

# ***Civil Society Leadership As Learning***

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## Attestation of Authorship

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Jane Madden', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

21<sup>st</sup> May 2014

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# Abstract

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This thesis argues that learning to work with complexity is central to civil society leadership. The thesis provides evidence of three inter-related conditions that foster the emergence of civil society leadership: being open to rethinking our understanding about leadership; facilitating collaborative inquiry relationships; and embracing complexity thinking as a way of thinking, learning and acting.

The thesis draws on findings from two action research studies of leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand. One research site was an academic leadership development programme for civil society organisation managers and leaders; the other was a national leadership team supporting leadership learning across diverse community-led development (CLD) initiatives.

The thesis identifies the need to disturb some taken-for-granted assumptions about leadership (for example, images of strong, decisive, visionary heroes), and be open to other understandings of leadership if we are to enable everyone to see their potential role as active citizens. Leadership is reframed as learning, a process of personal and collective work within complex adaptive systems (CAS). Complexity thinking and collaborative inquiry research supported movement away from essentialist ideas of leadership, towards an emergent understanding of leadership as a complex, interactive learning dynamic, moving between polarities of potentially contradictory responses, to enable adaptive action. The thesis identifies properties and practices of leadership within four inter-related layers of civil society leadership: personal, relational, cultural and structural. The findings illustrate how people can explore different discourses through their practical involvement in the world and free themselves to some extent from cultural conditioning which may limit their potential to exercise leadership.

The study shows how leadership as learning can be supported through collaborative inquiry as a means of co-constructing knowledge and action, as a whole group extends their capability to notice, reflect, inquire and make sense of their context, their practice and their collective wisdom as it is emerging. The praxis-related, practitioner action research design and implementation provide evidence of how leadership learning developed through different research cultures of collaborative inquiry. Leadership learning in both research contexts was emerging as much, if not more, from *how* researchers, teachers and civil society leaders practised collaborative leadership relationships, as from any content focus of *what* was being researched, taught or initiated.

The study identifies the power of complexity thinking constructs for fostering, analysing and understanding collaborative action research, leadership and learning. From a trans-disciplinary perspective, often incommensurable frames of reference have been able to collide, diverge and support the emergence of new knowing. The idea of nested CAS has been a useful heuristic device for understanding conditions that enhance leadership learning: such as quality neighbour interactions, diversity and redundancy, and coherence amidst uncertainty.

Some simple rules emerge from this inquiry about how civil society leaders, teachers, and researchers can promote leadership as learning, as propositions inviting further research. The research contributes towards the newly emerging field of complexity leadership theory, with a particular focus on the learning interactions that foster leadership at many levels of CAS. In terms of praxis outcomes, the study has supported the redesign of the academic leadership programme, and the publication of emergent learning from the CLD practitioners involved. The thesis challenges dominant discourse about civil society needing to become more 'business-like', by furthering understanding of leadership within the complexity of civil society. The study aims to support more active citizenship engagement, where people can identify their part in leading, learning and contributing to civil society from whatever their position.

# Chapter One:

## Introducing Context and Contribution

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Throughout my adult life working in community development I have grappled with questions about how leadership in civil society differs from (and is similar to) leadership in business and government sectors. As a teacher of aspiring and experienced leaders of community organisations, I have questioned how best to foster a form of learning that builds on the experience of participants in the courses I teach, to extend their leadership development. As a student engaged in writing a thesis where data is gathered and analysed collaboratively, I have explored questions about how knowledge emerges and puzzled over how to foster and describe this kind of emergence. As an active citizen, I have been curious to understand what needs to be in place to foster the emergence of strong civil society leadership.

This chapter introduces the research context of leadership in civil society in Aotearoa<sup>1</sup> New Zealand (NZ) and different perspectives on civil society, leadership and civil society's leadership capacity. Two collaborative investigations in learning environments for civil society leaders have enabled me to explore questions about what enables effective leadership development for people working in these complex contexts. The chapter introduces the reader to the purpose, scope and focus of the research inquiry and how the subsequent argument is structured to demonstrate the emergence of new understanding of these questions.

### *Civil society*

For the purposes of this thesis 'civil society' is a useful concept to depict a dynamic space where a diversity of actors and institutional forms, with varying degrees of formality, autonomy and power, interact for wider social benefit. The term 'civil society' is an internationally recognised, enduring, yet highly contested term (Edwards, 2004; 2011, p. 55) used to describe an arena in society of voluntary collective action around shared purposes, interests and values. An often quoted definition is that:

...civil society is the sphere of uncoerced human association between the individual and the state, in which people undertake collective action for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of government and the market. (Michael Walzer (1998, p 123 -124) cited in Edwards, 2011, p. 4)

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary for explanation of all Māori words used in the thesis

Civil society includes, but is not limited to, institutions otherwise referred to as non-profit, not for profit (NFP), nongovernment (NGO), tangata whenua, community, voluntary or third sector organisations. Such institutions cover a wide range of service functions (such as education, health and social services, community development and housing) and expressive functions (such as arts, culture, sport, recreation, religion, environmental protection, civic and advocacy activities, and union, professional and business associations), supported by voluntary and paid staff and philanthropic and earned income sources (Sanders, O'Brien, Tennant, Sokolowski, & Salamon, 2008). Civil society is a public sphere where a diversity of active citizens, formal or informal non-profit associations, government, business, family and kinship spheres of society interact to find common ground and work for the common good (Edwards, 2004). These concepts depict many independent, yet also interdependent, systems interacting to support the emergence of a 'good society'.

Civil society is a term not commonly used in New Zealand, with "no agreed meaning and little popular resonance" in this country (Lyons & Nowland-Foreman, 2010, p. 214). So why use the term for this thesis? Two key, related reasons highlight the power of language to influence our thinking. In the first instance, I was drawn to the more positive language<sup>2</sup> of civil society, as one way to describe the non-profit sector's organisations in terms of what they contribute, rather than in terms of what it is not (NFP, NGO). I soon discovered the second, more important, reason for using the term. Civil society is a useful way of describing the multiple layers of activity and inter-relationships across different spheres of society. These interactions go well beyond non-profit sector organisations, to shape the forms, norms and spaces for civil society dialogue and action considered in this thesis. Further, from a complexity thinking perspective, the multiple, contested interpretations of the concept of civil society are a useful, rich resource in preference to any tightly bounded definition, for example of the NFP sector (M. Tennant, Sanders, O'Brien, & Castle, 2006).

Edwards' writing sums up three different perspectives on the idea of civil society evident across the long history of the concept that goes back at least as far as the early Greek philosophers. One perspective focuses on the means to achieve the 'good society', another on the 'good society' as the goal, and the third on a public space that shapes the means and ends of the 'good society' (Edwards, 2004).

As Edwards outlines, one influential civil society perspective is based on ideas about strong networks of associations, volunteerism and collective action being at the heart of the concept

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<sup>2</sup> Other examples of more positive language include usage of terms social economy (Paton, 1991) or the community benefit sector (Gottlieb, 2009)

of democracy (De Tocqueville, 1835). More recently this has been expressed in the concept of social capital (Putnam, 2000) that is evident in strong connections within communities (bonding social capital) and between communities and government and the market (bridging social capital). In this view, civil society is at the heart of democratic citizenship, and a key *means* to achieve the goal of a good society. Supporters of this idea see “voluntary organisations as the 'gene-carriers' of the good society” (Edwards, 2004, p.41), as the place where people learn skills, participate and discover their own self-interest in being good citizens through the benefits of cooperative activity (Leonard & Onyx, 2004).

The second perspective challenges the first, because not all community organisations, citizens, or communities have the same social good norms, values, interests and motivations. This view focuses on ‘civil society’ as the *goal* citizens are aiming for. Whose values define what is the ‘good’, ‘civil’ or ‘evil’ society? “Voluntary associations are arenas for personal ambition and power as well as sacrifice and service” (Edwards, 2004, p. 44). There are inequalities within civil society in terms of power and who has voice. This problem cannot be resolved by excluding some groups from a definition of civil society because there is an inevitable pluralism in civil society. It is the place where, whoever we are, we can come together voluntarily to act. In this view, the success of the good society is in cross-sectoral linkages of the market, state and voluntary sectors, with the family as the starting place for shaping values and norms. Civil society at its best harnesses the different energies and tensions between all these sectors for the common good. But who decides common direction?

This leads to the third idea of civil society as the public sphere where citizens engage with others who may be different, but find common ground, *shaping the ends and means of the good society*. It is like a self-organising system where diverse ideas collide and yet find commonalities, with the potential for the emergence of higher level learning and development:

The concept of a 'public' – a whole polity that cares about the common good and has the capacity to deliberate about it democratically – is central to civil society thinking. The development of shared interests, a willingness to see something of oneself in those who are different and work together more effectively as a result – all these are crucial attributes for effective governance, practical problem-solving, and the peaceful resolution of our differences. (Edwards, 2004, p.55)

In this idea, civil society is a space for argument, deliberation, development of community and cultural identity, hearing alternative viewpoints, and incubating ideas and innovation.

Together these three perspectives paint a more robust picture than any one alone. Civil society is a whole living system that cannot be created by any sector acting alone. Its preconditions,

Edwards argues, include addressing all forms of inequality and discrimination, giving people the means to be active citizens, encouraging more participation in politics and public policy, guaranteeing independence of associations, and building strong partnerships, networks and alliances.

In this thesis, the term 'civil society' encompasses the sense of all three perspectives outlined by Edwards and is used as the dominant language for the concepts being explored. Where reference is made to different language (e.g. NGO, NFP, non-profit), the language of the literature source or specific context is used. The term 'non-profit' refers to institutional forms such as those included in the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector international study (Sanders et al., 2008) or Edwards' first idea of civil society. This usage of language is to remind readers that civil society is much more than the institutional forms that are part of it.

## **Civil society in an Aotearoa New Zealand context**

Civil society in Aotearoa New Zealand is influenced by Western traditions of democracy, active citizenship and the unique history of our country. Traditional Māori indigenous associations are based around whanau (extended family), hapu (wider descent groups) and iwi (tribes), and continue today as a strong collectivist dimension of Māori society. The Treaty of Waitangi signed between the British Crown and many (though not all) iwi in 1840, was to become a key founding document for our nation. Civil society organisations in Western form began with British colonisation from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (M. Tennant, O'Brien, & Sanders, 2008), alongside land wars, legal proceedings, protests and dialogue between different worldviews about the means and ends of a civil society in Aotearoa New Zealand. The civil society space was shaped by these two previously independent nations coming together in a new interdependent relationship. The interactions of these two self-organising systems triggered the emergence of many complex layers of conflict, learning and adaptation, far from certainty or agreement about the shape of the new nation.

In the early history of Aotearoa New Zealand, the number and forms of civil society service and expressive organisations grew, within strongly centralised state provision. "In the absence of large reserves of private wealth and a tradition of charitable giving, the state effectively became New Zealand's largest philanthropist" (M. Tennant, 2007, p. 9), until significant welfare and economic reforms of the mid-late 1980s. Since the 1980s there have been major shifts in the boundaries and relationships between government, non-profit, business and iwi. Non-profit and tangata whenua organisations' roles, services, budgets and paid and voluntary staff have grown. Government's role in the economy and welfare provision has shifted; large



health and disability institutions have closed; and Treaty of Waitangi settlements have been made. A whole new contracting environment has arisen since the early 1990s, creating different forms of interdependence and accountability in cross-sector relationships.

There are an estimated 97,000 non-profit institutions in New Zealand, with only 10% of these employing paid staff (Sanders et al., 2008). In 2004, the sector was estimated to have contributed \$7 billion, or 4.9%, to GDP when value added from the NFP institutions and volunteer labour was included (Sanders et al., 2008). This sector workforce represented 9.6% of NZ's economically active population, with around 67,000 full-time equivalent paid staff and 134,000 full-time equivalent volunteers (Sanders et al., 2008). While the patterns of participation varied across the diversity of sector organisations, overall women, and Māori women in particular, were more likely to participate in voluntary, unpaid work than were men (Statistics NZ, 2001). Proportional to population, New Zealand has one of the largest non-profit sector workforces in the 41 countries in the Johns Hopkins University international non-profit sector study, including an unusually high percentage (67%) of volunteer participation (Sanders et al., 2008). A more recent time use survey (Statistics NZ, 2011) shows that the rate of volunteer participation has continued to rise in the last decade, though most of the increase is in informal unpaid work outside one's own household rather than for formal organisations. New Zealand has a high rate of private philanthropy as a percentage of GDP internationally (Sanders et al., 2008). This is in part a reflection of statutory philanthropic trusts being established to manage assets from community savings banks and energy utilities when the state privatised these assets and increasingly stepped back from its role as 'philanthropist' from the late 1980s.

Work on the New Zealand part of the Johns Hopkins University study triggered some rigorous debate about recognising the place of Māori and Māori indigenous organisations, and the relationship between Māori and the state, within the data categories and definitions (Sanders et al., 2008). Clear categories, definitions and boundaries are important for a comparative international study of the non-profit sector, yet the blurred boundaries of civil society and its rich diversity present challenges for capturing data about its scope.

While this thesis does not deal directly with Māori perspectives on civil society, the influence of this cultural dimension will be evident in the inclusion of Māori language and concepts. This reflects my immersion in Aotearoa New Zealand, a society deeply influenced by its cultural roots, both Māori and Pakeha, which inevitably influences the research context and my worldview as researcher.

## Civil society capacity building discourses

The withdrawal of the NZ Government from many areas of public service provision from the late 1980s was associated with significant growth in the number and role of civil society organisations, and the introduction of service contracts, which in turn brought more stringent accountability than earlier grants mechanisms (Nowland-Foreman, 1995; M. Tennant et al., 2006). Within a decade, a whole new discourse of ‘capacity building’ emerged in the government policy lexicon (Mika, 2003) to express new capacities and capabilities that individual non-profit organisations and iwi were expected to develop in order to work within this changing landscape. This section discusses some of the different state, business and civil society discourses on ‘capacity building’ as these are important to the context of the research questions.

The need for civil society capacity building in Aotearoa New Zealand was to some extent a construct of new state sector regulatory compliance and contract accountabilities. These requirements were in turn a reflection of state sector reform adopting particular New Public Sector Management mindsets and models (Nowland-Foreman, 2000), with a worldview that community organisations’ performance would also benefit from being more ‘business-like’ (M. Tennant, 2007). With significantly increased public resources flowing to the emerging ‘shadow state’ (Wolch, 1990) came a need to establish legitimacy (Brinkerhoff, 2005) and public confidence (Light, 2004) in the contracted organisations’ capacity, competencies, efficiency and effectiveness. By government’s own admission, as expectations on community organisations grew:

...the costs of compliance with legislation and regulation, and scrutiny from Government and other funding agencies ... [meant] many community organisations require[d] additional capability to respond to these demands. (DIA, 2007)

Managerial discourses on capacity building implied a deficit to be addressed before civil society organisations could be constituted as effective, professional, legitimate contracted agents of the state or deserving recipients of philanthropy. This discourse has become so absorbed into the everyday cultural narrative that it has a tendency to become an unquestioned truth. There is no acknowledgement within this discourse of the uniquely important qualities of being “non-profit like” (Dym & Hutson, 2005, p. 51), let alone considering different Māori worldviews about management and leadership (see, for example, Spiller, Pio, Erakovic, & Henare, 2011). Capacity building within this managerial discourse was a *process* to achieve an outcome of improved service performance, often associated with planned external interventions and an evaluation focus on measurable results.

