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Like the sea: Living communityship as a form of participatory leadership within the creativity for learning in HE (#creativeHE) community

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ABSTRACT

The global pandemic has led to an explosion of open learning opportunities for academics to connect, share and develop ideas together. This paper presents a collaborative autoethnographic case study on the educational leadership approaches enacted and experienced in the voluntary Creativity for Learning in Higher Education (#creativeHE) community. The authors reflect, critically analyse and review the leadership of this open peer support community as it is experienced by them using visual metaphors and paired conversations. Insights gained through this inquiry seem to suggest that the leadership within this community is characterised by and experienced as communityship, a highly participatory and democratic way of leading that brings harmony, offers refuge and stretches the leadership team. Their humane and affective bonds as a collective provide a safe and calm working space in which everybody can flourish.

KEYWORDS

Educational leadership; professional community; Collaboration; open; network; Creativity

The creativity for learning in Higher Education (#creativeHE) community

As the sector moves towards more learner-centred and flexible pedagogies, paradoxically set within a more lean, mean and 'agile' context, the need for an academic community that modelled resourcefulness and encouraged educational experimentation emerged. The voluntary open cross-institutional #creativeHE community offers professional development opportunities and acts as a greenhouse for creative practitioners, researchers, students and risk-takers. #creativeHE was born in 2015 through existing professional relationships and shared interest in creativity to transform the curriculum, staff, and student experience. This unfunded professional

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development initiative was conceived by an individual from a single university and shared initially with six HE institutions. The collaborative approach enabled the #creativeHE team to grow across eight further institutions in the United Kingdom flourishing into a wide-reaching international community championed by a diverse team of 13 individuals across 12 organisations in the UK, Canada and Greece. This paper explores the #creativeHE project leadership approach and how it is experienced by participant authors through the lens of Fields et al. (2019) leadership framework.

Today

The #creativeHE community is a non-funded, distributed and international community of practice which originated in the United Kingdom, a space for emergent professional development for educators, students and the wider public, via practice sharing, peer support and experimentation with creative learning and teaching approaches. The community has developed projects and practices for engagement in scholarly activities to create stimulating learning and teaching experiences and address the need for creative educators and graduates across disciplines and professional areas. There are almost 700 members in the community, over 1100 participants from 178 institutions and 17 countries have participated in our activities.

A team of 13 volunteer educators that is coordinating community activities represents Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) colleagues at all career stages and contracts. Their disciplines reach from Arts to STEM. The team's diverse expertise creates a depth and richness of understanding of the disciplinary nuances of #creativeHE members, maximising reach. Operationally, the #creativeHE team works in smaller groups with specific responsibilities to secure the smooth operation of the community. Our values, as decided through democratic dialogue, are open, caring, collegial and collaborative.

In 2019, the wider #creativeHE community synthesised a Creativity Manifesto defining our collective beliefs and a call for action. Embedding creative practice in both formal and informal professional development activities across the sector, together we champion the #creativeHE values, and embrace creative curricula and pedagogy, nurturing the creative drive among staff and students locally, nationally and internationally to transform learning and teaching. Thus #creativeHE offers open, supportive and stimulating spaces for staff who seek to transform education and student outcomes through the core team's research-informed creative practices.

Our leadership approach

As a *voluntary* team, we eschewed a managerial approach and adopted a values-driven distributed leadership model (Bolden et al., 2009) and communityship (Minzberg, 2009), to foster collective creative practice. We wanted to explore if our leadership approach is aligned to Fields et al. (2019) which was developed especially for educational development settings and emphasises: affective qualities; mentoring and empowering; action-orientation; teaching excellence; and research and scholarship. We therefore developed this collaborative autoethnographic case study to interrogate this model and its relevance for the #creativeHE team's lived leadership experience.

A contextual literature review

Innovations in educational leadership

The Humboldtian model of HE (cited by Kreckel, 2017), is humanistic and focuses on the unity of teaching and research, unconditional academic freedom for educators and students, and for the community of educators and students to engage in intellectual inquiry to become world citizens. It provides an alternative to the widely discussed neoliberal university and market-driven forces (Hall, 2018, 2020), where an aggressive ‘new managerialism’ emerged – with senior managers determining not just policy and strategy but asserting their ‘right to manage’ even pedagogic and assessment practices, previously very much the domain of the autonomous professional academic (Sinfield et al., 2004).

