach to teaching. These findings indicate that, similar to K-12 school principals, department heads may indirectly impact on teaching approaches in higher education. Leithwood et al. (2008) maintained that instructional leadership practices can be categorised by the ways in which leaders 1) set directions, including vision, goals, and expectations, 2) develop people, including providing best practices and individualized support, 3) redesign the organisation, including building collaborative processes, and 4) manage the instructional program, including managing resources and staffing.

In Robinson et al.’s (2008) meta-analysis of leadership studies in the K-12 context, instructional leadership was found to have the greatest effect on student learning. They concluded that three dimensions of instructional leadership might hold promise for leadership for educational improvement. They are (with their average effect size): 1) establishing goals and expectations (ES=0.42); 2) planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (ES=0.42); and 3) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (ES=0.84).

In sum, the instructional leadership literature adds to the transformational leadership literature, by further specifying the need for instructional leaders to be a content and pedagogical expert, and in that capacity, promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. Similarly, visioning is further specified as establishing specific goals and expectations for teaching and learning.

2.3 Post-Secondary Department Chair as Middle Manager

Van Schalkwijk et al. (2015) show how in universities the leadership of teaching is embedded in the wider university culture, where efforts to improve teaching might not be valued, and reward systems might not be supportive of instructors' development as a teaching professional. In this respect, department chairs might be functioning more as middle managers and intermediaries (e.g. Briggs, 2005). The Carnegie Foundation has recognized the need for an institutional approach to strengthening education in Community Colleges, and highlighted the importance of leadership at the institute level for teacher professional learning (Carnegie Foundation, 2008). For the present paper this means that departmental leadership needs to be understood within the wider institutional context, and that organizational barriers and supports for instructor learning, teaching performance, and instructional leadership efforts need to be taken into account.

2.4 Curriculum Leadership

There is a body of literature that explores the educational elements of leadership in post-secondary contexts focusing on leadership for curriculum development. The notion of curriculum leadership appears particularly relevant for VPE, given the constant need to revise curriculum in response to changes in industry. Brown, Martinez, and Daniel (2002) surveyed instructional leaders in 2-year colleges in the United States about their perceptions of the most needed skills for community college leaders. Among the top ten ranked skills for leaders was curriculum development. More recently, Albashiry, Voogt, and Pieters (2015b) studied leadership of curriculum development in TVET institutions in Yemen. In their literature overview they state:

A growing body of analytical and empirical research indicates that academic managers are increasingly expected to perform curriculum leadership tasks: defining and sharing the curriculum purpose (i.e. mission, goals, and standards), promoting external and internal collaboration with curriculum stakeholders, providing a structure for curriculum development work, and coordinating the various and complex curriculum development activities. (p. 428)

Albashiry, Voogt, and Pieters (2015a; 2015b; 2015c) confirmed the important role that curriculum development has for heads of departments. Additionally, they indicate that the role of the department chair is significant in the development of quality educational programs and in improving student learning, but that heads of departments typically spend most of their time on managerial tasks.

2.5 Summary and Research Question

To summarize, the literature on leadership in education identifies the need for leadership of teaching excellence, quality curriculum, and an optimal student learning environment.

Figure 1 depicts the three areas of leadership of teaching in VPE. To achieve quality in each of these three areas, the literature identified the following tasks as important contributors.

1. To lead teaching excellence:
Considering individual instructors' needs and contributing to improved teaching and learning through the provision and promotion of and participation in high quality, relevant teacher professional development, and evaluation of teaching performance
2. To lead quality curriculum:
Defining and sharing the curriculum purpose, promoting external and internal collaboration with curriculum stakeholders, coordinating curriculum development activities

3. To lead an optimal student learning environment:
Effectively managing educational resources and program specific student guidance, instructions and regulations

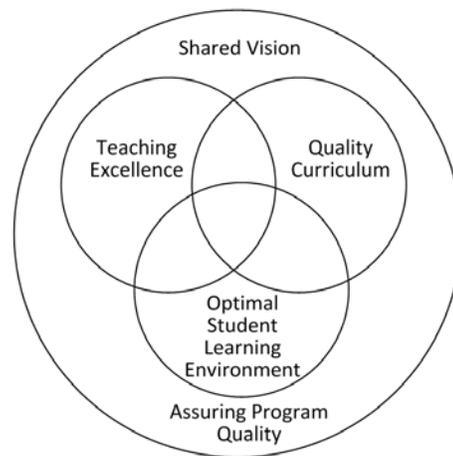


Figure 1. Conceptual model of instructional leadership of department chairs in VPE

In addition, there are two overarching strategies instructional leaders use to contribute to program quality.