Over this same period, the consumer rights movement was also demanding increased accountability for quality client service, (Donnelly-Cox & MacKechnie, 1998) whether the private, state or community sector was the delivery agent. With demands for increased accountability from two key stakeholder groups (funders and consumers), it became harder for the civil society sector's ambivalence towards things managerial (Donnelly-Cox, 1998) to persist.

From a civil society perspective, there had been a very different, strengths-based discourse on capacity building long before these public policy changes. From a civil society perspective, capacity building is about community development and is needed to organise effectively for social change and impact (G. Craig, 2007), and to mobilise and grow tangible and intangible assets (Kaplan, 1999) that support individuals, organisations, communities and sectors to achieve their own self-determined development goals (Mika, 2003). Self-determination is a fundamental expectation of Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi, which was reflected in the definition of capacity building when first used by the Labour government:

A process which seeks to strengthen the ability of individuals, whanau, hapu, iwi, Māori organisations and Māori communities to build strategies, systems, structures and skills they need to control their own development and achieve their own objectives. (Te Puni Kokiri 2001 cited in Mika, 2003)

Capacity building from a self-determination perspective has very different agendas from both business and state discourses, which tend to promote perceptions of civil society as weak, disorganised, messy, using language that defines the sector as 'not like us' (i.e. NFP, NGO) (G. Craig, 2007; Dym & Hutson, 2005). While community development and Māori worldviews are not the same, they share a common perspective of supporting communities to articulate their own indigenous practice values, strategies and identities (Cram, 2006), to develop their own analytical and adaptive competencies (Ebrahim, 2003), and to negotiate within a context of highly ambiguous stakeholder relationships and power dynamics. Capacity building within these discourses is an *outcome* in itself and a *process* of creating the conditions (people, infrastructure, thinking, understanding, behaviours, resources) that enable self-determined community and social change. Results are often evaluated by the learning, empowerment and participation achieved.

Research highlights the lack of a non-profit sector culture of investment in organisational capacity, and how this behaviour is fuelled by a double standard. The public expects non-profits to minimize overheads while accepting business investment in such functions (Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999). This research helped establish the case for investment in capacity building, and opened up the question of how to do so effectively: Who defines what capacity

looks like? Whose assumptions about 'good' management and leadership underpin capacity assessment and capacity building? What about the very real threat of colonisation of civil society (Bird & Westley, 2011) with inappropriate interventions which could actually destroy some of civil society's strengths by imposing inappropriate models of capacity building? As Brinkerhoff identifies, the concepts of legitimacy, capacity and performance are socially constructed. Norms are attributed by peer organisations, funders, users or potential partners about what are appropriate and desirable standards, values, goals, activities and stakeholder outcomes:

Thus capacity and capacity-building are not solely functions of what happens relative to the organization targeted for strengthening. Isomorphism dynamics push organizations (and their capacity-builders) in the direction of developing those capacities that are deemed necessary and desirable by: a) other organizations in the same category (e.g., NGOs, public service delivery agencies, private-sector entities), b) those environmental actors on which the organization is dependent for resources (e.g., funders), and c) users of the goods and services the organization produces. Thus what looks like "cookie cutter" capacity-building in the aggregate (across several organizations) may be less a mindless blueprint than a functional response to organization-environment interactions that confer legitimacy. (Brinkerhoff, 2005, p. 14)

Civil society leadership within this space requires an important discernment of what is helpful learning and adaptation in response to government and business sectors' expectations, and what are enduring values, identity, purposes and practices that represent the distinctive contribution of civil society. A new legitimacy does need to be managed through a mix of *conforming* (with the isomorphism dynamics of the environment to look like other organisations that are deemed desirable), *informing* (learning new ways to translate and communicate in other sectors' language) and *reframing* perceptions and beliefs about what strong capacity might look like (Brinkerhoff, 2005). Unquestioned adoption of others' best practices overlooks the critical question of context relevance in any transfer of knowledge and underestimates the need for ongoing emergence of new knowledge.

Any 'best practice' discourse, whether from business, civil society or elsewhere, is problematic in the sense that management and leadership thinking continues to evolve. For example, complexity thinking (Wheatley, 2006), values-based management (Henderson, Thompson, & Henderson, 2006) and distributed leadership (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006) perspectives are now challenging traditional administrative and scientific management discourse which views organisations like machines (G. Morgan, 2006) and good management as something that should be orderly, planned, systematic and rational (Mintzberg, 1998). There is a significant risk that capacity building efforts impose out-dated or inappropriate management mindsets and models on civil society, when emerging approaches such as new science thinking (Wheatley, 2006) resonate much more with the key strengths of civil society leadership and

the complexity of working within this context. As Collins (2005) suggests, rather than social sector organisations looking to business for leadership models, these organisations have a lot to teach the business sector: “Indeed, perhaps tomorrow’s great business leaders will come from the social sectors, not the other way around” (Collins, 2005, p.13). To enable such learning, different sectors need to find ways to communicate in each other’s language and to reframe some of the discourse, perceptions and beliefs about civil society leadership and capacity.

International capacity development research identifies that the deepest capacities of organisations are about how they exist, sustain themselves and maintain integrity around core values (P. Morgan, 2005). An undue focus on technical, tangible dimensions of capacity often imposes inappropriate management models, policies and systems on civil society organisations (Kaplan, 1999). Key underlying, intangible aspects of capacity risk being overlooked: how and why civil society organisations exist; how they learn, adapt and engage with others; how they lead; how they prioritise efforts and activity; and how others see them (Brinkerhoff, 2005; Cram, 2006; Ebrahim, 2003; Fowler, 2000; Kaplan, 1999). Tangible and intangible elements of capacity are increasingly understood as inter-related parts of a whole system (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Kaplan, 1999). A variety of capacity interventions will come and go to affect capabilities, skills, structures and strategies, but they build on a foundation of collective identity, learning and adaptation that gives the system its energy. Capacity development in this view is an ongoing, context-specific process of organisational learning and engaging in a complex, somewhat chaotic and changing world, while maintaining a core sense of collective identity. Learning, inquiry, reflection and research are therefore at the heart of capacity development itself (Cram, 2006). This research highlights the fundamental need for alignment of management and leadership approaches to context, and the rich intangible capacities that civil society already has.

Research on civil society capacity development has paid relatively little attention to the issue of leadership (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Dym & Hutson, 2005; Hailey, 2006; Hailey & James, 2004; Hubbard, 2005). There is plenty of prescriptive literature on governance and management of non-profit organisations but there is much less research-based literature on what supports effective leadership within this diverse and complex sector, particularly in the Aotearoa NZ context (Jansen, Cammock, & Conner, 2010):

For too long capacity builders have neglected the key role that local NGO leaders play in the development process, and overlooked the complex and collective dynamics of leadership within many NGOs. They appear to have underestimated the influence of the particular culture and context in which many NGO leaders operate, and as a result many capacity building

initiatives designed to support a new generation of NGO leaders have been inappropriate and irrelevant. (Hailey, 2006, p. 11)

Hence, the focus of this research on civil society leadership emerged at an intersection of these state, business and civil society discourses on capacity building. The language itself jarred because it assumed a capacity deficit, that capacity could be built as some tangible, fixed phenomenon, and that there was some 'best practice (business)' model to aspire to. As someone immersed in civil society contexts, I wanted to contribute to reframing perceptions of civil society capacity and leadership. I wanted to understand better how those of us involved in capacity building interventions could enable civil society to flourish.

## **My immersion in the civil society context**

My values and life experience have deeply shaped this research. I am a Pakeha New Zealand woman, with mainly Scottish ancestry, whose family lived and taught values of active citizenship, generosity and curiosity. I grew up with a strong sense of the role of family and community relationships in supporting my identity, sense of belonging and participation in civil society. Family members were engaged in practical, community and professional service for others and advocating for social justice. Questioning, thinking, learning and taking action to change society for the better, is the family norm.

Over the past four decades, I have carried on a family tradition of community work. In the 1970s I was involved in mobilising local community assets, resources and action for change. As a public servant in central government agencies in the 1980s I gained rich experience at the interface of state and non-profit sectors at a time of enormous shifts in the boundaries and dynamics of these systems. My values led me back to the non-profit sector by the 1990s, to be part of researching and growing strategic civil society responses to the changing social, political and economic environment.

I sought management and leadership learning opportunities as one of my first responses to this time of turbulent systems change. I had my first taste of formal non-profit management education in Canada in 1990-91, which strengthened my confidence and competence for subsequent management and leadership roles with national Aotearoa NZ community organisations during the 1990s. As the state sector established a new contracting environment with the non-profit sector, I was immersed in strategic cross-sectoral advocacy and policy dialogue, intra-sectoral networking, research and organisational development. As civil society organisations, we were learning to influence the environment, while at the same time adapting to the environment's new demands.

By 1996, Unitec NZ's NFP management programme was established in Auckland. I have since been involved as a student, graduate, adult educator, and in various programme leadership roles. The programme has become a highly respected space for argument, deliberation and development of NFP sector and cultural identity, experiencing different worldviews and incubating ideas and innovation – a microcosm of Edwards' third idea of civil society.

Family roles have also influenced this research. I can trace the seeds of my own paradigm shift towards complexity thinking to a period in the mid-1990s when I cared for my terminally ill sister. It was a profound initiation into another stage of leadership learning about the unknown and complex territory of grief, loss, divorce, growth and renewal. Now supporting ageing parents, there are more lessons beyond the realm of logical, planned, rational systems that are well suited to a complexity thinking way of seeing and being in the world.

## ***Two different learning environments***

This research focuses on two Aotearoa NZ interventions that have arisen within this broader civil society landscape to support learning, identity and capacity development with civil society actors. Two different learning environments for civil society leaders have been chosen as contrasting sites for learning about enabling conditions supporting the emergence of civil society leadership. One is a structured part-time academic programme for civil society managers and leaders who are mostly working within non-profit organisations. The other is a structured, non-academic learning network for community-led development practitioners. The following sections introduce these learning environments which have each been the site of one cycle of action research inquiry during this study.

## **Tertiary education learning environment**

Professional academic non-profit management education has been one significant strategic response to the need for capacity building and civil society leadership development. The growth of this field is "one of the fastest growing forms of university-based professional education in American academic history" (M. O'Neill, 2005, p. 11). Internationally, many of these programmes are located in faculties of public administration or business, with a minority in social work schools, reflecting different historical, cultural and disciplinary perspectives (Mirabella, Gemelli, Malcolm, & Berger, 2007) and different orientations towards the capacity building discourses described above.

In Aotearoa NZ, Unitec NZ worked with civil society actors to develop a qualification aimed at supporting participants' managerial competencies to work within an increasingly complex field, and at the same time supporting their leadership abilities, networks, knowledge and confidence to challenge and influence their environment. The original programme document argued that the needs of managers in the NFP sector "are quite different from those of employees in the private and public sectors of the economy because they are based on a totally different set of values and priorities" (Unitec, 1996, p. 4). While the programme sought to develop and professionalise the management of NFP organisations, it also sought explicitly to "contribute towards equalising the power relationship between the Not-For-Profit sector and the private and public sectors of the economy" (Unitec, 1996, p.10). As such, the Unitec programme was combining a vision of professional development for NFP sector managers and leaders with one of capacity strengthening for civil society organisations and stronger NFP sector identity, values, vision and relationships in a time of major sector change (Unitec, 2005). The programme sought to create a space where civil society actors could critically reflect on their own practice and draw on theories, concepts, and stories from both the sector's own whakapapa and the wider fields of management, leadership, organisational and community development knowledge. The intent was for graduates to be able to articulate and build context-relevant skills, strategies and knowledge. The programme aims to create a space for civil society actors to define what 'capacity' looks like, what 'professional' means, what 'effective performance' looks like and how 'effective leadership' might be supported. The assumption is that the answers to these questions are not necessarily the same as those for business or government.

Within the non-profit management field internationally, there is continuing debate about whether sector-specific management and leadership education is appropriate for building competencies for civil society leaders to engage cross-sectorally with business and government sectors (Paton, Mordaunt, & Cornforth, 2007; Salamon, 1998). With recent management and leadership thinking addressing more values-based, complexity-oriented approaches, there is more potential that mainstream curriculum could respond better to learning needs of civil society than it did in the 1990s. Within a rapidly changing landscape of tertiary education and strong institutional pressures for economies of scale, future changes in this non-profit management education field are highly likely. Whatever the future forms of management and leadership education, it is important that civil society identity, history and practice not be submerged or homogenised within a generic approach.



## **Community-led development learning environment**

Inspiring Communities began in 2008, more than a decade after the Unitec NFP Management programme was established. Created with a vision of seeing all local communities in Aotearoa New Zealand flourish, Inspiring Communities is both an organisation and a movement working to promote recognition, understanding and practice of community-led development ([www.inspiringcommunities.org.nz](http://www.inspiringcommunities.org.nz)). Community-led development (CLD) is about local people connected to a particular place determining their vision and taking action. It is a cross-sectoral approach that brings together diverse networks of local residents, business, funders, iwi, local and central government, schools and others, to mobilise local resources, energy and ideas for addressing important economic, cultural, social and environmental issues. It is about active citizenship. CLD creates spaces for local voice, participation, leadership and ownership of vision, plans, priorities and action; it is a way of thinking and acting.

While CLD is intentional about achieving locally determined visions, it is not a service delivery model, project or programme that offers one-off solutions. Rather, it is an adaptive developmental process seeking whole systems change for lasting impact within communities. CLD encourages innovative spaces, leveraging off local communities' strengths and assets to co-create a different future. CLD actively seeks to grow new leadership within communities and value everyone's contribution.

As a small national organisation, Inspiring Communities' role continues to evolve. Its role includes facilitating CLD learning connections across NZ and internationally, supporting local, regional and national initiatives, publishing regular newsletters and other website resources, promoting the CLD concept with local and central government, philanthropic, community, business and iwi leaders, and brokering practical opportunities for them to engage in.

