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Vuori, J. (2019). Distributed leadership in the construction of a new higher education campus and community. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(2), 224–240.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217725322>

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Please cite the original version:

Vuori, J. (2019). Distributed leadership in the construction of a new higher education campus and community. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(2), 224–240.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217725322>

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Distributed leadership in the construction of a new higher education campus and community

Abstract

This study examines a teaching-oriented higher education community which undertook a major change effort when planning a new campus and redesigning their pedagogics.

This paper suggests that instead of merely being a rhetorical tool of senior management, distributed leadership can be practiced in higher education communities for the benefit of the learners, the teaching and administrative staff and the local community. The study emphasises how important the joint sense making of the pedagogical approach was in the creation of distributed leadership practices in a teaching-oriented higher education community. It also highlights how higher education students may take an active role in a work system characterised by distributed leadership and how the infrastructure of a campus building may support distributed leadership.

Keywords

Distributed leadership, universities of applied sciences, campus architecture, student engagement

Introduction

Distributed leadership accentuates the collective dynamics of leadership instead of focusing on the actions and beliefs of appointed leaders. It offers a non-individualistic, post-heroic alternative to discuss leadership, as it shifts the lens of examination from the hierarchical leader–follower relationship to the collective and context-specific processes of various actors (Bolden, 2011; Jones, 2014; Thorpe et al., 2011). Bennet et al. (2003: 7) define distributed leadership as an ‘emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals working with an openness of boundaries and the varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few’.

For over a decade, the ideas of distributed leadership have been extensively discussed by school management researchers (e.g. Harris, 2008; Mifsud, 2016; Tian et al., 2015). Although the emphasis on the collective management dynamics could offer a counterbalancing perspective against the managerialist and leaderist discourses in academia (Crevani et al., 2015; Kezar and Lester, 2011), higher education researchers have been less eager to accentuate the value of distributed leadership, with a few exceptions (Creanor, 2014; Harkin and Healy, 2013; Jones et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2014a; Jones et al., 2014b; Keppel et al., 2010; Zepke, 2007).

In order to contribute to the discussion of distributed leadership in higher education, this paper presents an in-depth case study of a higher education community

which has gone through a major change and, in the process, created a context-specific working culture characterised by distributed leadership. By employing qualitative research, this paper aims to provide a thick description of the processes of distributed leadership which were enacted in constructing a new campus community and identity. Arguing that distributed leadership is not only rhetoric, but also a tool to make change in a higher education institution, the paper gives voice to the community members as they share their accounts of how they participated in the planning process of the construction of a new campus building, their present views on the campus identity and visions for the future.

This paper also contributes to the general literature on distributed leadership, as it discusses a major change initiative. Kempster et al. (2014) note that the idea of a heroic leader dominates the literature of change management and call for new explorations of distributed leadership in connection with change initiatives in different contexts.

The paper is structured to first provide a short review of studies of distributed leadership in higher education. This is followed by an introduction to activity theory, which serves as an analytic framework for this study. After that, 'Alpha Pittoresqueville campus', i.e. the context of the case study, will be introduced. The data collection and

analysis methods will then be explained before concluding with the presentation and discussion of the research findings.

Distributed leadership: a contested concept in higher education literature

The conceptual development of distributed leadership has resulted in multiple analytic models and overlapping use of terminology. No universally accepted definition of distributed leadership can be found (Thorpe et al., 2011). A researcher searching for non-individualistic frameworks for the study of leadership needs to clarify the differences between ‘distributed’ leadership with ‘distributive leadership’ (Creanor, 2014; Keppel et al., 2010), ‘shared leadership’ (Fletcher and Käufer, 2003; Pearce, 2004) and hybrid configurations of leadership’ (Bolden and Petrov, 2014; Gronn, 2009).

In addition to these general difficulties of the concept, the reason for higher education researchers’ hesitance to examine distributed leadership may lie in the close similarity of its ideas with the tradition of shared governance and collegial leadership (Burke, 2010; Kezar and Lester, 2011). One might argue that distributed leadership is an idea that has been proved to work in higher education (Birnbaum, 2004) and therefore has travelled from higher education to other leadership contexts, contrary to

the normal phenomenon of management fads transferring from other contexts to higher education (Vuori 2015a; Birnbaum, 2001).