4. Building and communicating a shared vision, expectations, and goals for teaching and learning;
5. Assuring program quality by evaluating program success and implementing improvement where needed (through collecting information about graduate satisfaction, student graduation rates, student performance on provincial or national exams, student employment rates, employer satisfaction with graduate performance, etcetera).

In the present study we explore the extent to which department chairs in VPE institutes in Western Canada fulfil these roles, with specific focus on fostering teaching excellence. Our research question is: how do program chairs in VPE institutes in Western Canada conceptualize and enact their role as leaders of teaching excellence in their department?

3. Methods

The methodology for this qualitative study was framed by a constructivist paradigm where research findings were viewed as subjective and contextually bound. Within this paradigm, meanings and understandings are constructed intersubjectively, and aimed at informing improved practice (Lincoln et al. 2011, p. 103 and 106).

3.1 Recruitment and Participants

A research ethics proposal was drafted and approved to ensure compliance with Canada's Tri-Council Policy Framework for Research Involving Human Subjects. To protect the identity of the research participants, institutes, chairs and instructors have been given pseudonyms and programs are described in broad terms. Three institutes were approached for this study. Prairie College is a large institute for technical education, offering trades and diploma programs and a few Bachelor degrees. Mountain College is a teaching university with diploma and Bachelor degree programs. River College is a community college with employment and upgrading programs as well as certificate and 2-year diploma programs. Upon receiving further research ethics approval from the three institutes, department chairs and deans were contacted to

invite their department for inclusion in the study. They were informed that criteria for inclusion in the study included: having at least 10 instructors, and the program's primary function is preparing students for a specific trade or profession. Liberal arts and general science programs were thus excluded, while programs such as welding and human resource management were eligible. Five departments accepted the invitation and contacted the researchers to volunteer their department for further recruitment in the study.

3.2 Data Collection

Instructors, chairs and associate chairs within each of these five programs were then invited to participate in the study and were requested to fill out an informed consent form. For the purpose of the present paper, all five department chairs and two associate chairs from a total of five departments were interviewed regarding their understanding of their role in leading and supporting teaching excellence in their departments, and the strategies they use to enact this role. The semi-structured interview guide included questions such as: What is your vision for teaching and learning at Your Institute? Do you have goals and priorities for instructor learning? and How does the performance management process support instructor learning? See Appendix 1 for the complete interview guide. While the chair and associate chair interviews form the main data source, we used additional data collected for other parts of our study to further understand the context in which the chairs work, and to triangulate the interview data. These additional data include notes made during observation of a number of staff meetings in each of the five departments, and interviews with 4-8 instructors in each department regarding their professional development.

3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Through a process of theming transcripts we arrived at a number of differences in role conception regarding 1) teaching and student learning, 2) the quality of curriculum, 3) management and administration, 4) direction and vision. We also noted differences in 5) beliefs regarding quality teaching, as well as differences in 6) beliefs about instructor learning. In terms of role-enactment, we established differences in the ways in which the chairs and associate chairs 7) foster the quality of learning for students, 8) foster formal learning of instructors, 9) foster instructor connections with the field, 10) foster on-the-job instructor learning, 11) lead quality curriculum, and 12) use performance assessment strategies in support of instructor learning, and 13) what advice they would have for new chairs. Finally, we found some differences in the way in which the chairs and associate chairs describe 14) organizational support for instructional leadership and 15) barriers to instructor learning. To further investigate these themes in the interviews, we created a summary matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 93-95) creating one column per participant, and one row for each theme. In each cell we then summarized the participants' beliefs or strategies, with reference to the original transcript excerpts. Following this exercise we further ordered our themes into over-arching categories according to the elements of leadership for teaching and learning as identified in the literature review. In the results section we describe these overarching categories, and the themes included in each.