Inspiring Communities' work has emerged from an international field (see for example, P. Block, 2008; Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006), with its own unique Aotearoa NZ flavour and principles. The CLD movement draws from established community development practice and principles (see for example, Chile, 2007; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006 ), yet also represents a mind-shift away from a more critical, binary analysis of community issues (G. Craig, 2007) towards understanding of complex, whole systems (Westley et al., 2006). An appreciative inquiry flavour is seen in the CLD focus on strengths, assets and what is already working (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) compared to earlier community development emphasis on needs analysis, problems and deficits to be addressed. CLD invokes cross-sectoral engagement

to support new conversations, stories, positions and possibilities within a culture of active citizenship (P. Block, 2008).

Within the range of different approaches to intentional community change that Loomis (2012) discusses, CLD is more focused on local community-building initiatives than advocacy, rights and protest movements for systems change. P. Block (2008) challenges the consumer mentality of entitlement culture that takes away personal, neighbourhood and community ownership, accountability and power for what residents' own actions can achieve. While not unaware of power structures and the need for advocacy for systems change, Block argues that systems change is never enough. The resurgence of iwi-led development in Aotearoa New Zealand following Treaty settlements<sup>3</sup> is an example of some redress at a systems level enabling more self-determined, community-led initiative in line with local whanau, hapu and iwi aspirations. Local civic and institutional engagement around shared community aspirations (i.e. active citizenship) is a central purpose within a CLD perspective. This is playing a complementary role, alongside iwi development, in supporting local solutions, visions, and action.

### ***Civil society leadership***

Both the Unitec programme and Inspiring Communities can be seen as capacity building initiatives that support learning with, from and for civil society leadership. They are different yet related responses which aim to create conditions for the emergence of an identity of active citizenship and the power of civil society to shape community responses to pressing social, economic and environmental issues. Both initiatives are drawing on tacit assumptions and knowledge about qualities and processes of leadership which are “very different from the conventional belief that the task of leadership is to set a vision, enroll others in it, and hold people accountable through measurements and reward” (P. Block, 2008, p. 87). One aim of this research is to unpack those different leadership qualities and processes. This section outlines some diverse ways of understanding leadership that are further explored in later chapters.

### **Framing understanding of leadership**

One challenge for me, in embarking on this research, was to make sense of the enormous diversity of leadership theories, “fashions and fads” over time (Grint, 1997, p. 1), which place

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<sup>3</sup> Waitangi Tribunal statutory processes have heard claims from different Māori hapu and iwi about historical grievances that provide the basis for Crown negotiations and settlement agreements.

different significance on the role of the individual leader, their relationships with others and the context in which they lead. Two key insights assisted my framing and scoping of the research: firstly, Grint's distinction between essentialist perspectives on leadership (which imply a definitive/objective account of the phenomenon) and non-essentialist perspectives which imply that this is not possible; and secondly, complexity thinking as a trans-disciplinary approach (Davis & Sumara, 2006), which is used in this study to mean supporting 'and-and' thinking to learn from different disciplines and worldviews, without trying to resolve inconsistencies or establish primacy of any one paradigm or way of seeing the world.

In designing this research, I considered contrasting civil society leadership with leadership in other contexts but I rejected this approach as unduly essentialist. There is a strategic role for essentialism in a process of shifting attitudes, forming identity and creating legitimacy (Smith, 1999), which is especially important for marginalised groups. I was tempted to identify similarities and differences between government, business and civil society sector discourses about leadership as a potential research contribution. In the end I rejected this approach to 'discover' such 'essential' characteristics or a 'model' for a variety of reasons. I saw the risk of such models creating a competitive positioning debate between sectors which could entrench as much as change attitudes (Ospina et al., 2004) or invoke defensive responses that inhibit trust-building in cross-sectoral civil society relationships. My research approach rejects any notion that a definitive or objective account of civil society leadership is possible. Rather, I name and explore this phenomenon to reflect the flavour of leadership within these particular civil society spaces and invite engagement around what other sectors might learn from the strengths of these approaches. I do not assume homogeneity or stability of characteristics within any sector leadership approach. My intent is to invite an attitude of curiosity rather than defensiveness, and active engagement in a continuing quest for learning, not a debate about whether a 'model' is proven to be 'right' or 'wrong'.

From a complexivist perspective, all knowledge is partial, temporary and biased (Davis & Sumara, 2006). The trans-disciplinary interaction of diverse and often incommensurable systems of knowledge is seen as a positive energy source supporting the ongoing emergence of new knowledge and learning; this study engages with the fields of education, leadership, civil society and complexity science. A diversity of leadership theories is therefore a rich resource to draw on, not a problem to be mastered through a single theoretical lens seeking any fixed truth. The purpose is not to build a general theory of leadership (Sorenson, Goethals, & Haber, 2011), but rather to offer a way of understanding leadership through the ongoing interaction of diverse ways of seeing, thinking and acting. Complexity thinking supports understanding of conditions that enable the self-organising properties of complex systems to

flourish in order to generate new learning and adaptation in a constantly changing environment. Complexity thinking represents a paradigm shift in terms of how knowledge, knowing and learning are understood, which is explained in more depth in Chapter Two. For now, complexity thinking provides the rationale for introducing multiple leadership theoretical disciplines that inform understanding of civil society leadership.

## **Trans-disciplinary perspectives from civil society leadership research**

The leadership literature extends from focus on the individual leader to understanding leadership as collective work. Leadership approaches promoted range from a focus on rules, roles and tasks to relationships, process and adaptability. Trait theories assume the ‘essence’ of the individual leader’s gifts and talents is critical: evidenced today in strengths-based human resource development approaches (Buckingham & Clifton, 2004). Behavioural theorists focus on specific competencies and intentional learning strategies to influence leadership behaviours and attitudes (Boyatzis, Lingham, & Passarelli, 2010). Situational leadership theories (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1996) assume that leaders need a range of leadership styles and behaviours, which are adapted to suit different situations. Social constructionist theories move the focus beyond the individual leader towards understanding leadership as relational, collective work (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Complexity leadership theories see leadership as an even wider, emergent, interactive dynamic process within complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

It is not this study's purpose to review the vast literature on leadership and leadership development theory and research. Rather, the focus has been on finding research most relevant to civil society leadership contexts and theoretical work that brings a complexity thinking understanding to learning and leadership.

Contingency leadership theories support the notion that leadership effectiveness depends on appropriate alignment of a particular leadership style and a specific context (Fielder, 1967; House, Javidan, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). The civil society sector has many examples of leaders from other contexts like business, the army, or the public sector who have not effectively understood the different context of civil society (Dufaur, 1995; Dym & Hutson, 2005; Hailey, 2006). The assumption that leaders need to understand the civil society context is central to the rationale for distinct non-profit management education. International, cross-cultural research suggests a dynamic interplay of many factors impacting leader acceptance and effectiveness (House et al., 2002). Each social and cultural context gives rise to its own implicit theories about what ‘good’ leadership looks like. Leadership is socially constructed in

interaction between these theories, an organisation's culture, the leader's attributes and behaviours and the particular strategic challenges that arise (House et al., 2002). With the best of intentions, people seek to learn from other contexts, yet also need to remember that at least part of the wheel *does* have to be reinvented (Patton, 2011), especially around leadership practice.

Hailey identified four major types of NGO leadership style: paternalistic, activist, managerial and catalytic (Hailey, 2006) and suggests that each style can be successful in different situations. However, Hailey identifies that the catalytic leader, who can promote and implement strategic change, demonstrate a wider worldview and effectively engage internal and external stakeholders "is more likely to generate longer-term, sustainable, strategic growth than the others" (Hailey, 2006, p. 3) in a civil society context.

Hailey identifies how the NGO leader needs competencies to embrace both management roles (focused on the internal day to day practical achievement of tasks) and leadership roles (focused on the relational, strategic and change dimensions). Hailey's research and other capacity development literature highlight the importance of individual NGO leaders' diagnostic skills, "insightful agility" (Fowler, 2000, p. xii) and "analytical and adaptive capacities" (Ebrahim, 2003, p. 1). Research on high impact non-profits emphasises leadership competencies to work across sectors to advocate, collaborate, inspire, mobilise resources and to work internally within organisations to share leadership and master the art of adaptation (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008).

Hailey argues that NGO leaders require a rare balance of inward looking (management) and outward looking (influence) skills, with exceptional resilience, emotional intelligence and an ability to balance multiple stakeholder demands without compromising identity and values:

Such 'development leaders' could be characterised as being value-driven, knowledge based, and responsive. In practice this meant that they had:

- **a clear vision and a firm personal value-set.** This gave them a strong sense of commitment to helping the rural poor that they were able to share with, and use to inspire, others.
- **a willingness to learn and experiment.** This meant they were comfortable applying new technologies or developing innovative organisational forms, and keen to draw on science or other sources of applied or professional knowledge.
- **a curiosity and ability to scan the external environment.** As a consequence they were able to track changes, analyse trends, and identify ways to respond to changing circumstances.
- **strong communication and interpersonal skills.** These enabled them to motivate staff and engage with a cross-section of society in a proactive and positive manner.

- **the ability to balance competing demands** on their time and manage the pressures from a range of different stakeholders. (Hailey, 2006, p. 13)

The civil society context involves engagement with complex, interdependent stakeholder relationships (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Stansfield, 2001) to manage commonly ambiguous accountabilities to funders, clients, communities, staff, boards, volunteers, other community agencies, tangata whenua, business sponsors, and government policy and regulatory bodies. None of these stakeholder groups own the organisation and yet often act as if they do. Values, vision and mission guide the organisation's direction. Profit is a means rather than an end. Voluntarism, fuelled by shared values, drives the resource engine and provides the energy which keeps the mission focus alive. Indirect funding relationships that are more complex than user-pays direct relationships add to the ambiguity of ownership and the complexity that characterises civil society (Stansfield, 2001). In Aotearoa NZ, there are unique historical relationships between Māori and the Crown, which call for strong, respectful, cross-cultural relationships, based on mutual understanding of history, culture and identity. Civil society organisations need the collective capability to balance diverse interests, identities and ways of thinking while maintaining enough stability to give coherence (Baser & Morgan, 2008). Civil society leaders need to be able to live in this uncertain, unpredictable space, understand its inherent tensions, paradoxes and contradictions that cannot be 'fixed', and see the possibilities for learning, change and innovation that can emerge within these dynamics.

Civil society leadership requires particularly strong relationship skills to enlist and sustain engagement, commitment and resources from this complex web of interdependent stakeholder relationships and accountabilities (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Bird & Westley, 2011; Hailey, 2006; Stansfield, 2001). More facilitative, collaborative and decentralised leadership styles are often more appropriate and effective in civil society than heroic, hierarchical and dominating leadership styles (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Collins, 2005; Crutchfield & Grant, 2008; Hailey, 2006). These findings may also reflect recent trends in the wider leadership literature supporting less heroic, more humble leadership qualities (Collins, 2001) and more facilitative, decentralised styles (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Raelin, 2003). Any generalisations about leadership styles have to be qualified by an understanding of how our culturally endorsed, implicit leadership theories influence what is accepted and sanctioned as positive leadership in different historical periods and cultural contexts (House et al., 2002), including civil society. However, there are particular reasons why civil society is more likely to need facilitative, collaborative and decentralised leadership styles.

Civil society leadership is strongly collective work, shaping vision, direction and learning together, compared to a more conventional view of an individual leader with a vision enlisting

followers who are then held to account for results (P. Block, 2008; Yorks et al., 2008). Civil society leadership requires a capability to engage voluntary commitment in offering time, resources, energy and ideas towards shared vision, mission and values. This ownership, initiative and engagement is both a means and an end of civil society capacity development (Baser & Morgan, 2008), alternatively described as active citizenship (P. Block, 2008). It is one reason why Collins argues that the business sector has much to learn from social sector leadership, because “true leadership only exists if people follow when they have the freedom not to” (Collins, 2005, p. 13). Civil society leaders need to understand the nature of intrinsic rewards such as values alignment, participation in design, and fulfilment of shared aspirations, in order to leverage essential elements of organisational capacity, such as grants, donations and voluntary engagement. These leaders cannot rely to the same extent on extrinsic monetary rewards of the market to buy stakeholder commitment and nor do they have the power of the state to require compliance with particular rules or policies (Stansfield, 2001). As many leaders new to the civil society context discover, if they try to use hierarchical authority to get things done quickly and efficiently, they will soon find key stakeholders voting with their feet and walking out or, at the very least, calling for more consultation.

In CLD environments, the core task of leadership can be seen as creating the conditions for civic and institutional engagement: framing the debate, designing gatherings with conversations that shift people’s sense of possibility and build ownership that “nurtures an alternative future, one based on gifts, generosity, accountability, and commitment” (P. Block, 2008, p. 88). This is much less about leaders and followers than about catalysing a shared vision, one conversation at a time, that people own and engage in together (P. Block, 2008; Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Raelin, 2003). It is more about supporting the energy of neighbour inter-relationships of self-organising systems, to catalyse higher order learning and adaptation, than top down command-and-control leadership interventions.

Civil society leadership has to make sense of this complexity. This does not happen simply through individual leaders’ natural talents, wisdom and analytical capabilities, but rather through their capacity to engage in leadership as collective work, simultaneously creating shared understanding and action with others (Yorks et al., 2008). From a social constructionist perspective, leadership is framed as relational work, existing in and through relationships. It is systemic work, because relationships are an integral part of wider systems and social structures. It is socially constructed meaning-making in communities of practice (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006).

This notion of leadership as collective work has fundamental implications for our understanding of what makes for a competent leader. “In organisations immersed in continuous change, what matters most is not what a leader knows, but what he or she is capable of learning” (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004, p. 82). This requires leaders to be vulnerable in feeling incompetent about what they don’t know, putting themselves in the role of the “reflective beginner” (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004, p.82) and defining their competence more “by the questions they ask rather than the answers they seek to provide” (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004, p. 86).

Antonacopoulou and Bento (2004) argue that leadership is neither taught, nor learned. Rather, leadership *is* learning. Key competencies therefore include self-awareness to facilitate one’s own reflective practice, and to facilitate learning, dialogue and sense-making with others (Isaacs, 1999; Storey, 2004; Symonette, 2007; Torbert & Associates, 2004). This implies a different approach to succession planning and leadership continuity than a quest for a replacement leader, through building collective capability for inquiry.

A fundamental implication for leadership research is “recast[ing] the focus from one which represents leadership as a landscape of ideal practice to one which abstracts leadership as a context of learning practice ... which defies objectivist representations, but which affords multiple interpretations” (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004, p. 95). This supports the idea that leadership is best researched and understood in context, investigating the unfolding of leadership in a dynamic, ongoing process, as people make sense of this challenging collective work while they are living it and doing it (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006). This thinking (about leadership as learning, and researching leadership as living practice) helped shape my research questions towards leadership learning rather than searching for archetypal models of civil society leadership, and my design of the research process itself as a site of leadership learning.