Bolden et al. (2009, p. 257) acknowledge that ‘the structure and nature of HE institutions, however, is not generally well suited to managerialism or “top-down” leadership’ seemingly advocating for a more distributed model. Such a model focuses more on the leadership activities and processes than on the individual leader and their qualities and allows for more emergent, ground up development suitable for our super-complex times and our super-complex institutions (Abegglen et al., 2020). This Humboldtian model fits well with informal and horizontal settings that do not engage individuals vertically, and are therefore more open and embracing – and humane (Abegglen et al., 2020). Social constructivism (Vygotsky et al., 1962) and communities of practice also seem relevant here (Wenger, 1998). Wenger-Trayner’s and Wenger-Trayner (2012) talk about “leadership groups” as experienced within communities of practice:

We have found that the learning capability inherent in social groups such as communities of practice greatly depends on internal leadership ... But as a community matures, leadership ideally becomes more distributed: more members understand the range of needs and step up to fulfil them. Over the years, we have developed a useful practice to foster and distribute such internal leadership more rapidly and systematically. We call this practice “leadership groups.” (p.3)

The idea of rotating leadership has also been explored in the literature. Two such examples are Howell and Mendez (2008) who refer to this as alternating leader and follower roles. Stech (2008) talks about the leader-follow state. While Bolden et al. (2009) recognise the role distributed leadership can play in HE, Minzberg (2009) proposes for organisations to look more widely for communityship as a form of shared and distributed and participatory leadership. They argue that an organisation focusing on practice and not on people and their titles or positions can boost proactive engagement and initiative among employees. This communityship seems to create more humane organisations, and more caring, energised, engaged and active employees with shared responsibilities. This practice-focused approach can be seen in the informal educational communities, networks and events that opened up in the pivot to remote emergency teaching during and since the pandemic. However, Bolden (2011, p. 254) questions if the concept of distributed leadership presents something new or if it is a substitute for previous ideas and if it actually offers a realistic response to equity. Additionally, Harris and DeFlaminis (2016, p. 143) recognise ‘romanticised and idealised accounts of distributed leadership in practice’.

Educational development

According to Fields et al. (2019) a large proportion of the literature on leadership in HE focuses on formal roles while leadership within informal settings is under-researched. The framework they developed is based on conceptualisations of such leadership within educational development settings consisting of affective qualities; mentoring and empowering; action-orientation; teaching excellence; and research and scholarship. This places relationships, partnership and collaboration at the heart of educational development, indeed they are framed as vital for its success (Stefani, 2003) while a managerial approach may have a negative effect (DiNapoli, 2014). Popovic and Plank (2016) recognise that a variety of approaches is needed to be effective and defined the following educational development models: 'grassroots', 'faculty-led', 'strategic', 'research-led' and 'community-building'. They note that a community model connects academics beyond any disciplinary, professional or hierarchical boundaries within and beyond an institution. Crawford's (2009) research within pre- and post-92 institutions in the UK, suggested that after academics complete institutional requirements that lead to a teaching qualification in HE, they seem to 'disappear' from the radar of the institution and may appear as inactive regarding their professional development linked to teaching. In fact Crawford (2009) established that academics often turn to external networks and communities, predominantly disciplinary ones. Nerantzi's (2017) phenomenographic study illustrated that academics also engage in open, cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional networks and communities, and find them of value for the ongoing development of their practice. Nerantzi's review of established pedagogical models and frameworks supporting digital learning across all settings for this project, illuminated key similarities that were recognised as enablers of effective collaborative learning across these frameworks: facilitator support, choice, activities and community.