Gosling et al. (2009) and Bolden et al. (2009) argue that distributed leadership does not necessarily work as an analytic framework in higher education, but rather serves as a rhetorical tool by highlighting the leaders' goals. The rhetoric of the discourse, however, might blur the actual power dynamics of a higher education institution. Kezar and Lester (2011) suggest that shared (distributed) leadership serves the interests of management and posits that the rest of the actors in a higher education institution are mere implementers of the agenda set by the management.

In a recent British study, Floyd and Fung (2015) highlight that there are several inherent challenges of higher education and higher education institutions that make the application of distributed leadership complex. Among these are the complexities and parallel existence of different missions of the higher education community, diverse academic leadership roles, communication challenges and academic values and identities. Bolden et al. (2008) posit that higher education institutions tend to seek solutions by paying attention to key individuals or restructuring efforts and are less keen to improve mechanisms that foster collective endeavours.

More favourable accounts of distributed leadership have been published in connection with higher education development projects in Australia and New Zealand.

One of the significant findings of these studies is that distributed leadership can diminish the gap between the administrative and teaching staff (Harkin and Healy, 2013; Jones et al., 2012). Research has also shown that distributed leadership can act as a catalyst for curriculum change (Keppel et al., 2010) and enhance innovation in pedagogics (Creanor, 2014).

Activity theory

Cultural-historical activity theory is a framework for analysing work by using ‘an activity system’ as a central unit of analysis. It emphasises the connectedness between the parts of an activity system, the network of activity systems with other activity systems and the multi-voicedness of activity. An activity system can be illustrated as a combination of interlinked triangles (Figure 1). The elements in the upper triangle are the ‘subject’, which could be an individual or a group, the ‘object’ and the mediating ‘tools’ which the subject uses in an object-oriented action (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001). The activity system elements that create conditions in which the goal-directed activity can take place are the ‘rules’, the ‘community’ and the ‘division of labour*’. The activity system results in the ‘outcome’.

Each activity system is a product of its history, and its objects and tools have been shaped in the layers of its history. The activity system develops and changes through the contradictions (structural tensions) between the elements of the activity

system or between the activity systems (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001). The 'third-generation' activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001) or the background writings it builds on (Leont'ev, 1981, Vygotsky, 1978) have been recognised to contribute to the conceptual development of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, Spillane et al., 2004). It has also been used as a framework in an empirical study of distributed leadership (Ross et al., 2005).

Methods

As a single case study using qualitative methods, this paper aims to provide a thick description of the multi-voiced sensemaking processes of the members of the community. The campus at Pittoresqueville (a pseudonym for the city where the campus is located) was chosen as a single case because contrary to the critical accounts on the possibilities of distributed leadership in higher education, this case offers a unique setting to discuss a successful implementation of its principles. The case thus also has the potential to shed insight on a contested phenomenon (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998) and justifies the appropriateness of the selection of a single case in this study.

In this study, the pseudonyms 'Alpha' and 'Omega' will be used to refer to the two higher education institutions involved in the case study, while 'Pittoresqueville' will be used to refer to the city where these institutions are located. Both Alpha and Omega are teaching-oriented higher education institutions. While they both have several

campuses, they share a campus in Pittoresqueville which is situated approximately 50 kilometres from the main campuses of both institutions. There are no other higher education institutions in the city of Pittoresqueville or in the province where it is located.

The research material consisted of theme interviews with Alpha staff and students and field notes taken during observation periods on campus. The informants represented different roles on the campus: senior and principal lecturers (n = 5), their line managers (n = 3), students (n = 2), administrative personnel and library staff members (n = 3) and a student counsellor.