Leadership as collective work aligns strongly with civil society practice, and Māori and Pacific cultural practice in this Aotearoa NZ cultural context (Pfeifer & Love, 2004). Māori and Pacific leadership is acknowledged as more collective than most Western orientations. Yet much cross-cultural leadership research and conceptualising still focuses more on the individual leader and less on the collective practice of leadership (see for example, Mead, Stevens, Gallagher, Jackson, & Pfeifer, 2004; Pfeifer & Love, 2004; Sanga & Chu, 2009). The Māori concept of kaitiakitanga or stewardship expresses both the collective, reciprocal, relational dimension of leadership and that of individuals as “stewards endowed with a mandate to use the agency of their mana (spiritual power, authority and sovereignty) to create mauri ora



(conscious well-being) for humans and eco-systems” (Spiller et al., 2011, p. 223). This understanding has some synergies with complexity leadership thinking.

Complexity leadership thinking is a newly emerging field supporting a paradigm shift for theory, research, practice and language (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011). Wheatley (1992) drew on physical complexity science disciplines to progress understanding of the complex interplay of many interacting forces between the individual, their social relationships and the wider system that influence leadership emergence beyond formal, top-down roles. Stacey (1995, p. 478) went on to highlight how:

...in order to produce creative, innovative, continually changeable behavior, systems must operate far from equilibrium where they are driven by negative and positive feedback to paradoxical states of stability and instability, predictability and unpredictability.

This complexity thinking perspective challenges assumptions about the purpose of leadership being to reduce uncertainty, build consensus and move the system towards equilibrium. Rather, complexity leadership thinking reframes tensions, paradoxes and contradictions as a resource for working with the formal and informal aspects of organisations as complex, living, adaptive systems.

Complexity leadership research has been mostly focused on business organisational contexts (Hazy, Goldstein, & Lichtenstein, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). However, Plowman et al. (2007) provide useful evidence from a church leadership context of far-from-equilibrium dynamics in civil society. In their research, church leaders were influencing conditions that enhanced interaction, innovation and sense-making, which disrupted existing patterns of behaviour and enabled emergent order (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). They were not the archetypal leaders individually exercising influence over others towards predetermined goals and vision. However, complexity leadership theory does not essentialise any one style, but rather identifies a variety of styles in dynamic movement. Recent complexity leadership theory suggests three entangled leadership dynamics – a mix of top-down administrative leadership, bottom-up adaptive leadership, and enabling catalytic leadership in the middle fostering the conditions for innovation and learning (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Panzar, Hazy, McKelvey, and Schwandt (2007) suggest that a non-linear, dynamical search for effective means of communication and influence emerges over time from the patterns of agents’ interactions. Further, they argue that the nature of the task, the environmental demands, the agents’ attributes and their prior history all influence these far-from-equilibrium leadership dynamics.

Leadership within the complex, dynamic civil society space becomes much less about leaders having the answers or the vision and much more about their capability to facilitate their own

reflective practice and collective learning, dialogue and sense-making with others (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004; Isaacs, 1999; Storey, 2004). Ongoing learning is therefore central to leadership itself and a key focus of this thesis in exploring enabling conditions for civil society leadership emergence.

## ***Scoping the research inquiry***

Complexity thinking provides a way of seeing civil society leadership learning as layers of interacting nested systems. These systems are full of paradoxes and contradictions, with self-organising properties which enable distributed intelligence and decentralised<sup>4</sup> leadership to emerge. For example, the significance of the Unitec programme is not only about learning for individual students, but also for their organisations, for the tutors and for the NFP sector, influencing identity and wider legitimacy. There are influences of the tertiary education environment and the impact of the Aotearoa NZ and Pacific political context on this programme learning space. Global awareness of impacts of economic recession and environmental sustainability imperatives affect local CLD learning spaces. All these nested systems interact, with the potential to support the emergence of new learning. Particular sub-systems like the individual leader and leadership as collective work are key aspects of the research focus, but are understood as interdependent parts of a wider, dynamic whole. In a trans-disciplinary sense, I was curious to know what could be learned from applying complexity thinking as a way of working with the research process and as an analytical framework for making sense of the data generated.

Chapter Two introduces particular language, constructs and a worldview that are important to understanding this research. The chapter explains how complexity thinking represents a paradigm shift in how knowledge, knowing and knowers are understood as always in movement. The chapter outlines the philosophical and methodological assumptions that inform the research approach. Guiding values and ethical principles underpinning the research quality, integrity and validity are identified.

Chapter Three explains the praxis-related, practitioner action research design developed to align the research purpose, values and paradigm with the research contexts. A chronology is provided of key stages of the two action research cycles, demonstrating how developmental

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<sup>4</sup> Davis and Sumara (2006, p. 52) distinguish between centralised, decentralised and distributed 'architectures' or forms of organisation studied by network theorists. In the leadership literature, the terms decentralised and distributed leadership are often both used to convey forms of shared, non-hierarchical leadership. I use the term decentralised leadership in the sense that Davis and Sumara use it to describe repeating scale-free networks with nodes that efficiently share information to grow distributed intelligence and are robust because no one node is critical to the overall functioning of the whole network.

evaluation, appreciative inquiry and cooperative inquiry approaches provided timely feedback of emergent findings to inform ongoing development and innovation (Patton, 2011). The research approaches used to support analysis, interpretation and triangulation of the data within the research context are discussed.

The research inquiry began with a first cycle of action research designed to distil learning about effective curriculum, teaching and learning practices which support civil society management and leadership development. This 2009 research supported the Unitec NZ team's reflective practice during a time of major programme review and redesign. Perceived success factors contributing towards programme effectiveness in the past and future were identified. Findings from six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with graduates and a literature review of trends in non-profit management education informed the Unitec team's programme redesign work. Appendix Four identifies the redesigned curriculum framework implemented from 2010. An emergent model of key dimensions of civil society leadership and how these are mirrored and grown through effective teaching and learning was developed from this exploratory study (Appendix Five).

This study raised important questions beyond a developmental evaluation of one programme. Are there similar underlying conditions that support the emergence of civil society leadership across academic and informal learning environments, and across NFP organisations and CLD contexts? What is important about what these leaders need to know and how they come to know? What is the role of sector-specific learning spaces and cross-sectoral learning spaces in a time of increasingly blurred boundaries? The findings sparked interest in finding a different site of civil society leadership learning for a further loop of action research to continue to explore the research question of "What supports the emergence of civil society leadership?"

Inspiring Communities and its national leadership team provided the opportunity to explore these questions in a different civil society leadership learning context. While Unitec's learning focused on the development of individual leaders mostly working in NFP organisations, Inspiring Communities was more focused on leadership as collective work, growing leadership at multiple levels, including:

- growing skills and knowledge of individual CLD practitioners located in diverse organisations, agencies and places
- promoting the value of growing community leadership and voice both within local communities and with potential CLD funding organisations, policy makers and partners.

- developing mechanisms to support informal, peer to peer learning within and between CLD sites across NZ

Inspiring Communities' kaupapa was therefore strongly aligned with mine and thus provided a natural partner to engage in a second, collaborative action research inquiry phase.

This thesis draws together my analysis and interpretation of what I have learned from these two collaborative action research inquiries. The collective wisdom from both research sites is acknowledged, which influenced the emergence of this way of understanding leadership learning in this civil society space. Key learning from the Inspiring Communities co-inquiry has also been published (Inspiring Communities, 2013). Appendix Twelve provides two extracts from this as examples of the collaborative writing and analysis arising from this research.

Chapters Four, Five and Six present the findings in response to the research question: What supports the emergence of civil society leadership?

Chapter Four describes a paradigm shift in my own thinking about leadership as the research progressed. My understanding of leadership shifted from a search for some fixed, knowable, essential qualities of individual leaders to seeing leadership as a whole, complex learning system in constant movement. The findings signal how a different discourse about civil society leadership as learning could open up the potential for more people to see their part in leading and contributing as active citizens.

Chapter Five elaborates findings about how to foster civil society leadership as learning, in particular through collaborative inquiry relationships. To foster learning amidst complexity, the research points attention towards three important process-oriented interactions: with peer learners, with new thinking, and with practice contexts. Particular paradoxes and tensions that arise within each are identified. Amidst these tensions, researchers, teachers and civil society leaders discern *how* they will exercise leadership to keep the system learning.

Chapter Six argues that complexity thinking introduces powerful ways of fostering, analysing and understanding collaborative action research. Complexity thinking constructs are used to explore three enabling conditions that teachers, researchers or civil society leaders may be able to influence to support higher-level learning: neighbour interactions; diversity and commonalities; uncertainty and coherence. Patterns, properties, propositions and principles are identified which support the emergence of civil society leadership, based on findings from across the two action research cycles.

Chapter Seven discusses the research findings, contribution and raises questions for further research.

## ***Research intent***

The construct of a PhD as an individual research contribution to new knowledge represents a particular challenge in presenting findings from collaborative inquiry. This tension has been acknowledged and managed from the outset with Inspiring Communities by building transparency around our shared intent, values and understanding about how we would work together on the research design, process, analysis and writing. I have been a co-author with Inspiring Communities in their 2013 publication and they in turn have provided feedback on my thesis drafts. Each publication serves a different purpose and audience. I have been very much the primary author of the thesis, just as Inspiring Communities took responsibility for their publication. It is an example of what Davis and Sumara (2006) describe as the collective emergence of a group's body of knowledge that cannot be solely attributed to any individual locus of learning. This thesis draws on the voice and insights from those who engaged in both research cycles, my own reflective practice and the rich literature of complexity thinking, civil society leadership and leadership learning. Ultimately, the thesis expresses my own voice and understanding from these diverse sources. However, the reader will also find frequent use of "we" in the thesis as I honour the collective wisdom of my co-researchers<sup>5</sup>. My intent is to enable some new ways of seeing, thinking and acting to emerge for civil society leaders, teachers and researchers.

The thesis seeks to make a contribution to understanding civil society leadership around at least four levels of learning, which are summed up as: *Name It, Grow It, Do It, Question It*.

The research seeks to illustrate and *name* civil society leadership in a way that reflects the flavour and whakapapa of leadership within Aotearoa NZ civil society. Through sharing stories from civil society leaders' practice and learning, the research intent is to paint a picture that others can interpret in relation to their own perspectives. The research makes no claims about generalizability yet does identify patterns, properties, propositions and principles about civil society leadership emerging from empirical inquiry. The research therefore responds to the identified need for more scholar/practitioner voices in researching, theorising and contributing

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term co-researcher instead of research participants to emphasise the collaborative research engagement with the Unitec and Inspiring Communities teams. In different ways each research cycle sought to shift power from these teams simply being research participants towards their active roles in shaping the research design, implementation, interpretation and outcomes. The Unitec graduates interviewed were much less involved in the overall process, and their roles were therefore more typical of research participants than co-researchers.

towards understanding of leadership in practice, and beyond North American contexts in particular (Sorenson et al., 2011).

The research aims to contribute to collective understanding of how to set up the conditions to keep *growing* strong civil society leadership for a socially responsible and environmentally sustainable society. “All systems either self-organize or die. From a systems perspective the key to effective change and capacity development is to create the conditions in which self-organization can flourish” (Morgan, 2005, p. 19-20). There is a risk that these conditions are unintentionally destroyed by the external imposition of inappropriate capacity building or leadership models, mindsets and strategies, that underestimate the wisdom and capability that already lie within civil society.

Thirdly, the research process itself tried to enact civil society leadership learning. Collaborative inquiry approaches chosen aimed to model co-research partnerships for *doing* research and for sense-making around civil society leadership practice. If core leadership capabilities include the ability to facilitate personal reflection and collective inquiry, dialogue and sense-making, then the research environment offers a learning space for strengthening these competencies. The intent was for mutual learning with others engaged, not only for me as the PhD candidate, building competence and confidence in use of different inquiry frameworks.

Fourthly, the research encourages different ways of knowing through *questioning* underlying assumptions, worldviews and discourses. The intent is to support critical reflective practice as civil society practitioners and to encourage others to question their perceptions of this sector. If learning is central to leadership, then leaders need to understand different ways of knowing and to identify patterns that give rise to distributed intelligence, self-organising systems and emergent knowledge. This research therefore supports trans-disciplinary learning to shed further light on how civil society leadership learns to work within complex environments.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Complexity, Learning and Knowing**

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As a researcher, I needed to address the question of how to make sense of a diversity of perspectives about civil society, leadership, and learning that emerged through this study. Complexity thinking offered me a way to support a 'not-knower'<sup>6</sup>, 'curiosity mindset' as a learner open to more than one way of seeing the world. Complexity thinking acknowledges that while different systems of knowing have their own internal coherence they are often logically incommensurable with each other. Rather than seeking to resolve these inconsistencies, complexity thinking seeks to capitalise on this diversity as an energy source. Diversity can support ongoing learning and knowing as systems collide, challenge movement away from equilibrium, and find new, temporary coherence in the emergence of new knowledge. As the research progressed, complexity thinking enabled a paradigm shift for me, as I came to understand knowledge, knowing and knowers as always in movement.

This chapter introduces aspects of complexity thinking that are important to understanding the thesis. Particular language, constructs and ways of viewing reality underpin how civil society leadership learning is conceptualised in this study as complex adaptive systems always in movement. Complex adaptive systems are systems that learn (S. Johnson, 2001) and learning is understood as "transforming what is known" (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, learning theories are introduced as a resource for exploring conditions that support learning in complex adaptive systems.

How then is new emergent knowledge, or knowing, validated within this trans-disciplinary, inter-discursive approach? Drawing on Lather (2006), the chapter outlines the methodological positioning of this research within five themes central to the validation of new knowledge: objectivity, complicity, difference, interpretation and legitimisation. The situated role of the researcher immersed in the reality that is being researched is acknowledged and the key role of reflexivity is discussed. Guiding values and ethical principles underpinning the research quality, integrity and validity are identified.

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<sup>6</sup> Usage of the term 'not-knower' in this thesis challenges dominant perceptions of leaders as individuals with knowledge and answers, in order to support exploration of leadership based around inquiring questions and an ongoing quest for shared knowledge. A 'not-knower' recognises the value in listening with inquiring curiosity to diverse perspectives, particularly in complex contexts where much is unknown or unknowable. A 'not-knower' brings a humble attitude which assumes they may not have the only or best answer, solution or knowledge for a particular context. A 'not-knower' is far from ignorant; a 'not knower' is wise.

## ***From context to complexity***

The previous chapter highlighted the multi-layered concept of civil society, the different discourses that impact on perceptions of its capacity, and the legitimacy of its management and leadership approaches. The inherent complexity of leadership in this context arises from a number of factors, including the ambiguity of diverse stakeholder accountability expectations; the need to inspire voluntary commitment of resources; the ongoing need to learn and adapt while maintaining clarity of identity, values and purpose. This complex context typically demands more facilitative, collaborative, decentralised leadership styles than heroic, hierarchical styles. Collective ownership, effort and sense-making are required to achieve a shared vision.