Leadership model

The #creativeHE team structures are democratic with shared decision making. Regular, open and inclusive discussions encourage participation to occur in a safe space where all voices are actively encouraged. We collectively make decisions transparently and problem-solve respectfully together. We find synergies through appreciating each other's qualities, collaborating closely to develop ideas and activities, fostering a collective belief that the power to influence student outcomes and drive sector change lies within the team and continually striving to encourage others. The core team is fluid and flexible. Wider team members and community members can become part of the core team when their confidence and time allows. This compensates for 'churn' and embodies our values of collegiality, openness and caring. If a core team member leaves there is no adverse effect thanks to our collaborative approach and ongoing capacity building. Members who step down remain valued and active members of the community, and they can step back into the core or wider team at any point.

To enable remote team working, we use social media to plan, action decisions and evaluate activities. The core team meets three times a year online to review and evaluate progress, plan future initiatives and agree on roles. For ongoing communication and team building, we use a private social media messaging group. We share our planning,

implementation and evaluation documentation using a cloud file-sharing platform. We rotate responsibilities for coordinating, facilitating, leading and evaluating community activities and often work in smaller teams that are reconfigured regularly to maximise effectiveness, strengthen intra-team relationships, enable personal and collective growth, build capacity and inject dynamism. This strategy has helped us grow, strengthen and sustain team relationships, team and community activities.

The core team have self-selected annually rotating responsibilities and work together in smaller groups on the smooth running of the community, leading specific projects (such as Tasler et al. (2021) *#creativeHE annual collection*), following the model of distributed leadership groups in a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2012). In 2020/21, two core team members led the co-ordination of our activities and blog, regular events were facilitated in pairs or threes and rotating small groups developed open online courses and additional social media content. In 2021/22 these roles were rotated according to personal preferences, creating a whole team of equals where the process and the outputs are truly collaborative. New wider and core team members are welcomed, often starting as event participants and progressively beginning to take on roles as champions, hosts and leaders of the community. As our team has grown, the qualities and expertise individuals bring create new synergies that influence direction and create mutual learning opportunities – and we felt that this was the moment to investigate whether our hopes for our leadership model was in fact how leadership was experienced by the #creativeHE team.

Method

To investigate how the #creativeHE leadership model is enacted in practice, this inquiry adopted a grounded case study method (Descombe, 2017) using collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Gillaspy et al., 2022; Lapadat, 2017) to gain insights into the leadership approach as experienced within a particular professional community. This enabled the in depth study of experiences within natural settings (Cousin, 2009; Punch, 2014) to better understand a particular phenomenon relating to a case, and learn something new in relation to this. According to Stake (1995) this is an intrinsic case study as authors electing to take part in this particular case are part of the team under investigation. The aim of the case study was to understand how we work together as a leadership team. The research question therefore is the following:

How is leadership experienced and lived by the #creativeHE team?

As authors we engaged in a CAE (Lapadat, 2017) visual inquiry (Margolis et al., 2011) to collect data using photographs as triggers for reflection, exploration and dialogue to gain insights into the #creativeHE leadership experience. This is an intrinsically ethical procedure as all the authors are voluntary participants in the enquiry itself, with the right to withdraw at any time prior to publication. As this is a form of insider research, as author participants we are conscious of our positionality and how this may affect data collection. While we bring a knowledge and familiarity to the inquiry we may also be biased and subjective (Greene, 2014). We

have dealt with this with transparency. Together, we the authors, became co-researchers:

A group of researchers work[ing] together on a particular topic, drawing on [our] own memories relevant to that topic, and through the shared work of telling, listening and writing, [we] move beyond the clichés and usual explanations to the point where the written memories come as close as [we] can make them to “an embodied sense of what happened. (Davies & Gannon, 2006 as cited in Lapadat, 2017, p. 3)

We collected data through a combination of visual research methods (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020) and written language materials. There is no objective truth in images, rather Hartel and Savolainen (2016) highlights that pictorial methods trigger strong emotional reactions that are personal and open to qualitative enquiry and analysis.

We used photographs to reflect on leadership within our informal academic network drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) to unearth our own interpretations of what those photographs meant to us.

The photographs used were a curated selection, 50 in total, from two 101 Flashcard sets from 2020 to 2021 (CreativeHECommunity) the community had created as open educational resources; curating photographs taken by contributors in a specific year as a response to ‘noticing’ and to which some of the author participants had contributed.