4. Description of Sites and Participants

Blake³ and Drew

The first department we studied involves a trades program with over 40 instructors, a chair Blake and multiple associate chairs, including Drew. The trade taught in the program is regulated by the trades department of the provincial government. Students are officially registered as apprentices with this provincial trades department, which also provides the full curriculum, including the learning modules for

³ To protect the identity of participants, all participant names used in this paper are gender-neutral pseudonyms

the trade. At the end of their training, apprentices complete the provincial trade exam to become certified by the provincial government. Apprentices attend trades education at Prairie College for a two or three month period per year, spending the rest of the year working as apprentices in the trade.

Parker and Lane

The second department we studied includes one and two year health sciences programs, preparing students to work in clinics and hospitals. The department employs between 25 and 40 instructors, who are organized around courses in which they are specialized. Parker, who had been chair for a number of years, has a number of instructors who directly report to him/her. There are a number of associate chairs, including Lane, who each oversee one of the programs and who also have a group of instructors as direct reports. Unlike the trades program, the instructors in this department are responsible for developing their own curriculum.

Connor

The third department from Prairie College we studied has 25-40 instructors and provides a two year, a three year, and a four year business program. Connor has been chair of the department for almost two years.

Sam

The fourth department we studied provides a two year diploma and a four year degree in a social service at Mountain College. The program is small with less than 15 instructors. Sam has been the department chair for about seven years.

Corey

The fifth department we studied provides an online and face to face two year program at River College in a health sciences field, resulting in a diploma and a certification by a medical association. The program has over 40 instructors. At the time of study, Corey had been chair of the program for a few weeks, but had been associate chair for almost two years prior to that.

5. Findings

In this section we will describe the outcomes of our interview analysis. The results are organized according to the major themes and sub themes that emerged in the study. These were: 1) role conception and vision; 2) supporting instructor professional learning; 3) leading quality curriculum; and 4) gathering and using information to evaluate and enhance program quality.

5.1 Role Conception and Vision

Our first interview question focused on whether (associate) chairs consider it their role to build a vision for teaching and learning within their department.

We asked Blake: “Now that you’re chair, do you consider it your role to build a vision for teaching and learning in your department?” S/he responded:

Yes. Absolutely. I think, and part of that vision is the vision of excellence, I guess and that, I think is really the real challenge. You know, you always have the percentage of instructors that are really excited about what they’re doing, and really engaged, and then you have a group that, you know, they go in, they do their job, but that’s it. And to engage them in—in being more proactive to engage the students and get the students involved, that’s the challenge, I think.

When asked about their vision for teaching and learning, both Parker and Lane expressed that they do not see it as their responsibility to build such a vision, rather to have their program follow the vision of teaching excellence as set forth in the Faculty of Health and the institute. Parker for instance responded: “so Prairie College kind of says, ‘here’s what we think is ... good teaching and learning,’ and then it’s my job to help staff reach that goal.” Lane explains that their faculty has their own official documentation of standards for teaching quality. After a long explanation, we asked: “It sounds like the faculty [of health] has a vision for what good teaching looks like, and that you’re trying to get your instructors to become familiar with that, and to comply with it?” and Lane responded: “That’s what I’m trying to do. Isn’t that my job?”

When asked about his/her vision for good teaching, Connor described “engaged teaching” and “empowerment for students”. S/he highlights that good teaching should be focused on “moving students ahead” and “using [students’] time well”. We asked Connor: “Is it your role to communicate your vision to instructors and to staff?” Connor replied: “That’s probably a little bit unclear.” He expands on this by saying: “I think one of the things that I need to do is to certainly help to ensure that they [the instructors] have some kind of a vision for what they want to do, or at least work with them on that.”

We asked Sam whether s/he considers it the chair’s role to build a vision amongst instructors for teaching and learning, Sam replied: “I do think it’s my role to support the development of a vision or program learning outcomes and all of that, but I don’t think it’s my role any more than anybody else’s to actually create them or make them.”

In sum, when asked about working towards a vision of quality teaching and learning, most participants agreed that that was part of their role. However, only Sam reported to have involved instructors in his/her program in creating a shared program vision. The other chairs did not report explicit strategies to build a program vision together with program instructors, mobilizing energy and leading the group to a shared goal. Yet, all participants agreed that enabling and engaging instructors towards success and continuous growth and working towards teaching excellence is part of their role. As the following sections show, each (associate) chair seems to enact this role in different ways.