The themes for all interviews were as follows: 1) the perceived value of the Pittoresqueville campus in its geographical environment and for the higher education institution of which it is part; 2) the perceived outcomes of a recent organisational change; 3) the perceived uniqueness of the campus and 4) scenarios for the future. The theme of the uniqueness of the campus was approached with multiple questions asking the respondents what is unique and essential on campus and how they present the campus to various stakeholder groups (e.g. applicants, new students, new staff, companies and foreign and domestic visitors). In addition, those informants (n = 10) who had been part of the community throughout the planning and construction process were asked to answer the following question: How did the Alpha Pittoresqueville

campus become the Alpha Pittoresqueville campus? The interviews did not include any direct questions about leadership, nor was the term ‘distributed leadership’ presented by the interviewer at any time.

The interviews lasted 42 minutes on average and were conducted during the course of one academic year. The data started to saturate after seven interviews, indicating remarkably similar perceptions of the life on campus. The observation periods took place during the same academic year when the researcher visited the campus several times in connection with two large-scale student-led learning projects.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The first round of coding of the interview data and the field notes from the observation periods was inductive and was conducted to categorise the informants’ expressions of the attributes of campus uniqueness, the campus construction process and talk of leadership. The second round of coding was performed using the elements of the activity system (Figure 1) as the main categories and focused on both the historicity of the system and the contradictions within the system.

The following chapters are structured to provide a narrative of building the Alpha Pittoresqueville campus from the first planning stage to present. All pseudonyms used in this paper are female although two of the interviewees were male. Moreover, in order to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, in addition to not revealing their

gender, their titles referring to roles in management, teaching or administrative staff will not be provided.

Background

Pittoresqueville's historic sites and old-town infrastructure make it one of Finland's main tourist destinations. Its 50,000 inhabitants welcome 1.6 million tourists annually. In addition to employing people in tourism and retail, Pittoresqueville hosts electro-technical and petrochemical industries. Despite the grand history of the city and its ambitious plans for the future, the education level of the region is lower than the Finnish national average.

Up until the establishment of Finnish polytechnics in the early 1990s, the tertiary-level educational needs of the region were satisfied with the supply of three separate colleges: one for nursing, one for business and one for tourism. In the 1990s, the business and tourism colleges joined polytechnic Alpha and started to educate bachelor-level students in business and tourism management. The nursing college became a part of polytechnic Omega.

Today, Alpha University of Applied Sciences (UAS) has 11,000 students and is located in five campuses. Omega UAS has 8,000 students in seven campuses. These

institutions have a joint campus in Pittoresqueville with 1,000 students and 60 staff. The following chapters discuss its planning and construction process.

The first steps

It took more than five years from the moment the representatives of the senior management of Alpha approached the city of Pittoresqueville with the idea of building a new campus until the inauguration of the new campus building. The staff of Alpha worked at two different locations at that time. Laura describes her thoughts in those days:

I wondered how can this [situation] be so miserable There is a river in between us, with business [education] on one side and this [tourism education] on the other side, and the river is long and deep and we cannot find anything in common. It was like a competition: 'We do it this way, we have, we have always, yes, we have already tried that before'.

The city of Pittoresqueville provided the campus with a rental agreement for the plot for 30 years. It was in the interests of the city to ensure that there would be higher education in the area. The commitment of the city was also reflected in the plan to have

the regional developmental company move into the new campus premises to facilitate close links between Alpha and the companies in the region.

The planning process of the campus building lasted several years. All Alpha staff members were involved. The planning process was led by a task group headed by a member of the teaching staff. The task group reported to a supervisory group which consisted of degree programme managers and the unit director. The task group acted as an intermediary and was responsible for organising and planning actions. The members of the task group were chosen among people who were 'interested in pedagogics and future foresight' (Birgit). 'Although many say that you cannot change the curriculum and the premises at the same time, we did', Doris notes, 'and now thinking back, we are very satisfied'. Ella describes the working methods as follows:

We had many full-day workshops during which we started to think, hey, what is the learning of the future. What do we want it to be and how shall we accomplish that? And if so, what would it mean for our pedagogic approach and what would it mean for the premises? We started entirely from the basic assumptions of learning roles: How does one learn in the first place?