This research explores conditions that support the self-organising properties of civil society leadership to emerge and flourish. How is it possible to better understand the flow that unleashes the potential for self-organisation to emerge through the individual, their social relationships and their particular context? How can the ambiguity, tensions and contradictions between different stakeholders' way of seeing a civil society organisation or a local community be used as a positive resource to work with, not just a constant source of tension? What provides coherence and consistency alongside this work with diversity and ongoing change? What are some of the relational qualities that enable decentralised control and self-organisation within a system?

A complexity thinking perspective seeks to understand and create conditions that support the self-organising properties within any system to flourish (P. Morgan, 2005). Complexity thinking provides a way of understanding nested, multi-layered complex systems. It highlights these systems' capacity to work with paradoxes as a positive energy source and the key role of neighbour interactions in supporting decentralised leadership and learning. The synergy of these concepts with the civil society leadership context is strong. Ultimately, it was the realisation that complex adaptive systems are systems that learn (Davis et al., 2008; S. Johnson, 2001) that confirmed for me that this framing would align well with study of my particular research question: "What supports the emergence of civil society leadership?"

## ***Complexity thinking whakapapa***

Complexity thinking is an emergent field of inquiry that is gaining significant momentum as a trans-disciplinary, new science, and engaging new ways of seeing, thinking and acting across the physical, natural and social sciences (Wheatley, 1992, 2006). This new science has generated new knowledge across diverse fields such as quantum physics, the behaviour of ant colonies, the geography of cities, the ecology of living systems, computer programming ,



organisations, leadership and evaluation research (Davis & Sumara, 2006; S. Johnson, 2001; Patton, 2011; Wheatley, 2006). Complexity science is increasingly influencing education, leadership, organisational and capacity development thinking (Davis et al., 2008; Grove, Kibel, & Haas, 2007; Kaplan, 2002; P. Morgan, 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Wheatley, 2006). This section locates my usage of complexity thinking within its ancestry or whakapapa.

Complexity thinking supports understanding of complex, dynamic, evolving, inter-connected systems. This approach brings a paradigm shift beyond Newtonian linear (cause/effect) thinking or critical theory dialectical (either/or) thinking to a trans-disciplinary worldview that embraces diverse theoretical frameworks and ways of knowing from across the physical, natural and social sciences (Goldstein, 2008). I use the term 'paradigm shift' to represent a fresh way of interpreting the world, a new way of working with and beyond previous theories. Complexity thinking challenges the idea of any ultimate truth – and as such does not seek to replace other ways of seeing the truth. Rather, it works to explore the potential for new knowledge and learning that can arise when diverse systems of knowledge collide and engage with each other.

The origins of this field have been traced to a confluence of diverse fields of research “including cybernetics, systems theory, artificial intelligence, chaos theory, fractal geometry and non-linear dynamics” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 8). The field has been influenced by, and is in part a response to, the ontological and epistemological debates that have challenged the limitations of positivist research assumptions. In particular, the limitation of linear cause-effect explanations, reductionism, determinism, predictability, linear evolution, impartiality and assumptions that the normal state of systems is one of equilibrium (Kernick, 2006; Marion, 2008) have been challenged as inappropriate for understanding complex phenomena. “The problem is not that complexity is necessarily dense and impenetrable ... rather, the problem is that our frames of reference for understanding get in the way” (Marion, 2008, p. 2). The field has grown from observational studies of diverse complex phenomena dating back to the nineteenth century, for example, when biologists challenged the emphasis on the power of external forces shaping order and looked at the complex behaviour patterns of internal interactions (Marion, 2008).

Goldstein (2008) provides a useful overview of studies from the late 1970s that began to build trans-disciplinary understanding of common features of complex phenomena. He explains how the advent of computers enabled more computational analysis of dynamic patterns. Yet early systems-thinking was strongly rooted in equilibrium-seeking assumptions about complex systems. The idea of understanding whole systems was further advanced from the biological sciences in methods which explored from the whole to simpler entities that could explain the

whole, rather than reductionist tendencies to focus on parts. Nonlinear dynamical systems theory developed the notion of sensitivity to initial conditions: how small changes can be amplified in all sorts of unpredictable effects and identified the role of attractors. Graph theory's contribution has been through an understanding of the mathematics of networks, focusing on the idea of nodes and linkages, connectivity internally and externally which support the emergence of new order. While the philosophical idea of emergence has been traced back to the nineteenth century (Blitz 1992, cited in Goldstein p. 35), it was the physicists, mathematicians and chemists who advanced understanding of phase transitions and the concept of emergence as "the arising of new structures with new properties out of the interactions taking place inside the system and between the system and its environment" (Goldstein, 2008, p. 34). Goldstein asserts that complex adaptive systems theory assimilated ideas across these different fields of inquiry and provided the basis for many innovative and important research initiatives in this field.

Throughout this thesis the term complex adaptive systems (CAS) is used as a common heuristic device in complexity science to help identify key properties of systems to pay attention to, in making sense of their dynamics and relationships. "Complexity science is not a single theory. It is the study of complex adaptive systems - the patterns of relationships within them, how they are sustained, how they self-organize and how outcomes emerge" (Zimmerman, Plsek, & Lindberg, 2002, p. 3). The study of CAS brings into focus not only the tangible, but also the intangible (Kaplan, 1999, 2002) fields, structures and relationships that help us understand the spaces and dynamics between the parts. Such an approach seeks to understand systems as living, dynamic, complex, organic, multi-layered and evolving: more than the sum of their component parts (Westley et al., 2006). CAS are not in any way fixed phenomena or entities with clearly defined boundaries.

As the complexity science field has grown in academic rigour and recognition, the language used to describe the field has shifted from complexity theory towards complexity science and complexity thinking, and the lexicon has grown to include the term 'complexivist' to describe these approaches (Davis & Sumara, 2006). There are both 'hard' complexity science approaches which work within more deterministic assumptions (e.g. physics and computer applications) and 'soft' complexity science approaches that make a more interpretative use of complexity as a way of seeing, to describe living and social systems. Complexity thinking is used in this thesis to describe an attitude that sits between 'hard' and 'soft' science as a philosophical and pragmatic "way of thinking and acting" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 18) to affect the behaviour and characteristics of complex phenomena. This practice orientation influences the underlying philosophical assumptions of this thesis, the research design, the

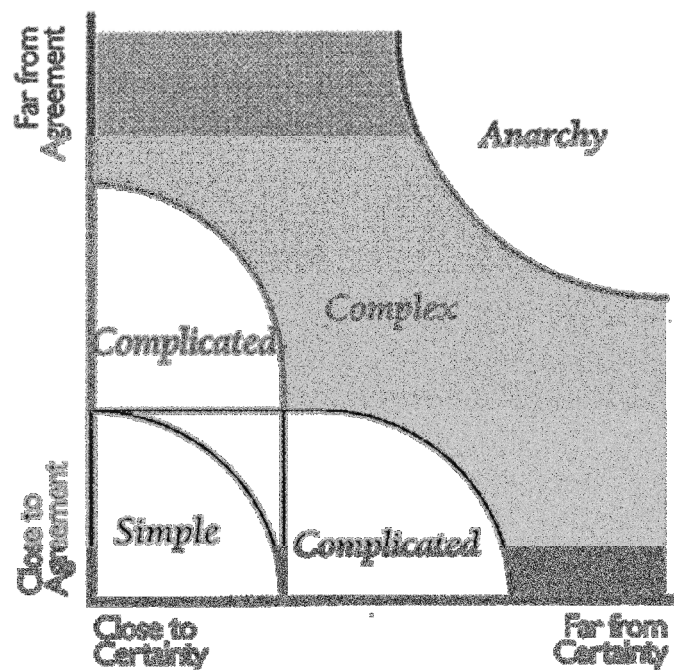
theories that are drawn on to support the analysis, and the kind of new knowledge that emerges. This usage of complexity thinking sits within what Alhadeff-Jones (2008) identifies as a third generation of complexity theories, which use complexity constructs as powerful metaphors for interpreting reality.

### ***Key constructs within a complexity thinking worldview***

This section introduces the ontology (understanding of the nature of reality) that sits behind my usage of complexity thinking. Particular complexity thinking constructs are elaborated to explain how this understanding of reality frames the thesis argument.

### **Simple, complicated and complex systems**

Complexity thinking does not assume that all reality is complex. Rather, reality is understood as simple, complicated, complex or chaotic – and known, knowable, unknown and unknowable. Warren Weaver, a physicist and information scientist, is recognised as one of the first to distinguish simple, complicated and complex systems (Davis & Sumara, 2006). His work has since been built on by others (for example, Cabaj, 2011; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Stacey, 2002; Westley et al., 2006; Zimmerman, 2001) to help understand what this means for analysing and acting in management, leadership, organisational and community situations.



**Figure 1: Stacey's Agreement and Certainty Matrix (Zimmermann, 2001)**

In simple systems, only a few variables interact. Weaver argued that in such situations, it is possible to use analytical methods and explanations to identify a reasonably stable truth about cause and effect relationships. In Stacey's matrix (Figure 1), these are systems that operate

with a high degree of certainty and agreement about the relationships between the parts. Simple systems lend themselves to planned paths of action to achieve specific outcomes and sharing of best practices from one situation to another to improve effectiveness, for example, procedure manuals. In simple systems, “what needs to be done is *known*” (Patton, 2011, p. 87).

Complicated systems involve millions of variables. Cause and effect relationships between separate parts can be found to create some degree of certainty and agreement. Stacey distinguishes two different scenarios of technically and socially complicated systems. In technically complicated situations, there is less certainty about cause and effect linkages but a high degree of agreement – for example, around a shared purpose. This clarity of shared purpose, combined with specialist technical expertise and incremental decision-making, can guide complicated systems towards agreed theories or workable solutions. In socially complicated systems, there is a greater deal of certainty about how to achieve outcomes but strong disagreement about which outcomes are desirable. Relational work on political decision-making, negotiation and alliance-building are needed in these situations to reach a level of certainty and agreement. “When the degree of uncertainty and agreement are such that what needs to be done is challenging and difficult, but *knowable*, the situation is complicated” (Patton, 2011, p. 87).

Complex systems are defined by their high degree of both uncertainty and disagreement. Components of complex systems are dynamic and adaptive, supporting creativity, innovation and change. Prediction is problematic and decision-making therefore complex. Solutions that work in one place may not work in another. You cannot separate the parts from the whole. Complex systems’ essence lies in their particular relationships at specific moments in time and stakeholders may be far from agreement (Westley et al., 2006). “In complex situations, cause and effect is *unknown* and *unknowable* until after the effect has emerged, at which point some retrospective tracing and patterning may be possible. These different degrees of *causal knowability* actually define the uncertainty dimension of the degree of uncertainty/degree of conflict matrix” (Patton, 2011, p. 92). Patton reminds us that these are not absolute distinctions, but rather a matter of perception and judgement. He calls them sensitising concepts that are used as a heuristic device to help analyse a situation and inform appropriate responses.

Kurtz and Snowden (2003) extended this thinking with their Cynefin framework into multi-ontology sense-making that challenges assumptions of order, rational choice and intentionality. Five domains are identified in Figure 2 below: order (known and knowable), un-order (complex and chaotic), and disorder as the space in the centre where these different

ways of knowing conflict. Un-order conveys “not a lack of order but a different kind of order” (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003, p.465). Snowden (2005, p. 51) argues that people are capable of working with “contextual complexity”, working within and between all these domains as a result of intentional and accidental action, to develop different diagnoses and interventions.

Figure 1 Cynefin domains

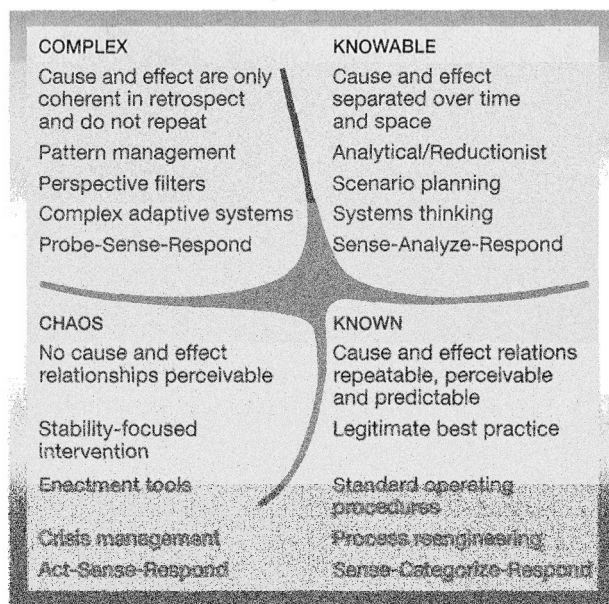


Figure 2: Cynefin domains of knowing (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003, p 468)

Kurtz and Snowden’s idea of multi-ontology sense-making provides a clear ontological foundation for my use of complexity thinking in this study. It aligns with complexity thinking’s trans-disciplinary understanding of how it is possible to move between different ways of knowing in ongoing processes of acting, sensing, learning and responding to context. Finding ways to work with contextual complexity is fundamental to management, leadership, teaching, learning, and importantly in this case, research design.

This research assumes that reality is not fixed or fully knowable through our own rational minds as individual agents. Rather, this research assumes reality is a historically and culturally situated process of the ongoing social construction of knowledge through our relationships with our surroundings (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). “Reality...is created and explained in interaction” (Sarantakos, 1997, p. 51). As researcher, I am the ‘curious inquirer’, the ‘not-knower’, as part of reality as complex, dynamic, interconnected whole systems. These systems are continually interacting and mutually influencing the ‘knower/inquirer’ and what is ‘known’, such that knowing and acting cannot be separated. A reflexive approach acknowledges these influences and the limitations and sensitivities this implies towards the wider cultural, historical and social context within which the research is undertaken.

In this study, civil society leadership is understood as complex, dynamic, adaptive systems of inter-relationships between individuals, families, groups, organisations, communities, societies, eco-systems. Complex adaptive systems, leadership and learning are all socially constructed in and from their particular context. The high degree of uncertainty and lack of agreement about the inter-relationships involved in supporting the emergence of civil society leadership learning locates this research in Stacey's complex zone. Leadership deals with human beings and the complexity of their relationships with each other, let alone with their wider context. The research unpacks some of the paradoxes and diversity that can support this system's energy, interaction and learning. It does not attempt to explain the intricacies of all the interaction of the many layers of nested systems that impact leadership learning. Rather, it explores how a complexity thinking approach can provide a way of thinking and acting within teaching, research and practice environments, to foster, analyse and understand the emergence of civil society leadership learning.