5.2 Supporting instructor professional learning

The chairs express a variety of beliefs about instructor learning, including Blake “It’s a growth process ... you constantly have the opportunity to improve yourself”. Connor, however, in the business program describes:

I don’t know if it’s that easy to try to make people who are, you know, trained in other disciplines, to make them instructors. ... I’m kind of a little more of the belief that teachers are born, not made. ... I think people that end up in that role here are a lot of people that actually are pretty good at teaching.

Chairs in the two health sciences programs indicate that instructors in their programs display a great willingness to learn: Parker: “The people I work with are really passionate about student learning and want to be the best they can be.” Corey: “I just get this overall sense that people [at River College] are enthusiastic about all kinds of learning.”

As each of our participants found instructor learning important, each reported to employ a wide variety of strategies to encourage and support instructor professional learning. These strategies can be organized in four themes: 1) fostering participation in formal professional development opportunities, 2) fostering instructor connections with the field/clinic/industry, 3) fostering informal instructor learning, and 4) encouraging instructor self-directed learning and learning from feedback through performance review cycles.

5.2.1 Fostering instructor participation in formal professional development (PD) opportunities

Each of the three colleges in our study provides individual funding for instructors to attend conferences and courses. In addition, the three colleges each have a dedicated department offering courses and/or workshops on a variety of teaching topics. In the two health sciences programs and the business program, participating in a number of hours of formal PD is a requirement to stay registered as a professional in that field and employed in the program. Thus chairs support instructors by approving time and funding for PD attendance. In addition, the chairs of these three programs have worked together with their teaching department, or other training providers, to provide sessions customized to their department on issues such as lesson planning, the institutional learning management system, and difficult conversations with students. Corey, in River College, also regularly invites speakers to the monthly mandatory staff meetings to provide relevant information and training. Blake and Drew in the trades department report that instructors do not have many opportunities to participate in PD because of the many hours they are required to teach, and the fact that there is only one week in the year when instructors are at work, but do not need to teach. In their case, facilitating instructor PD involves approving funds to attend PD and organizing substitute instructors for classes missed. The instructors in their program attending external PD sessions are required to write a report and circulate it amongst their colleagues. Sam, who oversees a program with a relatively small number of instructors, supports instructors' formal PD when they devise their workload plans at the beginning of the academic year. Sam supports them, for instance, by writing letters of support when instructors apply to attend conferences.

5.2.2 Fostering instructor connections with the field

In addition to organizing and approving funding for formal PD, and organizing customized PD sessions, the chairs in our study also work towards keeping instructors connected to their trade/profession. Lane and Parker, for instance, approve industry leaves that allow instructors to take a leave of absence from their instructor role to go back to work in the field for a limited time. Other chairs allow instructors to work in the profession on a part time or casual basis (Corey, health sciences; and Connor, business). Because of their heavy teaching load, Blake and Drew indicate that industry connections mostly happen through attending industry events, such as conferences, or in specific training sessions put on by manufacturers of new technologies that have become part of the curriculum. In the health services program, there is an expectation that instructors engage in service, both within the institute as well as in their profession. Sam explains that this means that instructors are expected to “be involved with the professional association, ... be on educational committees for people in the field ...”

5.2.3 Fostering informal instructor learning

Common in each department was the provision of a shared online space, where instructors could upload their teaching materials for their colleagues to use and adapt. The large trades program seems to have the most extensive culture of informal learning, where instructors welcome each other into their classes, and new instructors are encouraged to observe other instructors' classes prior to teaching the same content on their own. Many instructors also work together on developing an extensive online bank of student assignments. In addition, instructors in this trades program typically provide each other with teaching materials and walk each other through it. Instructors teach certain classes in pairs, contributing to mutual learning. In addition, Blake recently started requiring that new instructors be paired up with a mentor, and observe specified classes taught by their colleagues.