In addition to the staff working together, the inhabitants, local companies and the city representatives of Pitttoresqueville were involved in the workshops and other planning

activities. Teaching staff interviewed company representatives to find out the competence needs of Alpha graduates in the future. The entire staff also made excursions to other campuses in Finland. Internationally active staff members benchmarked working practices and facility arrangements when visiting companies and partner institutions abroad. Harriet, a member of the task group, recollects that the task group consulted literature, where is where they ‘got ideas, discussed them together, made conclusions and then brought them back to the task group to make decisions’.

The process involved meeting the architects and later the interior designers on different occasions. Birgit tells about the meetings and working practices:

... everyone was allowed to actually participate and everyone was expected to participate. Of course, some were more active than others, but everyone had a role. When meeting with the architects, I believe that everyone noticed that they actually listened to us. I believe it was quite a strong motivator to encourage people to open their mouths.

The divide between the pragmatists and the radicals

The planning process of the new campus revealed that there were two fundamentally different staff orientations: those who were described by Vivian as ‘healthy-minded pragmatists’ and those who were seen to be willing to take a more revolutionary path to the future. Laura shares a memory from the first days of the planning when she noticed the split:

We had our first session where the people were firmly above the clouds and thinking how at the new campus everything just goes and flows, based on the idea that people interact with each other and that results in understanding. And I thought I have two options: either to go along with it or say exactly what I want and think. And so I shared my point of view that the degrees are not achieved just by hanging around like that; we also need benches, tables, books and files.

The pragmatist/visionary split resulted in time-consuming discussions on the changes the task group proposed. While Yvonne describes the process of everybody taking part in the long discussion as a ‘lovely, lovely broth’, Jenny characterises the consensus-seeking discussion culture as ‘Swedish’ and notes that the long discussions ultimately ‘prepared for the major change which was later implemented’.

A lot was at stake, because the planning process concerned both the fundamental learning principles to be adopted in the new curricula and the joint working

practices in the new building. Therefore, the actions of the opposing camps were described as ‘hitting the brakes’ and ‘sabotaging’, which in turn were described as causing ‘open wounds’.

The discussion also involved asking who makes decisions. Would it be a majority vote, or should some, for example the line managers, be given more than one vote? Harriet notes as follows:

For the lecturers, the joint decision making, the majority rule of democracy is very difficult. If we decide something together, one thinks that it will not concern me because I was of the opposite opinion.

The work system at the planning stage

Figure 1 depicts the activity system of Alpha Pittoresqueville staff at the planning phase. The object of the work was a new campus and curricula. The outcome of the activity was the preparation of employable graduates, and as the legislation for Finnish UASs requires, prosperity for the region. The work was divided between the task group, the programme managers and the unit director, the teaching staff and the administrative personnel. In addition to Alpha staff, the planning involved the city, the inhabitants of

Pittoresqueville, representatives of Omega UAS they were also moving into the new campus building, the architects and the interior designers.

There were, however, two contradictions within the activity system.

Contradictions are a source for disturbances and conflicts, but also create opportunities for innovative disruptions (Engeström, 2001). The first contradiction in the Alpha Pittoresqueville work system in the planning stage was between the tools and the object regarding the principles of pedagogy—how does one teach and learn. The second contradiction was between the subjects and the rules and concerned who has the power to decide. Vuori (2011) argues that Finnish UASs do not have a history of shared governance and are more inclined to adopt a managerialist culture with top-and down management. Contradictions occur when the old collides with the new (Engeström, 2001). In this respect, the ideas of distributed leadership and joint-decision making can be considered as a new rule colliding with the old managerialist practices.