As an epistemology, complexity thinking supports ways of knowing that are less rule-bound and more guided by heuristic devices, such as the idea of complex adaptive systems. The process of generating knowledge is seen more as "an 'en-cyclo-paedic' process (which builds in cycles rather than in a linear accumulation of knowledge)" (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008, p. 76), as we construct meaning based on our identity as human beings and our interactions with the phenomena and contexts we are researching.

A complexity thinking ontology and epistemology is much more than a description of the complexity of a particular context or phenomenon. Complexity thinking invites exploration of order, un-order, and disorder in the sense Snowden (2005) identifies. Different ways of knowing, different interventions will be needed in different contexts, yet there may be some principles, processes and responses to complexity that will be relevant beyond the particular sites of civil society leadership learning in this study.

## **Paradoxes and contradictions**

Complexity thinking helps us understand CAS as full of paradoxes and contradictions, and invites inquiry about these as complementary pairs rather than dichotomous (either-or) choices (Patton, 2011). For example, all elements or agents within CAS are capable of their own independent action and are also deeply interdependent and interconnected. Interdependence and independence co-exist (Zimmerman et al., 2002). In a civil society leadership context, one example of working with paradox is the diverse and often ambiguous stakeholder relationships with policy makers, funders, other community agencies, clients, volunteers, staff, and community members. Funders' expectations, client or community need

and staff's professional judgement may all pull the organisation in different directions. A civil society organisation or movement is simultaneously asserting its capacity for independent action while working with its interdependence with many internal and external stakeholders, to keep focused on its vision, mission and values.

Every element is both a whole complex adaptive system in itself and part of a larger whole nest of other CAS (Diamond, 2011). The landscape of the whole system and the agent is constantly changing (Westley et al., 2006). To attempt to understand the whole requires a different way of seeing that is not simply built from an analysis of the parts. Understanding requires an analytical and sensory awareness to see and sense the relationships, flow, pattern, rhythms, invisible connections and spaces between the parts that form the whole field (Kaplan, 2002). For example, storytelling about the history of a particular civil society initiative can help a group understand bigger picture patterns of key people, relationships, events and environmental influences that have shaped the organisation's values, culture and strategies. Distilling this wisdom can open up new ways of seeing more immediate challenges and opportunities.

Complexity thinking's trans-disciplinary approach comes from seeing different systems of knowledge as nested CAS – for example, from neurology to psychology to sociology to anthropology to evolutionary understandings about the species and the biosphere (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Each has its own history of thought that continues to develop, collide with, inspire and challenge other knowledge systems in an ongoing pursuit of knowledge. Paradoxes and contradictions are seen not as problems to be solved but rather as part of the dynamic energy of the complex system.

### **Neighbour interactions as critical for learning and adaptation**

Any CAS can be understood as comprising a large number of interacting nodes and linkages. The nodes are the critical relationship connection points where agents meet and interact in CAS. Nodes are not homogenous and include not only people but projects, technologies and ideas across different levels of CAS. New knowledge emerges in the spaces between the nodes, through the ongoing possibility of creating new pathways of connection among the nodes (Kilduff, Crossland, & Tsai, 2008), if the strong inertia tendency of networks can be overcome. New nodes, new ties, and rewiring of existing connections is needed to bring together new ideas (Kilduff et al., 2008) – for example, the intersection points of state and civil society discourses; of government and community organisation policy negotiations; of manager and staff performance conversations.

Interactions at these nodes determine what will happen in the system (Diamond, 2011). They can create or destroy opportunity for learning and adaptation (Kilduff et al., 2008). The nature and quality of relationships with neighbours is central. These non-linear, neighbour interactions can enable “ideas to bump into each other” (Davis et al., 2008, p. 199) with exchanges of energy, information and material resources across the porous boundaries of systems when they interact at these nodes. These local interactions of human and social capital (McKelvey, 2008) can build an extraordinary source of distributed or collective intelligence which enables decentralised control (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; S. Johnson, 2001) and increases the potential for learning and adaptive responses (Schreiber & Carley, 2008). A key finding of complexity research in the natural sciences is the lack of any centralised leader or external controller in ant colonies, slime moulds and other natural systems (S. Johnson, 2001). Rather, an identified process of self-organisation enables the system to both survive and adapt.

Brafman and Beckstrom (2006) use the metaphor of the starfish to describe these self-organising properties in particular contexts of decentralised leadership such as social movements and the internet. Starfish have no head. Their organs are replicated throughout each of their arms. Under attack, starfish become more open and more decentralised as they mutate. Cut the starfish and it will grow two starfish or a new arm. Its intelligence is spread across its system, not held in one centralised head like the spider. The spider metaphor is used to symbolise the hierarchical leadership model with clear division of roles for each part of the body. Under attack, the spider is more vulnerable and tends to centralise power even more than it did before, whereas a starfish decentralises. Brafman and Beckstrom argue that starfish cultures, or starfish-spider hybrid variations, tend to be more resilient than purely spider cultures amidst change and complexity.

This self-organising starfish culture of “large collections of simple, interacting units, endowed with the potential to evolve over time” (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008, p. xii), these authors call swarm behaviour. They acknowledge that human systems differ from starfish, bees and ant colonies in their capability for independent, intelligent decision-making, but they suggest that this just makes the complex dynamics more sophisticated. They argue that human organisations try to suppress swarm behaviour and control it from the top. Organisations underestimate the capability of complex dynamics to spontaneously generate new structures without external agents, to create order by dissipating energy rather than accumulating it, and to generate largely unpredictable outcomes because of the random behaviours and complex interactions driving CAS (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008, xiv).



The self-organising properties of starfish culture or swarm behaviour rely on strong circles of peer neighbour interactions, loosely connected around clear shared values and intent, rather than tightly prescribed rules from any leader above. Brafman and Beckstrom (2006) suggest that catalytic leadership within this system at its best brings strong emotional intelligence to these relationships, a tolerance of ambiguity (rather than a need for control) and a collaborative (compared to directive) leadership style. The leadership style uses inspiration and connectedness strategies in preference to controlling and organising approaches. A civil society context starfish example would be self-help support groups and their strength in catalysing voluntary motivation and energy around their shared purpose. Brafman and Beckstrom argue that the strength of the system lies in the quality of the local circles of interaction, their interconnections with other circles, their level of initiative and participation, and their sharing of energy, information and resources across circles, which supports mutation and keeps a movement alive and learning. Marion (2008, p. 11) describes how enabling leaders catalyse “structures, rules, interactions, interdependencies, tension and culture in which complex mechanisms can thrive and unanticipated outcomes can occur – and they create mechanisms that weed out poorly adaptive outcomes.” This paints a very different picture than capacity building interventions driven by external experts or command-and-control leadership.

### **Randomness and coherence: chaos and order**

CAS hold a paradoxical mix of randomness and coherence, chaos and order in tension. The self-organising properties of the multiple agents interacting in CAS can produce highly unpredictable, random behaviour, because agents are capable of both independent and interdependent behaviour. External and internal conditions can therefore influence uncertainty and unpredictability (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). Complexity research has identified the non-linearity principle, which acknowledges how small actions can produce large, uncertain reactions out of all proportion to the initial triggering event – known as the butterfly effect (Gleick, 1987). For example, an ‘aha’ moment about a concept like values alignment can set a person on a pathway to a whole different lifestyle, a change of job, or a new way of seeing their family, community or life purpose that could impact change at a societal level. Such transformational moments are never predictable, though the learning environment may have provided conditions that supported this emergence.

Another paradox of CAS is that underlying their apparent unpredictability there is also some order. Chaos theory suggests that order and chaos are partners in the creative process of change (Wheatley, 2006). The seemingly chaotic movements of the systems in fact weave a pattern or form a shape, which is called a ‘strange attractor’ (Wheatley, 2006), a process “that

draws the energy of the system to it" (Zimmerman et al., 2002). Strange attractors are different from 'fixed point attractors', characterised more by bureaucratic command-and-control structures (McKelvey, 2008). Goldstein (2008) highlights that attractors can and do shift over time. In a metaphoric sense:

...an attractor is a figurative manner of speaking about patterns of behaviour occurring during particular times or places in an organisation. Leaders then can operate on the 'level' of the organisational attractors, for unless the attractor is changed, behaviour under its sway cannot really shift. (Goldstein, 2008, p. 30)

The dance between chaos and order happens in a phase of turbulence where lots of possibilities are explored in different directions. The strange attractor emerges as a hidden boundary that "*lives within the system*, becoming visible as it explores its space of possibilities" (Wheatley, 2006, p. 118). The strange attractor is a pattern of natural energy within the system that supports the possibility of change and innovation out of this chaos:

Chaos is the last state before a system plunges into random behaviour where no order exists. Not all systems move into chaos, but if a system becomes unstable, it will move first into a period of oscillation, swinging back and forth between two states. After this oscillating stage, the next state is chaos, and it is then that the wild gyrations begin. However, in the realm of chaos, where everything should fall apart, the strange attractor emerges, and we observe order, not chaos. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 117)

Each complex adaptive system therefore has both an inherent stability as well as its own capacity to change its structure (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Far from equilibrium, behaviour is both orderly and disorderly at the same time – pulling the organisation in different directions (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). It is the system's capacity to operate far from equilibrium that enables it to go on living and learning (Davis et al., 2008) and which forces it to explore new possibilities and adapt. This reframes disequilibrium as a necessary condition in the social innovation process, not a problem to be solved.

## **Seeing and sensing patterns**

The challenge for social practitioners or researchers is to develop the capacity to see and make sense of the patterns, the flow, or the qualities that shape the whole and give these systems coherence – for example: clarity around a shared common purpose, organisational culture and history. To read or name the patterns and order requires cultivation of different ways of seeing and sensing the whole, to notice the recurring patterns emerging over time. Focusing primarily on fragments of time and experience can appear chaotic – and presents a particular methodological challenge for this research.

Immersion in the whole system is necessary in order to see and sense these patterns, in both the present moments and the bigger picture over time. By being so immersed, the very act of

noticing fosters the potential for the emergence of learning within this system. Complexity thinking is therefore consistent with my methodological positioning as an insider researcher and my use of cooperative inquiry with co-researchers similarly immersed. It also supports research analysis that is reflexive and recursive – i.e. continuing to evolve through my everyday lived practice as well as the specific action research cycles.

Fractals are “infinitely complex recursively constructed shapes” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008, p. 74), evident as repeating patterns with no end to the self-similarity found within pattern within pattern – for example, as seen in a fern leaf: “In the world of mathematics, fractals appear as repeated iterations of simple nonlinear equations ... In essence, fractals reflect the same basic pattern that can be seen regardless of the scale or level of magnification” (Fairholm, 2004, pp. 377-378). Fractals have a simplicity within their complexity. For example, values reinforced by repeated patterns of behaviour and attitudes form the self-similarity pattern of an organisation’s culture. Shared values reflected in how an organisation functions can provide a strange attractor for a civil society organisation, movement or individual leader through much apparent chaos and change. Shared values tightly upheld and deeply internalised as core principles to guide behaviour can enable less need for explicit, prescribed rules and external policing of them – what Watson (1994, p. 16) refers to as “simultaneous loose-tight controls”. Shared values and vision can be seen as strange attractors that sustain coherence, commitment and the enduring stability of a self-organising system across time, when they are well embedded and embodied in the culture.

### **Reading patterns is not a neutral exercise**

In reading the patterns of CAS, it is important to acknowledge that our framing of what we see, and the sense we make of it, is deeply influenced by particular mindsets, assumptions and worldviews. As readers of patterns, my co-researchers and I were not neutral observers but rather active participants in the process of noticing. One cannot ignore the impact of “deeply entrenched habits of interpretation and implicit associations that support social constructions of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, disability, opportunity” (Davis et al., 2008, p. 105). Each actor is part of a cultural world system which has a significant influence in shaping their understanding of the world. The feminist author bell hooks would suggest that we need strategies for decolonisation of the mind and imagination, such as cultural criticism, if we are not to simply reinscribe old patterns (hooks, 1994). Our cultural conditioning limits any actor’s way of seeing the world. Critical pedagogy assumes one is able to analyse and identify this conditioning and, through dialogue and action, free oneself from ‘false consciousness’ (Friere, 1972). Post-structural theorists such as Foucault view this dualism between the individual and context as an unhelpful binary, though they retain the idea of ongoing critique of oneself and

the social situation (Mark Tennant, 2009). For the purposes of this research, these wider cultural conditioning influences are acknowledged, discussed, and at times challenged, without expecting that any actor can completely suspend their own assumptions, worldview and biases.

The Inspiring Communities co-inquiry group articulated a worldview which we observed had a strong 'feminine' bias, yet this was not about women 'in' leadership or breaking glass ceilings. This worldview is more about strong beliefs in the interconnectedness and interdependence of the individual, the collective and the environment. Such beliefs are also influenced by Māori worldviews in bringing a distinctive Aotearoa flavour to this thinking. The 'whare tapa whā' model (M. Durie, 1985) highlights how our sense of self and wellbeing is not only dependent on our physical, spiritual and mental health but also on our capacity to belong, care and share with others. This foundation starts with whanau/family which links us to our ancestors, our identity and future generations. Our identity can build over a lifetime to many other connections in communities of place and through many other roles in hapu, iwi, workplaces, or voluntary or civic involvements that engage and motivate our service to others. As active citizens we build relationships and find commonalities that connect us to a bigger picture. As leaders, we do not have to know it all; in fact, it is best if we know we cannot. Our 'feminine' bias suggests that in learning to lean on each other we might create the interconnectedness that builds resilience.

## **Emergence**

Complexity thinking challenges the vast majority of leadership definitions that rest on the assumption of one person intentionally influencing others to direct them towards achievement of predetermined goals (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). Instead, emergence expresses the concept of self-organisation, which arises from adaptive exploration and complex attractors, as a naturally occurring process of change and stabilisation that *does not require external influence* (Marion, 2008- emphasis added).