The business program, on the other hand, has a more individualized culture. Apart from the first year courses, instructors who teach the same course work in small groups to align pacing of content, quizzes and exams. From the instructor interviews we learned that, at times, the course coordinator prescribes rather

than collaborates, inhibiting others from bringing forward ideas and engage in discussion. Connor will make space in the schedule for instructors to observe colleagues who are already teaching the course they intend to teach in the future. At the start of his/her appointment as chair, Connor had recognized that instructors in his/her department were not able to meet all together at any point in the work week, due to the fact that there were always some instructors scheduled to teach at any given time of the working day. S/he therefore worked with the Faculty of Business to create one hour in the teaching schedule per week, where instructors are not teaching, so that there is time for instructors to attend a meeting or customized workshop.

Other chairs employ other strategies: Corey has encouraged the creation of learning communities of instructors who are working on similar courses or similar delivery formats. Sam seems to have implemented the least innovations regarding fostering informal instructor learning, possibly because s/he doesn't see a clear need. The instructors in the small program that Sam chairs are accustomed to collaborating on a wide variety of program activities. At the end of the academic year, they attend two full days of program planning together, in which their new initiatives of the past year are evaluated, and a plan is devised for changes to be made in the new academic year.

5.2.4 Fostering instructor learning through the performance management cycle

Each of the three institutes has a process in place for instructors and their chair to meet to discuss goals for the year, and at the end of the year to assess their progress towards these goals. At Mountain College a peer evaluation process has been made part of the performance management cycle, whereas at Prairie College there is an effort to encourage instructors to collect feedback from multiple sources on multiple aspects of their job, including teaching, corporate citizenship, and curriculum development. As such the performance management cycle is used by chairs to individualize their support for instructor. In conjunction with this, Blake worked on furthering instructor learning opportunities, by asking each associate chair to conduct classroom observations with all their newer instructors, and use a feedback template to fill in during the observation. Lane also started conducting supervisory classroom observations with the instructors reporting to him/her.

5.3 Leading quality curriculum

The departments vary in the extent to which they have control and autonomy over their curricula. Apart from Blake and Drew, whose curriculum is provided by the government, each of the (associate) chairs definitely consider it their role to lead quality curriculum, but to different degrees and levels. Each program is also in close contact with one or more professional associations that provide regulations such as graduate competency overviews and accreditation requirements. In addition, each institute also has curriculum development policies and other quality assurance requirements. Connor's program has gone through a process of program curriculum mapping as part of Prairie's College's efforts to create more consistency and quality across its programming. The first day of the program mapping exercise involved a day with industry representatives, who provided input in the expectations they have for the knowledge and skills of program graduates. The result of this process is a graduate profile, a list of program learning outcomes, as well as a collection of course descriptions, which includes descriptions of course learning outcomes and assessments. The health program at Prairie College has gone through a similar mapping process, but in addition, Lane and Parker have invested time to review course documents and materials in more detail. Lane stated:

I audit teachers' courses; I review [Learning Management System] sites using a checklist; I review curriculum to ensure that they meet the program outcomes, so, and then they have the appropriate course outcomes, and then their concepts, skills and issues match the course outcomes, followed by

the learning objectives. ... I review formative and summative assessments to ensure that they're high level thinking, and that they're testing to what they say they're testing to.

Sam, on the other hand, indicated to only be leading program curriculum mostly through collaboration, leaving the responsibility over individual courses with the instructor. We asked: So whose responsibility is it to create the curriculum in your program? Sam replied:

I'd say it's shared. [In a two day retreat after the spring semester] we all discuss what needs to change or what needs to stay the same or what we're lacking in. ... Now, the primary writing responsibility [of the master course syllabus] typically goes to the instructor that will teach the course.

In sum, leading curriculum development and renewal is a common and expected part of the role of department chairs of programs that are responsible for their own curriculum. In addition, each program is situated within a unique program specific complex of stakeholder organizations, each with their own demands and regulations.

5.4 Gathering and using information to evaluate and enhance program quality

The previous paragraphs have already discussed several processes and information sources that chairs use to gain information about the quality of teaching and curriculum in their program. In addition to these, three departments feed into professions that provide provincial or national exams. The professional associations share the exam results in such detail that programs can identify clusters of content that students either excel in or are weak in. The chairs feed this information back to instructors to further improve teaching and curriculum. Other sources of information are student performance during practicums and clinical placements, and graduate employment rates. Additionally, some programs also use employer surveys to request information on the strengths and weaknesses of graduates they recently employed. Finally, some chairs also use student graduation and employment rates as measures of program success.