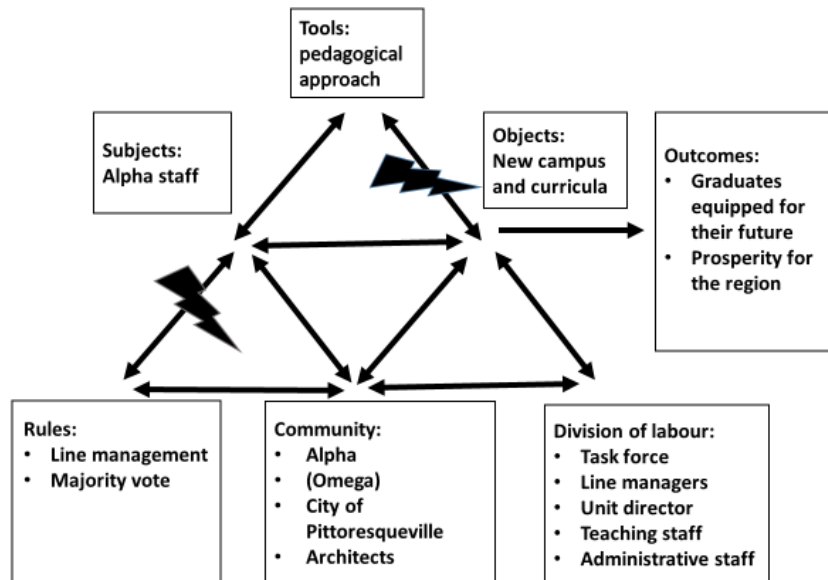


Figure 1. The work system in the planning stage

The way we do things around here

Figure 2 illustrates how the activity emerged after the contradictions of the planning stage were solved. The upper part of the figure illustrates that the guiding tool of the new activity system is the new pedagogical approach adopted by the Alpha Pittoresqueville staff, ‘our way of inquiry learning’ (Harriet). This pedagogical framework is common to all degree programmes offered by Alpha Pittoresqueville. Students have a semester project each semester that will connect different courses of the semester together. Through commissions of companies and other organisations, the

students are ‘linked to the challenges of the companies’ (Birgit). In this approach, the students are considered as active constructors of knowledge and have responsibility for their learning. The lines between different subject areas have been diminished because courses are offered as a combined effort of lecturers from different disciplines.

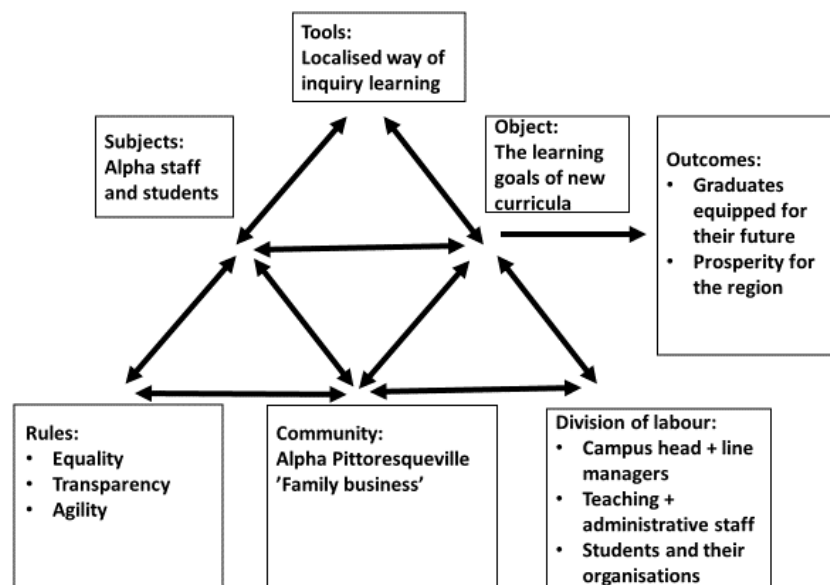


Figure 2. The work system at the time of data collection

The outcome of the work system is the same as in the planning stage: graduates equipped with the skills to succeed in the future and prosperity for the surrounding region. The subjects of this activity system are not only the Alpha teaching and administrative staff, as the pedagogical approach has changed the role of the students

and they are thus genuine subjects of the activity system. Heidi accentuates this point from the student perspective:

The lecturer is not solely responsible for the project; rather, one student from the class is a project manager. The lecturer only oversees, and of course takes care that it moves forward ... A lecturer does not always have to be a powerful authority figure ... who tells and others listen. Instead, we learn by doing, through trial and error.

Figure 2 shows how the 'rules', 'community' and 'division of work' have changed in the work system compared to the previous stage (Figure 2). The community at Alpha Pittoresqueville campus has evolved to a 'family' or 'family business' consisting of teaching and administrative staff and students.