The capacity for higher order learning defines the quality of emergence that lies within CAS (S. Johnson, 2001). There is no one agent in control, but as a result of all the seemingly unpredictable interactions of local elements, old patterns can be disrupted and new ones adapted and shaped:

The ongoing interactions among entities at a lower level in the system can result in emergent order at a larger systems level (Anderson 1999). This is because systems are nested and in constant interplay (Ashmos and Huber 1987). Agents at a lower level in the system exchange information, take actions, and continuously adapt to feedback about others' actions. The next larger part in the system reacts and so novel responses can bubble up and provide system level

order without the imposition of an overall plan by a central authority (Chiles et al 2004). *Self-organisation* is the tendency of systems, especially in times of uncertainty or stress, to shift to a new state because the agents that make up the system interact, learn new things and modify their interconnections. A new order emerges locally from a previous one without constant direction from a higher level. This new order or condition is an *emergent* state. (Plowman & Duchon, 2008, p. 134)

The flow within any system can become stuck, uneven or inequitable (Diamond, 2011). Emergence – or higher order learning – is not always achieved in self-organising systems. Feedback loops – negative and positive – assist a CAS to recognise the congruence and dissonance between its ideal form and its current reality (S. Johnson, 2001) as a vital information resource for shaping its response. Negative feedback in this context means the way that extreme variations are held within acceptable ranges: like a thermostat maintains a certain room temperature, or agreed ground-rules maintain group confidentiality. Positive feedback amplifies some dynamic aspect of a system and is a threat to a system that seeks equilibrium (Davis & Sumara, 2006): like a positive experience of participation in community grows momentum for community change.

I use the term 'emergence' in the sense that Lichtenstein (2007, p. 303) calls “emergent evolution” of increasingly complex layers of systems. Each layer provides important learning gains in the system's capacity to operate effectively in its environment. In a leadership context, this means that one's internal personal development and external environment processes of change are in ongoing interaction – for example, as Torbert and Associates (2004) identify in their developmental psychology approach to action inquiry. There are micro, meso and macro layers to these systems, and entities interacting in these systems, including not only individuals, groups, organisations, community or societal contexts, but also ideas and bodies of knowledge.

CAS maintain enough coherence to survive by a constant restructuring of internal relationships (Davis et al., 2008). Davis et al explain the idea of enabling constraints in that CAS are simultaneously rule-bound (constraining) and capable of flexible, unanticipated possibilities (enabling). The challenge is to achieve a balance between sufficient structure or constraint and enough openness for new learning to emerge. CAS need diversity as a rich source of information for adaptation and sustainability (Zimmerman et al., 2002) but not so much diversity that tips them into complete fragmentation (Kaplan, 2002). A level of internal redundancy or sameness (for example, common language, shared responsibility, agreed norms) is the counterbalancing quality in this tension. Redundancy in this sense means an excess of aspects needed for complex co-activity. Minimal redundancy implies high specialisation which can appear more efficient but puts adaptability more at risk in complex systems (Davis & Sumara, 2006). This is an important distinction between complicated and

complex systems. In complicated systems it is often appropriate to focus on high specialisation and minimal redundancy for efficiency, and this is often associated with more rule-focused, hierarchical structures. Davis and Sumara explain that in complex systems there needs to be an abundance of commonality as a resource for managing volatile situations and supporting the self-organising properties of decentralised leadership. For example, it may seem inefficient to have three people skilled enough to be running an organisation, but when an earthquake hits, this flexible leadership resource becomes an asset that can support adaptability, continuity and consolidation of new forms of operation more readily than one with high specialisation and minimal redundancy.

## **Civil Society as Complex Adaptive Systems**

From a complexity thinking perspective, for a system to be defined as complex, it needs to exhibit certain properties. These properties of CAS that inform this research focus attention on:

- neighbour interrelationships, communication and feedback mechanisms, and how CAS co-evolve, self-organise and learn from each other
- self-similarity patterns of organisation that give CAS inherent coherence and stability across different levels, alongside random uncertainty, that enable them to function far from equilibrium
- the balance of diversity which enables creative new responses alongside CAS capacity to find commonalities
- the ability of CAS to balance independent action with an interdependent responsiveness to each other in non-hierarchical decision making
- the understanding of CAS as nested structures, composed of and part of other systems in a multi-layered, dynamic reality with porous boundaries

The civil society space can be seen as nested systems of associations, actors, sectors and discourses. Leadership within this space is strongly focused on interdependent stakeholder relationships, while supporting shared ownership of core values, vision and intent that give a more independent identity. Civil society and its organisational forms function as CAS far from equilibrium, as they seek social change and are impacted by ongoing changes in the environment. Civil society leadership as CAS calls upon both a level of redundancy and diversity as resources for managing coherence, uncertainty and adaptation.

Complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) identifies three entangled complexity leadership roles: *adaptive*, *administrative*, and *enabling*. These roles reflect a dynamic relationship between the bureaucratic, administrative functions of the organisation and the emergent, informal distributed intelligence dynamics of CAS. This theory is important to this research in signalling the dynamic movement between different forms of leadership in CAS, without seeing self-organisation or bureaucratic leadership as the only states. Most complexity leadership research, however, has focused on organisations and business contexts in particular. This research explores the civil society context, which has different drivers and often more porous organisational boundaries.

This research reframes common assumptions about leadership as influencing followers, towards an understanding of leadership as influencing the conditions that support the emergence of higher order learning. The intent is to understand "the fertilizer that speeds up the distributed intelligence growth" (McKelvey, 2008, p. 239) more than simply the individual leader or leader/follower dynamics. Davis and Sumara (2006, pp. 135-136) suggest that three complementary pairs of variables are particularly relevant conditions that a teacher or researcher may be able to affect to support the self-organising properties of CAS for learning:

- Specialisation – living in tension between internal diversity and internal redundancy
- Trans-level learning – enabling neighbour interactions through decentralised controls
- Enabling constraints – balancing randomness and coherence

For the purposes of this research, Davis and Sumara's framework is used as one that synthesises many of the complexity thinking constructs discussed above. Chapter Six returns to these three variables as the focus for the meta-analysis of patterns across the research data, and offers the reader further explanation of the complexity thinking ideas introduced above.

### ***Complexity thinking as a new way of learning and knowing***

This section expands on the epistemology (how we come to know and act in the world) that sits behind my usage of complexity thinking. Complexity thinking understandings about how knowledge emerges are discussed. Learning theories and their relevance for this research are explored to underpin the research focus on civil society leadership as learning.

Initially, I explored complexity thinking as a relevant way of looking at the research context and data, but during the research, I discovered its deeper philosophical implications for how knowledge, knowing and learning are understood. Complexity thinking invites a trans-disciplinary, inter-discursive exploration of different systems of knowing in an ongoing project of co-creating knowledge over time. Even the word 'knowledge' is used cautiously, as it can

imply something fixed, stable and true, rather than something that is partial, incomplete, biased and ever-evolving. The more active term 'knowing' is therefore more often used in this thesis to convey this sense of emergent knowledge that is not being predetermined.

Different systems of knowledge or knowing have their own internal coherence and are often logically incommensurable with each other. Complexity theorists explain their approach as 'inter-discourse', that is, appreciating insights across diverse discourses, yet not as some kind of 'meta- discourse' that is trying to displace other discourses or philosophies (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Complexity thinking offers a way of seeing different philosophies as independent yet interdependent parts of nested systems of learning and knowing which exhibit many of the identified qualities of CAS. Diverse, coherent systems of knowing can be seen as 'learners', bumping into each other in neighbour interactions, bringing diversity to the wider system.

The idea of being a 'learner' is not only about an individual person but expands to include groups, communities, organisations, bodies of knowledge, languages, cultures, and species. In the language of complexity thinking, "a learner is a complex unity that is capable of adapting itself to the sorts of diverse circumstances that an active agent is likely to encounter in a dynamic world" (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 14). Learners act as open systems with porous boundaries to exchange information and energy with their environments and continue to affect their own structures and those environments (ibid).

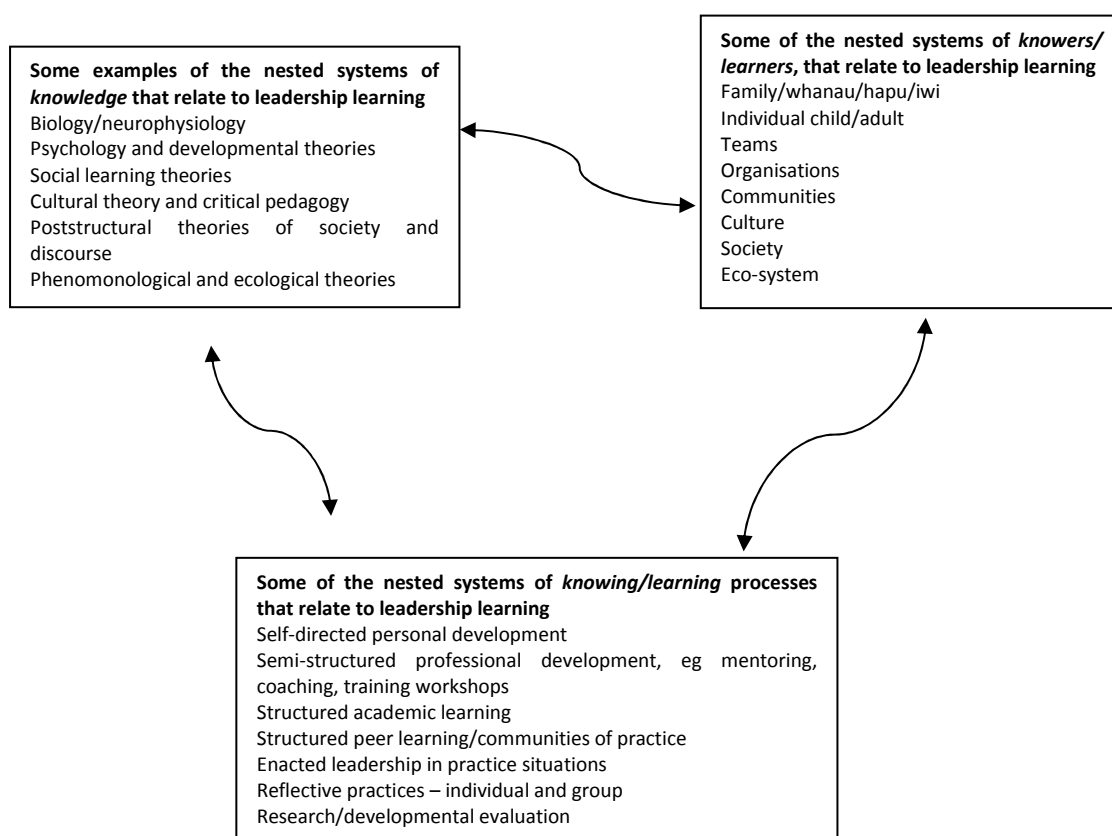
Complexity thinking demands an awareness of different epistemological and theoretical positioning without being paralysed by these differences, "providing something to think with rather than a mastery project" (Lather, 2006, p. 50), in an ongoing process of co-creating knowledge, knowing and identity. Unlike 'paradigm wars' to establish the primacy of one worldview over another (Grant & Giddings, 2002), complexity thinkers look for the useful threads and "deep complementarities of varied theoretical frames without reducing seemingly oppositional stances to one another or minimising their particular contribution"(Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 107). Different systems of knowledge are acknowledged for their distinct points of difference that are not reconcilable as complete ways of knowing. The inter-relationship between these systems, with all their associated paradoxes, tensions and contradictions are part of the energy flow that has the potential to co-create new knowledge or knowing. Variation is a resource, not a problem to be resolved through imposition of one worldview. It is in this sense that complexity thinking represents a paradigm shift from assumptions that coherent research must be framed through use of a single paradigm (e.g. positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, post-structuralism). Complexity thinking brings its own particular understanding of the diverse nature of reality, the diverse ways that we



interpret it and how knowledge is continually co-constructed through the interaction of these multiple ontologies.

## Leadership learning implications

The immediate focus of this research is on individuals and teams as leadership learning systems, within community organisations and communities-of-place learning systems. Complexity research explores phenomena at their level of emergence, while acknowledging the place of these learning systems within a wider landscape of nested systems which influence and are influenced by these systems – for example, family, whanau, hapu, iwi. Similarly, different systems of knowing influence the analysis of this research – such as hermeneutics, post-structuralism and critical theory – which are further discussed later in this chapter. My analysis of some of the nested systems of knowledge, knowers, and knowing processes involved in leadership learning systems is outlined in Figure 3 below and discussed in this section.



**Figure 3: Nested systems of knowledge, knowers and knowing processes**

Illeris (2009) provides a useful overview of the different emphases that learning theories place on the individual self, social relationships and the broader context as influences on learning. Neurophysiological theories seek to understand the biological mechanisms of learning,

memory processes and brain stimulation. Psychological theories seek to understand enabling conditions for behaviour modification, cognitive structure transformations and developmental processes of individual learners. Social learning theories put the emphasis on learning and knowing as a collective social process, that is motivated by interaction, activities, life transitions, organisational contexts and communities of practice. Critical and cultural learning theorists put more emphasis on understanding the dominant power structures, discourses and cultural imperatives that influence people's identity and ways of seeing the world with a focus on interrupting patterns and opening up space for alternatives. These and other learning theories contribute to understanding different dimensions of the learning process, especially when we are conscious of their underlying assumptions.

### **The difference between what we know and how we know**

Some learning theories assume an informational learning approach to change behaviour or increase knowledge within an existing frame of reference. That is, they inform what we know, compared to transformational learning which seeks to change our form of knowing, in a sense of changing how we know (Kegan, 2009). Argyris and Schon (1974) call this a distinction between single loop learning that works within an existing frame of reference and double loop learning that changes the 'settings' of the governing variables that affect how we think, feel and behave – for example, challenging underlying assumptions, practices, values or system dynamics. Mezirow (2009) makes the distinction between instrumental learning (to control or manipulate the environment, improve performance or prediction) based on deductive logic, and communicative learning that requires inductive engagement with others' frames of reference to find common ground amidst diversity. Mezirow argues that transformative learning occurs when instrumental and communicative learning combine. Kegan (2009) also supports the value of both informational and transformational learning in any learning activity, discipline or field. He cautions that we need to be clear about the difference between a change in behaviour or knowledge and a transformative shift in one's frame of reference or epistemology.

Davis et al. (2008) make a similar contrast when they differentiate correspondence theories of learning (that seek to enable the learner to uncover, discover, or acquire some pre-existing knowledge) with coherence theories of learning (that assume knowing is a dynamic, evolving, relational phenomenon that cannot exist separate from the knower). These authors challenge the dominant paradigm of education as one group trying to get others to see things their way by transmitting a particular body of existing knowledge. Instead, they encourage "recasting education from helping people know what they don't know to noticing what they haven't noticed, affecting their perception and expanding their world" (Davis et al., 2008, p. 35) in a

constant web of interaction. Coherence theories assume an ongoing dynamic within the individual 'agent', and between agents and their context to maintain coherence at multiple levels. This dynamic is supported by the 'not-knower' curiosity of a learner attitude, expressed in one's own reflexivity and the search for shared meaning with others. The different learning theories that help us understand the individual agent, their social interactions and the wider context, can therefore all be understood as part of a complex adaptive system of knowing, teaching and learning (Davis et al., 2008).