6. Preliminary Points for Discussion

6.1 Ad hoc nature of leadership

Our findings paint a picture of (associate) chairs who are incredibly busy with administrative tasks. Each (associate) chair interviewed values quality teaching and has taken steps towards encouraging instructor professional learning. As Van Schalkwijk et al. (2015) point out valuing quality teaching is an important condition for leadership of teaching in post-secondary education. Although the (associate) chairs we interviewed have received little to no support in developing themselves as leaders of teaching, each has undertaken some promising efforts to foster formal and/or informal instructor learning in their department. These efforts include requiring instructors to collect student feedback more systematically, conducting classroom observations, and/or fostering instructor learning communities. Yet, none of our interviewees seem to have a systematic or strategic approach to leading teaching excellence. This comes most clearly to the fore in their responses to questions such as: What is your vision of teaching and learning? and Do you consider it your role to build a vision for teaching and learning amongst instructors in your department? In our participants' difficulty answering these questions, and subsequent descriptions of departmental culture, resonated a number of related reasons for the lack of a systematic approach to leading teaching excellence. The first reason can be paraphrased as "I have not really thought about it, I just focus on addressing all that comes my way". The second reason is the (associate) chair's assertion that all instructors are doing a great job, while at the same time there does not seem to be any mechanism in place for the (associate) chair to

gain information about the teaching performance of instructors. Connor is the most straightforward about the problematic nature of this lack of evidence:

in the chair role, I honestly, can't think of a day-instructor that I've had an issue I was asked to deal with. ... But that doesn't mean everybody's doing an amazing job; it just means I don't have a clue.

The third reason could be construed as a tension between academic values of academic freedom and collegiality on the one hand and the need for leadership and supervision of teaching on the other hand. This tension came forward specifically in the two departments offering degree programs. The relationship between supervisor and instructor in VPE institutions is an area of further exploration. Is this relationship more closely related to the supervisory relationship that exists in the K-12 sector (characterized by formal supervisee observation and evaluation) or in the university context (characterized by faculty autonomy and limited direct supervision by department heads)? It also begs the question whether differences in supervisory relationships across faculties and programs might be allowed an accommodated. In addition to these reasons, some departments also seem to encounter structural barriers to providing systematic direction and support for teaching excellence.

6.2 Structural barriers

In several cases, the lack of flexibility in instructor schedules does not allow for collaborative professional learning or programmed professional development. This might suggest a lack of commitment to the importance of instructor learning on the part of the institutions. There appear to be instances of structural impediments to the facilitation of meaningful instructor learning. This probably needs addressing at an institutional level and may be indicative of an undervaluing of instructor professional learning. There may also be innovative ways of creating the time for formal and informal professional learning that have gone unexplored. This is something that could be further explored with chairs whose departments suffer from these kinds of structural barriers.

6.3 Limiting beliefs

One of the chairs interviewed appears to hold the belief that teaching is something you are born to, and that good teachers end up in a position such as instructor because they are good at teaching. This is a potentially risky attitude for a leader of an educational program. There are several assumptions associated with this assertion that might not be substantiated: 1) that instructors are drawn to teaching because they are already good at it, 2) that content knowledge in the trade or profession is paramount and teaching will take care of itself, and 3) that it is not possible to teach someone how to teach. The risk lies in the potential that a chair holding such beliefs might not recognize and act upon their responsibility to assess teaching and support instructor professional learning.

6.4 Program specific differences

Finally, our findings show that in considering program leadership of teaching excellence in VPE, there needs to be recognition for the way each program is uniquely situated in a complex context. Figure 2 shows the various stakeholders surrounding a program. Our findings show differences amongst programs in the amount and type of influence and authority of the various stakeholder organizations over the content and delivery of the educational program. These differences may have implications for the way teaching excellence in the programs can be led. This issue was also pointed out by Craig (2005) who warns against the homogeneous classification of department chairs, who might play vastly different roles depending on the profession/trade or discipline, and might require different skills sets. In addition, in some programs

instructors and/or program leadership are more actively involved in helping create curriculum quality guidelines and/or accreditation requirements, and are therefore able to influence their context. Some programs seem to operate as followers of their profession/industry, while others play more of a leadership role. This raises questions regarding the responsibility of VPE in society: either to reproduce existing practices or be a leader of innovative change and environmental and social responsibility (Anderson, 2008). Clear leadership at the institutional level may help guide program leaders in determining their program's position in their complex context.