It really is like a family spirit. You can see among the staff that we have a really good time together and we have good relationships. Many of us want to come to work because ... something happens all the time and it is nice to work (Ella).

The family metaphor was also seen in the informants' choice of talking about 'home', 'mothers' and 'fathers' and 'love' in the community. The working culture was referred to as 'positive', 'supportive' and 'inspirational'. In addition, when describing the work

system of today, the informants emphasised equality, transparency and agility as the major rules that have an effect on the work system. Equality was highlighted in the informants' comments emphasising a 'human touch' or 'human-to-human' relationships between the community members of Alpha Pittoresqueville campus. Two staff members share as follows:

Students are seen as whole persons, and personnel are also seen as whole persons. It is understood that there is always a human being behind the work, and she has a private life and it influences the work (Nelly).

...for us, human touch is a real, existing matter (Sara).

The interviewed students gave similar accounts of equality on campus. Marianne, for example, comments that, 'It feels like we work together, rather than me just working for her (the lecturer)'.

The architecture of the campus building supports this sense of community through transparency. Vera tells as follows: 'It [the building] has been designed to create transparency and close communications, so that students and the whole staff are interacting all the time'.

The campus infrastructure has been built on the idea of an open atrium type of space in the middle with the use of glass walls, thereby allowing transparency for all meeting and classrooms. Two of the participants reflect as follows:

The [Campus] building functions by collecting people together. And the downstairs lobby, something happens often there. Somehow the feeling spreads above and quite often people stand on the upper floors and look down at what's happening ... It is very difficult for me to describe it, but there is something magic in the activities and the resulting vibrations which spread around in the different rooms and corridors (Yvonne).

...these glass walls, you don't want to hide the classes inside some small classroom. This creates a sense of freedom. It does not feel that one is sitting in a stuffy classroom, but instead you can see through the school when you see into classrooms, you see what happens there...No one is tired of commenting on these glass walls and how this does not look like a school. It looks more like a workplace which has conference rooms. If you brought someone here, she wouldn't necessarily realise that this is a school (Marianne).

Moreover, instead of having offices of their own, the teaching and administrative staff work in a flexi-office that has been divided into different work spaces. The line managers and the unit head, for example, were not assigned offices of their own. As the following excerpt suggests, the flexi-office is the heart of the campus:

The community spins around there quite strongly. You are always in the middle of everything and you celebrate those name days and bring cakes and give neck massages to each other (Birgit).

Only the student counsellors and management assistants were assigned offices of their own in order to store the archives and to have private conversations with students. However, despite being adjacent to the flexi-office, Nelly explains as follows: 'I feel that I am missing something if I am not there where everyone is'. Doris agrees and describes that while working in her office, 'I feel I am far away from other people'.

Alpha Pittoresqueville campus also wants to extend its community spirit by giving a special welcome to people visiting the campus. This includes not only receiving applicants in the entrance examinations and orienting new students, but also welcoming citizens of Pittoresqueville and other visitors to campus.

We try to welcome people and visitors to our community. Everyone can help and you can talk to everyone here. We are kind of the same family, and you are welcome to join us (Birgit).

Moreover, Alpha Pittoresqueville community members perceive the working culture as 'entrepreneurial', 'agile' and 'pioneering'. They use these attributes to refer to willingness to experiment with new ideas in pedagogics, administration and community-building activities, such as organising events that take place in the atrium. Within the Alpha UAS, the Pittoresqueville campus initiates and welcomes small-scale educational and administrative pilots and trials.

No one has ever said to me that it is not worth starting to do something or that I should not take the initiative and start experimenting with something (Laura).

We perhaps think that let's try and see how it goes. We can always make it positive, because we are so close to students that we can always tell students what we are piloting and why. If it doesn't go well, we can always tell the students that this was an experiment and ask them what they think (Birgit).

One could think that we are kind of a laboratory; we are small enough, but we are international and kind of active (Hanna).