Each author participant was invited to choose any image from the collection that best represented for them their leadership experiences within the #creativeHE team – and then engage in a dialogic process that moved through description, analysis and discussion in pairs. Palus and Drath (2001) argue that it is necessary to ‘put something in the middle’ when attempting authentic dialogue to unearth complex ideas. We also wanted to avoid the pull to the normative or performative answer that interviews and questionnaires often trigger.

These photographs were used in dialogue also with Fields et al. (2019) educational leadership framework which was drawn on as a scaffold to shape discussion. Together the images and the Fields et al descriptors made visible what was tacit with respect to their sense of the leadership experience within the #creativeHE community.

Co-authors worked in pairs, moving from the individual selection and reflection process to the dialogic exploration of their thoughts. In the process, each pair completed the template that was provided for this purpose that was then used for the analysis (see [Appendix 1](#)). The analysis of the data was a collaborative endeavour carried out by participants-authors. It enabled a peer dialogue that was important in agreeing the themes and patterns that emerged and consider differing viewpoints and question our individual observations and interpretations more critically.

Findings: How leadership is experienced

Of the eight photos chosen by the participant authors from 50 flashcards in total, four included images of the sea, two were the same picture of rocks and ladybird, one was of a glass door sculpture and one of fungus ([Figure 1](#)).

Looking more closely at the chosen photos (see [Figure 1](#)) and the narratives that accompanied these in the data (3530 words in total, summarised in [Table 1](#)), we gain further insights into the symbolism of the metaphors used revealing it seems, key

