BOOK REVIEW

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN CANADA

REVIEWED BY:

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Ives, Cindy, Walsh, Pamela, & Heiser, Rebecca E. (Eds.) (2025). *Women and Leadership in Distance Education in Canada.* Athabasca University Press. Pages: 281. Price: 32.99 CDN (paper).

This welcome publication focusing on women's leadership and positioning in varied distance education (DE) roles and contexts opens with a very informative, strong, and well researched introduction. The chapters that follow offer insight into the august history of our field as recounted by many of my former colleagues, providing readers with "an authentic glimpse of ... women's experiences with leadership" (p. 15).

I was especially happy to see a meaningful quote from DE pioneer and former colleague, Liz Burge, and her co-author Helen Lenskyj, wherein they suggested that "feminist principles of teaching and learner-centred instructional approaches are inherent to distance education contexts and ... feminist approaches are learner centred" (p. 2). Absent in these pages, however, are references to many other pioneering women distance educators, who, through their leadership and scholarship, contributed to the advancement of the field decades ago; I think of Linda Harasim, Jane Brindley, Judy Roberts, France Henri, and Barb Spronk.

Lori Wallace's opening chapter's title, calling forth the "old buffalo," is both significant and wise. Titles are important, always, offering insight into what follows as well as creating interest. Ives, Walsh, and Heiser's authors' many dynamic and descriptive chapter titles effectively guide readers through the book's pages.

I am always fascinated by women's stories of their work, their devotion, their struggles, and their successes in higher education. But I also understand the challenge of harmonizing or incorporating diverse stories into a seamless whole. Thus, to accommodate the impressive scope and breadth of these chapters, I am accepting a broad view of the notion of leadership.

Hence, I ask, "What is leadership?" At what level does it exist? And when is it mentorship or simply good practice? Does achievement and success within one's professional endeavours mean leadership? This question underlies, for me, the book's overall discussion of leadership.

Sarah MacRae, in her chapter, encourages us to "apply the term synonymously with "educator" in [our] various teaching and learning spaces" and makes a convincing argument for the "soft skills" of communication in leadership as well as emphasizing the value of critical reflection in our work. I support the latter more so than the former.

A common view of leadership put forth by Afsaneh Sharif in her chapter, and well-supported, is this: "... leading from the middle means that anyone, no matter the position or job title, can be a leader. It means being collaborative in an environment in which everyone leads and follows" (p. 223). And along the lines of "soft skills" or "quiet leadership," Kristine Dreaver-Charles

suggests that "sometimes trying to lead quietly by asking that one question can create a conversation on possibilities" (p. 46). And perhaps it does; but is that leadership? Or community? Tammy Soanes-White presents another view of leadership – "walking alongside" – which reflects her experience as a distance learner and practitioner in the rural north. "Being a leader in this educational environment means walking alongside others as we co-construct our experiences by valuing roles, responsibilities, and knowledge systems together" (p. 239), advice formulated for success and relevant for anyone, anywhere.

Articulating her view as a young scholar, Connie Yuen speaks of "cultivating leadership skills by establishing visibility, capacity, and credibility in the field" (p. 248). She is aware that she is not only a fledging scholar but also a woman working in a traditionally male-dominated field that, despite diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, remains resistant to women in leadership roles.

Several chapters present very detailed histories of programs or institutions, focusing on the contribution of women staff to the development and ultimate success of distance education in Canada. As Kathleen Matheos concludes: "[thinking back], it is important to acknowledge the women leaders whose commitment and collaboration created the firm foundation for [today's] online and hybrid learning" (p. 152). Likewise, Lorraine Carter, Diane Janes, and Katy Campbell echo similar sentiments in their stories and histories from their respective institutions.

Many chapters, however, approach the task of defining leadership more directly, and in both theoretical and concrete terms. A strong statement of purpose, for example, clearly sets the direction in Sophia Palahicky's chapter, where she "focuses on my work as an associate director responsible for learning design services, including the following three areas: instructional design, faculty development, and faculty support" (p. 155).

Several chapters offer useful hallmarks of leadership. Jennifer Lock, Patti Dyjur, and Michelle Marshall approach leadership from a more theoretical perspective than do some others. While it's not necessary to have *everyone* run through foundational theory, this chapter provides a complementary foundation to the book's introduction. Grounding their discussion on the "three Cs" of leadership – connections, communication, and catalyst – they also include the key concepts of advocacy and, ultimately, change.

Two other important "c" words, closely related and also relevant to leadership, pop up frequently throughout: crisis and Covid. Lynn Corcoran and Margaret Edwards state this truism: "There will always be a crisis at some point. ... as leaders [we] learn how to respond to them and build upon our learning by scaffolding the lessons learned from the current crisis to the next crisis..." (p. 120).

The relevance of this quote springs from both its common sense and truth, and from the fact that many chapters in this collection centre, or focus on, the "pivot" that Covid-19 thrust upon us. In her chapter, Amy Burns very precisely positions her experience in "crisis leadership" while using personal journal entries, an engaging technique in women's writing.

Michelle Harrison, Christina Hendricks, Tannis Morgan, Anne-Marie Scott, and Elizabeth Childs used another technique to tell their stories, that of multiple voices chiming in, **"**collectively wondering why there is not more written about what it means to be a leader in distance education, particularly given the global recognition of Canada as a leader in this area" (p. 169). Their reflections emphasize the importance of transparency, communication, and connection. Articulating their approach to change in their chapter title, "Hurry slowly ...," they recognize "that values-based leadership requires time to consult, reflect, and then act" (p. 180).

Corcoran and Edwards also present four useful general leadership strategies: personal and institutional values alignment, communication, support, and provision of structure, followed by detail explanation of the implementation of these values.

Sometimes, giving leeway to telling personal stories invites a lot of story-telling, which provides a warm and folksy vehicle through which

to expound on a topic. In some cases, the story veers a bit, one way or the other, off the main road. Jenni Hayman, in her story-telling, very deliberately constructs her auto-ethnographic narrative around four research questions to explore the junction of graduate study and leadership for women.

The always-present issue of women's positioning within professional ranks resonates loudly for these authors, among them both Erin Keith and Jasmine Pham, who discuss "carving out" spaces for themselves in established and "masculine and white spaces" (p. 221) that have always constituted higher education environments.

The book concludes tidily, summarizing themes pertinent to women's leadership roles, and presenting both an optimism and a hope for the future: "In these examples, we see an opportunity for future theorists and scholars to consider the nuanced ways that women demonstrate leadership in higher education (p. 276).

Space limitations prevent me from singling out the work of more chapter authors. I can only say that they are good. Together with them, the editors have constructed a book with many strengths: It's sincere; it's wise; it's historically fascinating; it's eloquent. This book has a lot of heart. As a woman with long experience in our field, I have witnessed and experienced many of the contexts described in these chapters. So I nod my head, knowingly, and thank the writers for these valuable insights. And strongly suggest to readers that you add this collection to your "must-read" list.