Formal leadership

The narrative of constructing a higher education community alongside with constructing the actual building for the community in Pittoresqueville accentuates the collective empowerment of all members of the staff (see Figure 3, division of labour). The community did not abolish the formal line-management roles, but the interviews with both line managers and the rest of the staff emphasise that the success of the effort belongs to everyone. The line managers themselves characterise their roles as enablers and communicators. When asked what she was personally proud of during the change, one of the line managers replied as follows: 'I can't answer that. The project succeeded, so I must have succeeded as well'. The formal leadership was able to create a culture where the whole community, including the students, can be part of the change. Ella remarks as follows:

A very big underlying force has been that our bosses and senior management ... are very positive about all development and give you freedom, responsibility and opportunities.

The adopted inquiry learning pedagogical approach empowers the students to be in charge of their learning. In addition, the Alpha Pittoresqueville campus empowers them to be active members of the community by inviting them to join various activities and processes that take place on campus. The students are part of the teams that interview prospective students in the entrance examinations. They also take a major role in the new student orientation activities and in developing the process for such activities. They feel the campus building is so comfortable that ‘when the classes are over, we do not necessarily go home, but instead stay on campus’ (Heidi).

Both sectors of the Finnish higher education system, i.e. the research universities and UASs, have experienced major cuts since 2010. The Ministry of Education and Culture’s Structural Development plan and its mission to create stronger higher education units (Vuori 2015b) have forced many UASs to shut down operations in smaller campuses. This is not the only threat the Alpha Pittoresqueville community is exposed to, as they must also face the idea of losing the community’s autonomy if the decision-making machinery of Alpha were to take over. Isa expresses the worst-case scenario as follows:

How would I put it...kind of like a form of organisational castration in which someone somewhere outside would make the plans and [Pittoresqueville] would just produce education and the local decision

making and local management would come to an end. Bureaucracy would increase and the model of a bigger organisation would be implemented by force.

Relationship with Omega UAS

The original plan was to create one Pittoresqueville campus with three main parties: Alpha, Omega and Pittoresqueville's regional development company. Eventually, the latter did not move to the Pittoresqueville campus. Instead, a branch of local city administration located its offices there, but currently has a very limited involvement in the activities with Alpha and Omega. Omega students and staff share and use the same premises, such as the library, classrooms and staff flexi-office, but contrary to the original plans, with the exception of sharing the library, the activities of Alpha and Omega can be characterised as activity systems that are connected but with 'separate organisations under the same roof' (Nelly).

Alpha and Omega, quite nicely, don't compete with each other. We might work in parallel, but we do not actually work much together (Yvonne).

We have a very good relationship in terms of when we have a break or have coffee. Nobody distinguishes if you are from Omega or Alpha...

And we make jokes in the same way in that office. But from the point of view of work, we do not have anything common with Omega at the moment (Ella).

Conclusions and discussion

Floyd and Fung (2015) note that surprisingly little research has been conducted on distributed leadership in higher education. This study was a single-case study, and as such, offers one perspective on this phenomenon. However, single-case case studies may make a contribution to an emerging field of research if they are able to provide new insights (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). This case study helps substantiate the argument that distributed leadership in higher education can be more than rhetoric (cf. Gosling et al., 2009) or a disguised way to implement senior management's agenda (Kezar and Lester, 2011). Furthermore, the study suggests that distributed leadership may have profound implications that benefit both students and staff.

Several measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, the informants were chosen to represent all community members of the campus, including the management, administration, teaching staff and students, to provide a holistic account of the campus construction process. Although data started to saturate after the first seven interviews, the data collection continued and 14 people were interviewed. Second, in addition to interviews, the researcher observed how the

community worked in practice by observing how students worked and took ownership of their learning processes in two different student-driven projects. Third, the data was carefully coded in two iterative cycles: first inductively and then deductively. Fourth, after the case narrative was written, it was sent back to and checked by two of the informants from the original interviews (Cuba and Lincoln, 1985). The informants confirmed the correctness of the factual contents of the narrative and concluded that the interpretation of the events is plausible.