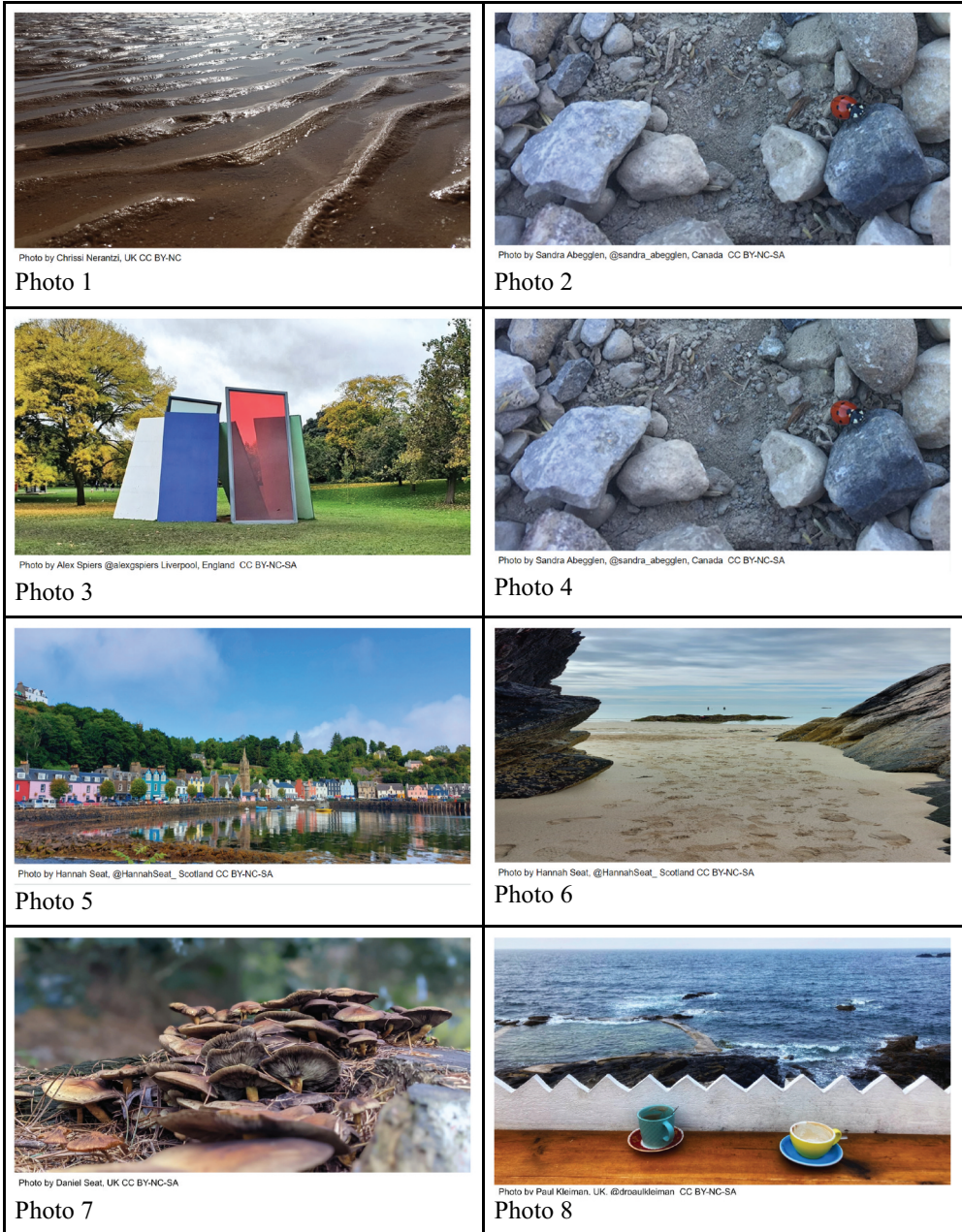


Figure 1. Photos selected by participant authors.

characteristics of the leadership in the #creativeHE team as experienced by the participant authors.

Together, we identified three key themes in the photographs chosen by participants: harmony, refuge, stretch – and we discuss these before linking back to the dimensions of Fields et al. (2019) framework.

Metaphors and their meaning

The visual metaphors selected, analysed and synthesised by participant authors express their experience of leadership are transitional, liminal, rhizomatic nature as depicted in [Figure 1](#). Their horizontal arrangement represents each participant authors' dialogue pair.

Harmony

The sea features four times. In Photo 1, the participant author describes the sea as shallow and near the shore, calm and in the sunshine revealing perhaps the warmth and feeling safe while looking into the vastness of the sea without, however, being also afraid. Photo 5 is described as equally calm beside a seaside village with colourful houses. For this participant it illustrates the coming together of diverse individuals and ideas and how, while different, there is harmony and peace and togetherness. In Photo 8 the sea is viewed from the shore and while there are some waves, not big ones, the two cups seem to say for the participant author 'I am not alone' and together we can overcome challenges and are there for each other, care and protect each other.

Refuge

Photo 3 depicts an art installation with colourful doors. The author describes it as seemingly fragile, made of glass. Their narrative discusses the shielding and protective effect of the colourful doors and how they have come together, as the #creativeHE team and its members have found refuge in each other's company. A port where they feel safe. Photo 6 shows a path of soft sand leading to a 'calm' sea framed by boulders and outcrops. For this participant author, this hints that this is a safe passage, one that protects those who use it. Both photos are used to examine the team from an external perspective, indicating the awareness of others within the team and how this communityship acts as a protective shield. In this sense, there is also an analogous interpretation to the visual portrayal depicted in Photo 8.

Stretch

Photo 2/4 was, chosen by two different participants, shows what are described as hard stones representing strength and being acted on by nature – organic tension: a. grey and challenging terrain, a bright red ladybird. Whilst there is a challenge, these participants highlighted feeling positive, not giving up, moving and climbing. The contrast between the grey and the bright red is said to illuminate how the individuals within the team are who they truly are, retain their light and shine bright, perhaps even brighter than outside the team. They are moving like the ladybird does in the world that is perhaps a little bit too grey with too many obstacles.

Photo 7 shows the tension between the individual and group using the mushroom metaphor, connected through rhizomes. In nature, not all mushrooms are safe, but rhizomes depict collegiality, the strength deriving from communityship

Fields et al. (2019) as a lens

The findings are further discussed using Fields et al. (2019) educational leadership framework and its dimensions as a lens, which we applied to unpack the leadership experience and praxis within the #creativeHE team.

Each dimension presented below includes representative quotations from the data in the format of key words and phrases that were reported by participant authors as part of the dialogues that took place with respect to the selected photos and in response to:

Looking at the Fields et al. framework (Fields et al., 2019) ... Does this framework help to frame your reflections on how you experience leadership in the #creativeHE community? If so, in what ways? How does this relate to the images you chose?