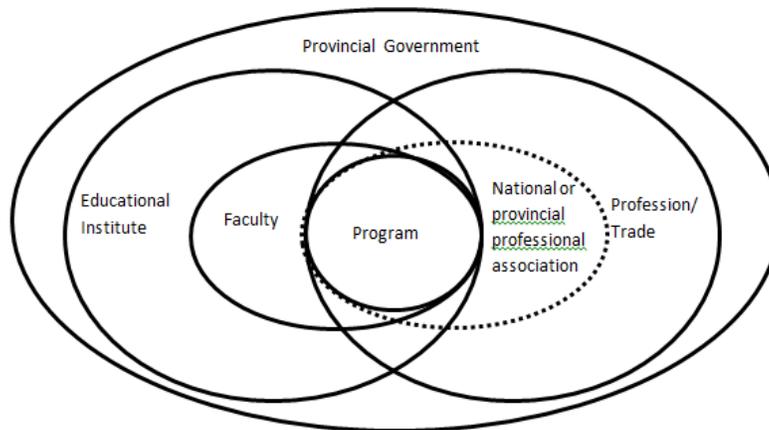


Figure 2. Depiction of how VPE programs are situated within the context of the institute, industry, and government

7. Conclusion

The participants in this study were clearly active in leading their academic units. We view them as busy and thoughtful educational leaders who operate in complex institutional contexts. One of the obvious conclusions is that they are operating with significant internal and external constraints and demands on their time, and these constraints are important considerations in understanding the nature of their leadership. There are considerable leadership responsibilities for most of our participants in the area of curriculum development and renewal in particular. Even though our participants have all thought carefully about their roles in teaching and learning, there appears to be an underdeveloped sense of what instructional leadership means in their institutions. In particular, department chairs' understanding of the process of creating a vision for teaching and learning in their departments seems an area for potential growth. As well, the systems and practices for supporting instructor professional learning (even within the same institutions) seem idiosyncratic. The work of these educational leaders is central to the quality of teaching and programming in VPE. A more systematic and considered approach to instructional leadership for VPE is needed to ensure high quality teaching and learning in VPE.

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Appendix 1 Leading teaching excellence in professional and vocational education

Interview guide for interviews held with chairs and associate chairs

Opening question: How long have you been chair? Were you associate chair before that time?

1. What would you say are your primary responsibilities as (associate) chair of this program?
2. What is your personal vision for teaching and learning at [your institute]?
3. Do you consider it your role to build a vision for teaching and learning amongst instructors in your department? If so, what are some things you've done in this regard?
4. Do you consider it your role to support instructor learning in your department? If so, what are some things you've done in this regard?

For each example: How did instructors respond? What have you learned from this experience?

5. Do you have goals and priorities for instructor learning? If so, what are these goals and priorities based on? What are your plans for supporting instructor learning during the current year?
6. What institutional provisions are in place for supporting instructor learning?
7. What is your sense of how well instructors respond to instructor PD initiatives?
Does this differ between In-house vs external PD opportunities?
Does this differ between teaching related vs trade related PD opportunities?
8. How do you support instructor on-the-job learning? What provisions are in place (mentoring, auditing, professional learning communities, staff meeting presentations, a culture of informal mutual instructor support, a sharedrive with teaching materials, etcetera)
-What factors, would you say, enable instructor learning in your department?
-What factors, would you say, inhibit instructor learning in your department?
9. How does the performance management process support instructor learning? Do you see instructor learning as an important piece of the performance management process?
11. What are current departmental norms/goals with respect to student learning? What data do you use to establish whether the department is successful? Do you feed this information back to instructors?
12. Whose responsibility is it to create the programming and curriculum in your program?
13. What advice about supporting instructor learning would you give to others considering taking on the role of department program chair?