The case narrative of Alpha Pittoresqueville campus accentuates how the elements of trust, respect, recognition and collaboration in distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2012; 2014) were gradually incorporated in the creation of a working system on campus. The analysis of the work systems through the framework of activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001) revealed that the change took place through solving two contradictions in the planning stage: the first concerned the learning approach as the major operating tool of a learning-oriented higher education community, while the second concerned the power system on campus in terms of who makes decisions. The contradictions resulted in heated discussions and a change process—a back-and-forth journey in which the opposing camps, ‘those in the clouds’ and ‘those on the ground’, expressed conflicting views revealing both commitment and resistance to change.

Although Alpha Pittoresqueville campus is also conducting research and development activities to support the local community the major share of its budget focuses on teaching activities. Therefore, joint sense making of the pedagogical approach, the main tool of its working system, was central and crucial for the change to take place and a community to develop. Earlier studies have demonstrated the possibility of distributed leadership to foster curriculum change and innovation in pedagogics (Creanor, 2014; Keppel et al., 2010). The learning approach of Alpha Pittoresqueville campus emphasises students' active learning, engagement, collaboration with the local employers and teachers' role as facilitators. In practice, the new learning approach encapsulates what Kuh (2009: 683) considers as student engagement: 'Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities'.

As a part of the professional higher education sector, the goal of the work system on Alpha Pittoresqueville campus focuses on the employability of students and the future of the regional economy. Although the teaching staff has different disciplinary backgrounds, the disciplinary divide was not accentuated in the interviews (cf. Harkin and Healy, 2013).

Similar to the studies conducted by Harkin and Healy (2013) and Jones et al. (2012, 2014a; 2014b), the case of Alpha Pittoresqueville campus highlights the possibilities of distributed leadership to diminish the gap between the teaching and administrative staff. This was emphasised by the interviewees in both staff categories and exemplified in the accounts of the administrative staff that either planned to or had already moved from their designated offices to the flexi-office to be part of the community.

The interpretation of this study is that distributed leadership was not mandated or directed from above (cf. Kezar and Lester, 2011; Mifsud, 2016), but rather a practice that was adopted by the community with the support, participation and encouragement of the formal management. This was possible first because of the strong local autonomy granted to Alpha Pittoresqueville campus by Alpha UAS, and second because of the non-heroic leadership orientations of the local formal management. The patience of the formal management to endure the lengthy process of joint sense making resulted in a work system that has profoundly changed the leadership and work practices of the community. The numerous remarks of the informants that refer to 'family', 'home' or 'family business' exemplify the community culture that was developed when the 'open wounds' caused by the debates in the planning stage started to heal.

In discussing the potential of distributed leadership in higher education, Floyd and Fung (2015) suggest paying attention to the practices to provide time and opportunities to discuss the nuances and contradictions of distributed leadership in regards to institutional values and goals. The case of Alpha Pittoresequeville campus provides an empirical account of how this was achieved. The joint sense making process was started with a core question (How does one learn?) and was continued by the staff setting their goals and redesigning their roles as facilitators of student learning and as links between higher education and local employers' needs.

The metaphors referring to 'family', together with the multiple informants' comments on the 'human touch' on campus, signal that distributed leadership has contributed positively to employees' well-being. The success of reforming the work conditions has led to an agile 'lab' culture which readily welcomes pilots and other experiments and thus demonstrates how to tolerate and make use of new internally or externally driven changes.

The original goal of creating a joint work system of Alpha, Omega and the city of Pittoresqueville on new premises was not reached. It is evident that while they are connected to each other, they are separate activity systems that work in parallel, but not jointly. This separateness was so taken for granted that the majority of the

interviewees, although sharing the same premises with Omega, did not mention Omega in the interviews except when specifically asked by the interviewer.

Contributing to a field of studies of distributed leadership in higher education, the Alpha Pittoresqueville case study offered insights regarding a successful change initiative characterised by distributed leadership in a teaching-oriented higher education community. It is also exceptional because it discussed how the mental adjustment to distributed leadership practices took place at the same time the community physically moved to the new premises which were constructed to support the adopted learning vision and distributed leadership practices. Further examination of the relationship between mental and physical (and virtual) space arrangements in connection with higher education leadership could offer interesting new avenues for research.

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