The findings were then collectively organised using the dimensions of Fields et al. (2019) framework (affective qualities; mentoring and empowering; action-orientation; teaching excellence; and research and scholarship) to illustrate how the participants in this inquiry reflected on their #creativeHE leadership experience.

The conversations by the author participants moved from discussion of the images to mapping against Fields's et al. (2019). The responses, whilst closely aligned to all dimensions of the framework, differ slightly in emphasis, as the extracts used here in Table 1 show. What becomes clear is the importance of collegiality, a safe space and feeling connected to others on a humane level. The 'affective qualities' as well as the 'mentoring and empowering' dimensions of the framework and the role these play in nurturing the professional and lived experience of leadership within the #creativeHE team seem to be represented the strongest within the findings. What also seems to be of significance is 'action orientation', 'research and scholarship' and 'teaching excellence' although mentioned were not highlighted as significantly as the other dimensions. It could be that the team believe they are already competent in these dimensions, or that the most significant aspect of this project is the lived, emotional dimension of the #creativeHE leadership team.

Limitations

The small sample size of participants and the limited geographic scope of three participating countries may not capture the full potential or inadequacies of DL. The limited depth of data for this CAE, along with the interpretative limitations, as all participants support the values of #creativeHE may not be representative and generalisable to other contexts and may limit the objectivity of the study. There might be what Harris and DeFlaminis (2016, p. 143) recognise as 'romanticised and idealised accounts of distributed leadership in practice'.

Discussion

With this inquiry the author participants aimed to gain deeper insights into the key characteristics of the leadership approach in the voluntary #creativeHE community as experienced by the eight members of the leadership team who participated.

Table 1. The framework by Fields et al. (2019) and how it is lived by the participant authors based on the data in the context of the #creativeHE leadership experience.

Educational framework, dimensions	Example words & phrases from the data as expressed by the participant authors
Affective qualities	'Harmony and peace' 'Organic' 'Melody' 'Shine brightly in welcoming space' 'Spaces for experimentation' 'Beauty and strength' 'Hopeful space' 'My happy place' 'Space of trust' 'We believe in each other' 'Calm and centredness' 'Peace' 'Comforting c.f. brutality' 'Values, compassion, hope' 'Our port in a storm' 'Nourishing community' 'Uplifts spirits' 'Humour'
Mentoring and empowering	'Supportive community' 'Safe, supported, stretched' 'Spaces for experimentation' 'Place of love' 'Checking in on one another' 'Facilitating rhizomatic networks' 'Actively reaching out to newbies' 'The possibility to launch off by yourself' 'Other people believe in you' 'Empowerment of colleagues' 'A community of trust' 'A lifeboat in a rough sea'
Action-orientation	'Puddles of exploration' 'We create, collectively' 'Constant movement and change' 'Spaces for experimentation' 'Enable' 'Yes-thinking' 'Action orientated encourages searching for innovation' 'Sharing practical tips, tools and resources'
Teaching excellence	'We are excellent already' 'We believe in each other' 'Cooperation'
Research and scholarship	'Collaboration, joy and a complex situation' 'Space for inquiry' 'Invested in changing the landscape of HE' 'Collaboration and scholarship' 'Just publish!'

The collaborative data gathering exercise clearly spoke to the heart of the values, which uphold and sustain this community. The values demonstrated through the sharing of personal metaphors speak to Minzberg's (2009) work on communityship as a means of fostering participatory leadership. Minzberg argues that communityship makes for more humane organisations and greater empathic bonds between members, so the values of the #creativeHE community as laid bare by this research echo these same principles. The research participants have foregrounded trust, love, comfort and safety in their comments, and the chosen pictures visually evoke peace, nature, tranquillity and safe spaces as representative of participants' affective responses to the prompt questions. Arguably, it is these values, as

revealed by the research exercise, that foster the sense of openness and inclusivity that is characteristic of the #creativeHE community. Research participants spoke of 'actively reaching out' to welcome new members, and of the community 'facilitating rhizomatic networks'; of 'enabling' and collective creative power. Whilst some mention was made of fear and danger, the emphasis was on the humanity of the team. It is clear within the data that community leaders as a team feel that they are greater than the sum of their individual parts.

This returns us in many ways to Timms and Heimans (2019) conceptualisation of 'new power' in HE: an energised collective power that enables individuals and communities to break down institutional barriers and break through partitions created by siloed working and the new managerialism of the neoliberal university. Hunter (2020) writes of the significance of external networks in fostering and maintaining identity for educational developers, who often sit outside of traditionally clearly demarcated identity functions within university structures (Kensington-Miller et al., 2015). In the responses to this visual exercise we can read the processes of identity formation at work – for individuals and for a wider community of practice. As the community empowers and facilitates this identity formation, so too it creates a space into which previously unheard voices can be centred and recognised, again calling to mind the promise of the 'new power'. This sense of power is viewed as a collective work that creates a safe and calm working space, a more humane HE offering a pool of opportunities by empowering each individual to belong in the HE tribe and at the same time allowing for panopticism- the internalisation of every participant's gaze. This 'new power' is evidenced to derive from a mix of the sense of belonging in the #creativeHE tribe and maintaining the uniqueness of every participant's prior experiences and way of thinking.

Final remarks

The aim of the CAE case study was to understand how leadership is experienced and lived within the #creativeHE team. The findings suggest that a community of practice whilst launched to be action oriented is held together by the strength of its emotional bonds that act as a social glue. The reward seems to come from the affective rather than the effective dimensions at least within this specific leadership group of a voluntary community.

While the findings of this study are specific to this particular case, they may also provide useful food-for-thought for others who are involved in voluntary community projects. The participant authors consider exploring the usefulness of conducting such a study with their own students to gain insights into the affective dimension in the democratic processes of our classrooms.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Data will be collected only from co-authors by 1 July. Thank you all.

Visual method: Image mediated reflection

In order to keep it manageable and model #creativeHE practice, we will work in pairs:

1. Each **individual** to choose 1 image – from the Research flashcard set Research flashcards from 101 Photo Flashcards sets 2020, 2021 (curated using our 2020 and 2021 sets) – that to you represents the #creativeHE leadership process or experience.
2. Arrange to meet with the other person in your pair (see pairings below).
3. Copy the data collection template below and complete it as a pair.

OPTION: You may wish to reflect on all the steps below through a recorded conversation during a live online meeting in your pairs, then summarise the transcript according to the template below. Alternatively you could choose to complete steps 4-5 individually before you meet.

4. Write/verbally describe the image you have chosen. What do you see? (suggested time 2 min each)
5. Write/reflect verbally your analysis of the image you have chosen: why and how does that image represent the #creativeHE leadership process for you? Relax and free write/talk – let words flow (suggested time 5 min each)
6. Discuss in pairs – using active listening and open questions: Each participant shows their picture and discusses their analysis in their pair. Neither has to change their minds in the discussion (suggested time 15 min)
7. In your pairs, move on to a final analysis. Look at the following framework by Fields et al. (2019). Their framework is based on conceptualisations of leadership within educational development settings consisting of:
 - a. affective qualities
 - b. mentoring and empowering
 - c. action-orientation
 - d. teaching excellence
 - e. research and scholarship.

Does this framework help to frame your reflections on how you experience leadership in the #creativeHE community? If so, in what ways? (suggested time 15 min)

8. Work in pairs making sure both views are included in the data template if they differ.
- Suggested pairs** Please get in touch with your buddy to complete the below by the end of June 22

The following was completed by each pair

Person 1 image (link/copy image and add name)

Person 1 image description

Person 1 image analysis

Person 2 image (link/copy image and add name)

Person 2 image description

Person 2 image analysis

Discussion across the two images. What did you notice? Were there any similarities/differences?

Discussion: Looking at the Fields et al framework . . . Does this framework help to frame your reflections on how you experience leadership in the #creativeHE community? If so, in what ways? How does this relate to the images you chose?

(Fields et al., 2019): affective qualities; mentoring and empowering; action-orientation; teaching excellence; and research and scholarship)

Any other comments