This research has provided a lived experience for me of civil society leadership as a learning *process*, just as much as this thesis draws together a more tangible *product* of this learning. The research process began with a more informational, instrumental, correspondence theory of learning approach to uncover trends, issues and perceptions that would inform and improve the teaching delivery and design of an academic programme for civil society leaders. The learning impacted behaviour and knowledge and sowed the seeds for the second phase of the research which embraced a more collaborative form of inquiry that is more aligned with coherence theories of learning. This latter phase focused on noticing and collective sense-making, engaging with each other's frames of reference and perceptions in an intentional process of exploration of shared research questions – and of different ways of knowing.

While research or teaching may be a prompt for learning, these are by no means a necessary or sufficient condition to ensure learning. Research and teaching may sow the seeds for learning but cannot ensure a predictable harvest. As a teacher, I can design learning processes that I expect will facilitate the learning of tangible facts, knowledge and skills as measurable learning outcomes – or that could challenge and enlarge a student's ways of seeing – but I cannot control what the student learns. As a researcher, I can design an inquiry process in search of specific knowledge or particular outcomes, yet I also need an open mind and eyes to notice what emerges. Beyond tangible learning about specific phenomena is another whole layer of learning: our consciousness of our way of being, our identity, attitudes, worldview, values, behaviour patterns, our capacity to 'read' the world around us (Kaplan, 2002). This research has moved from focus on more tangible outcomes like curriculum redesign to trying to understand civil society leadership as complex, dynamic, learning systems. My own way of living with paradoxes and complexities has been influenced by complexity thinking along the way – an experience of transformational learning that was in no way planned or predicted at the outset.

It is beyond the scope of this research to explore these particular learning theories in depth. However, the complexity thinking and education approaches underlying this research rest on the assumption that the individual self is not fixed and is capable of challenging taken-for-

granted assumptions, language and practices, and capable of building alternative beliefs, actions and power relations (Davis et al., 2008). Such transformations are possible, but not at all certain, as an outcome of any particular learning or research intervention.

### ***Validation of new knowing***

If complex adaptive systems are systems that learn (Davis et al., 2008; S. Johnson, 2001) and learning is “transforming what is known” (Davis et al., 2008, p. 4), then how is new emergent knowledge or knowing validated within this trans-disciplinary, inter-discursive approach? Lather (2006) argues that to work within the proliferation of paradigms, any research needs to address five “stuck places of social research across paradigms” (Lather, p. 48): *objectivity, complicity, difference, interpretation and legitimisation*. These five themes are discussed below to position complexity thinking, this research and myself as researcher within the proliferation of research paradigms. In doing so, I argue that complexity thinking is part of what Lather signals as a “next?” paradigm movement that does not fit neatly within traditional divides between positivist, interpretivist, critical and post-structural categories.

### **Objectivity**

Underlying complexity thinking is its particular understanding of every act of knowing as partial, incomplete and biased (Davis et al., 2008). Complexity thinking in this sense rejects scientific objectivity, relativist subjectivity and structuralist/poststructuralist inter-subjectivity as all insufficient bases for establishing any claim of truth (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Instead, complexity thinking talks of truth as an “inter-objectivity” (ibid, p. 15) holding all of these ‘ways of knowing’ in conversation, while acknowledging there is more than just objects, subjects or social agreement in the ever-evolving wider-than-human system context. That is, there are more layers of inter-connected reality than people will ever be able to explain or understand – let alone with any one lens.

Complexity thinking, in this sense, invites ‘and-and’ or ‘there is more’ thinking. The term ‘and-and’ thinking conveys a more expansive sense of possibilities than the term ‘both-and’, more commonly used to counter the limitations of binary ‘either-or’ thinking. There is more to understanding complex realities than can be achieved with a positivist paradigm, and yet the findings from such studies may inform conversations that enable emergence of new knowledge. There is more than the constructivist paradigm’s worldview of knowledge as the sense an individual mind makes of their own world. Complexity thinking sits reasonably comfortably within a social constructionist paradigm which puts emphasis on human relationships as the origins of people’s constructions of the world (Gergen & Gergen, 2008). Yet knowledge is also constructed in a wider social context within which “particular domains of

knowledge, cultural traditions and particular social identities are given priority over others” (Davis et al., 2008, p.8). Any particular worldview or perception of reality therefore has to be understood in relation to the knower’s identity, their place in their culture and society, and the power dynamics that legitimise some knowledge and ways of knowing over others (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008), as cultural, critical and post-structural paradigms challenge us to consider.

Post-structuralist paradigms arose independently from complexity thinking but share similar understandings of discourse, social and cultural norms and how they emerge and operate (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Both complexity thinking and post-modern thinking have broken away from the dialectical logic of the nineteenth century. Their theories and ideas diverge and converge to support new emergent theory grounded in practice, without the need to claim grand, universal truths (Mayo, 2003). Interpretivist, phenomenological and ecological paradigms have also been applied to interpret patterns of complex living system dynamics (Kaplan, 2002) within and beyond the human realm. Complexity thinkers will never settle for conclusive ‘answers’ about interpretations of phenomena or accept one discourse as preferred. Rather, complexivists hold different systems of knowing in an ongoing trans-disciplinary, inter-discursive conversation between knowers, learners or knowledge-producing systems (Davis & Sumara, 2006).

## **Complicity**

In any emergent knowledge, the product of knowing and the process of coming to know, are deeply intertwined and in ongoing movement:

Complicity is associated with highly complex systems that continually interact and influence each other directly and indirectly and implicates the observer as part of the interactions. It carries the connotation of entanglement and systems that are complicit co-emerge with each other, that is, they change together but not necessarily at the same pace. Thus, systems whose relationships are characterised by complicity are simultaneously distinct and inseparable from each other. (Hussain, 2011, p. 4)

The research process itself constructs meaning through the recursive search for knowledge amongst co-researchers and participants. The process opens up multiple, emergent perspectives and propositions that are part of an ongoing process of coming to know, rather than expecting to find, an answer, a model or generalisable conclusions (Cameron, 2001; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Mayo, 2006; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006).

As researcher, I bring to this research my own concepts, beliefs and experience of this context from an adult lifetime of involvement in civil society leadership learning. As a reflexive insider researcher, I challenge my own knowledge, theories, assumptions and practice and seek to engage my co-researchers and participants in their own critical reflective practice where

possible (Brookfield, 1995; Pillow, 2003). Each emergent theoretical position is challenged within this as “self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher”(England, 1994, p. 244). “Perhaps the most powerful notion here is the situated self; the self as part of the text of the world, which opens up the possibility of refusing the way one has been inscribed and exploring alternative discourses about oneself as a means of resisting domination and oppression” (Mark Tennant, 2009, p. 155). In understanding complicity we know that “reality changes shape and meaning as we’re in it. It is constantly new. We are required to be there, as active participants” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 192).

This research therefore changed the reality that the inquirers sought to understand, in intended and unintended ways, as the research sought to learn, i.e. transform what is known. The ethical imperative was to be constantly attentive to how myself and co-researchers were affected by and affecting the phenomena we were seeking to understand through an ongoing active reflexivity.

## **Difference**

Reflexivity also implies sensitivity and attention to power relations within the research process (England, 1994). Critical theorists, including feminist writers (for example, England, 1994; Reid & Frisby, 2008; Scott, 1992) and Kaupapa Māori researchers (for example, Bishop, 2003; A. Durie, 1998; Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002; Smith, 1999) have challenged researchers to decolonise researcher/researched relationships which do research *on* ‘others’. Civil society sector’s experience of being the object rather than the subject of research has echoed this call for research *with* participants, enabling their own voice and agency (see for example the Code of Practice on [www.communityresearch.org.nz](http://www.communityresearch.org.nz)). Highly participatory research methods are therefore used to offer “a space in which dominant discourses are challenged and reframed, shifting the horizons of the possible” (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008, p. 176).

Participatory research methods do not in themselves, however, resolve the research problem of speaking for ‘others’ (Alcoff, 1991). Even with sensitivity and attention, one can never fully represent or know another’s worldview, or read the silences of what is said and not said (Mazzei, 2003). A tension in my researcher role has been to acknowledge the power dynamics in the process, no matter how much I position myself as the learner, not as the expert. I bring to the research a ‘not-knower’, ‘curious inquirer’ attitude, seeking to catalyse everyone’s role in this collective search for co-construction of new knowledge. Yet I also carry with me other identities in relation to the co-researchers and participants as their past teacher, colleague and/or current PhD student, which bring subtle forms of power imbalance to collaborative research relationships.

Research reports in the form of a thesis are constructed as an individual output with their own standards, conventions and parameters. Roles and expectations with co-researchers and participants were negotiated throughout the process (see Chapters Three, Five and Appendices Three, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Eleven for further details) to transparently manage these multiple, ambiguous accountabilities and power imbalances. In complexity thinking terms, ambiguities, paradoxes and tensions do not have to be resolved, but are rather part of the dynamics of the system to notice, acknowledge and respond to.

## **Interpretation**

The categories of analysis and interpretations in this research are contestable because they are influenced by my personal and professional subjectivity and the subjectivity and aspirations of the co-researchers – our discourses, identities and worldviews (Scott, 1992). We cannot assume that speakers using the same words are necessarily “talking about the same thing” (Cameron, 2001, p. 147). Multiple readings of the same data will produce different categories, interpretations and conclusions, depending on who is analysing the data and from what perspective. As researcher, my sense-making is not only shaped by my subjectivities but my subjectivities are also reshaped by the research process (St. Pierre, 1997). That is, my discourse, identity, and worldview continue to be impacted as a result of this research, and findings arising must be considered as emergent and context specific.

This research is in direct contrast with the positivist research tradition that sets out to collect data to test a theory or hypothesis (Davidson & Tolich, 1999). Using deductive logic, positivist research seeks to discover or uncover cause and effect relationships between research ‘objects’ that are considered to exist independent of the researcher (Davidson & Tolich, 1999). On other hand, this research has drawn on an inductive approach in which the researched, the researcher and those accessing the research are all engaged to the extent possible as subjects of inquiry: ascribing meaning, building understanding and drawing theoretical conclusions (Davidson & Tolich, 1999) in the ongoing, “active process of producing reality” (Flick, 2002, p. 33). There was then a further abductive reasoning process. Whereas deductive reasoning works from the general to the specific, and inductive from the specific to the general, abductive works back and forth between the general and the specific (Patton, 2011). In this research, abductive reasoning is helpful to describing the process of working between the theoretical and conceptual resources and the data emerging from the inductive inquiry that shaped the emergent findings.

From an interpretivist perspective, it is the researcher’s interpretation which is key to the analysis (Grant & Giddings, 2002), that is seeking a level of internal consistency and collective

accord about the truth. This research has drawn on interpretivist approaches in its search for ways to read patterns, paradoxes and intangible layers of meaning in CAS. This research has explicitly built collaborative relationships with participants as co-researchers in that sense-making. However, the limitations of any particular interpretation (individual or collective) are acknowledged as a social construction of reality – and from a complexity thinking perspective, collective accord may not be possible or even desirable.

Nor is there an expectation that this research will discover the ‘essence’ of civil society leadership as a phenomenon. However there is a hermeneutic influence in the research analysis as it explores the meaning of the lived experience of co-researchers and participants seeking to occasion the emergence of this kind of leadership. Gadamer (2006) talks of the role of philosophical hermeneutics as an art form in both representing something that evokes particular thoughts – though not a precise or fixed description – and presenting something that opens up new interpretative possibilities. This research seeks to paint a picture that evokes both these responses. The purpose is not to establish collective accord about the truth about leadership development in this context or the meaning of civil society leadership but rather to use the inquiry process and the partial, incomplete and temporary nature of its findings to inform future practice. An extended epistemology has been applied as a basis for building collective interpretation of practice experience in order to inform future practice (Heron & Reason, 2008), which is further outlined in the next chapter. Yet this collective interpretation is not a fixed consensus but a summing up of a process of knowing at different points in time by different authors. Every research participant brings different pre-understandings. Different research outputs and practice applications continue to emerge from different actors’ interpretations.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the analysis of language, discourses and power relations – that sit behind the ‘facts’, themes and issues identified – provides various ‘lenses’ for understanding complexity and underlying concepts and beliefs (Cameron, 2001). Post-structuralists are interested in how the way we talk or write can make a particular discourse seem like solid fact or stable truth as it becomes absorbed as the familiar way of using language (M. Wetherell & Potter, 1992). “Like jam, language gets everywhere, it sticks to your fingers, you can’t shake it off and it imparts a distinctive flavour and texture. And unlike fingers, interaction can never be wiped clean” (M. Wetherell, 1999, p. 267). Complexity thinking shares with post-structuralism an interest in inherent contradictions as interesting, valuable data (Cameron, 2001), to be embraced with an attitude of reflexivity (Ryan, 2006). While this research is not setting out to use discourse analysis as a primary research lens, it



does pay attention to language and its role in constructing and representing experiences of civil society leadership learning.

## **Legitimation**

Across the proliferation of paradigms, approaches to validity are always “partial, situated, temporary” (Lather, 2006, p. 51). I locate my research within the broad field of action research (Carson & Sumara, 1997; Reason & Bradbury, 2008), and practitioner research in particular (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007) which focuses on practitioners initiating research within their area of practice in order to theorise and improve practice. Praxis-related research brings a specific focus on supporting the development of new knowledge to inform committed action at an individual and wider societal level (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007). Common themes around praxis-related, practitioner action research indicate that integrity and validity in this field of ‘insider’ research is established through evidence of:

- democratic engagement: creating an inquiry culture of dialogue with co-researchers and other participants shaping the research at every stage, giving ongoing consideration to who is marginalised, empowered or silenced through the process
- support for articulation of tacit knowledge: drawing on participant’s life experience and practice to build new knowledge or emergent theory to inform relevant action in their own and wider contexts
- building trustworthy relationships through transparency, flexibility and integrity of process: establishing clarity around roles, authority, level of distance or engagement of the researcher, using energising rather than extractive approaches, with an openness to keep revising processes as necessary
- questioning of assumptions: critiquing own and others’ ‘truth’, dominant power structures and discourses
- social change outcomes: research being a catalyst for change in people’s thinking, focus, energy, actions

These principles align with praxis-related practitioner action research with its focus on informed, committed action (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007), and development evaluation, cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry with their focus on generating knowledge with people, from practice, to further inform practice (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Heron, 1996; Patton, 2011). The principles also align with complexity thinking’s focus on neighbour interactions that co-evolve and learn in self-organising forms (Davis & Sumara, 2006). The

principles represent enabling constraints for managing randomness and coherence, supporting a diverse level of questioning while finding some common ground. The principles align with, and yet go beyond, university ethics committee expectations, and take Treaty of Waitangi principles of participation, partnership and protection used in these processes to another level.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and how developmental evaluation, cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry approaches have been applied to support these principles in action within the research cycles.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Action Research as Living Practice**

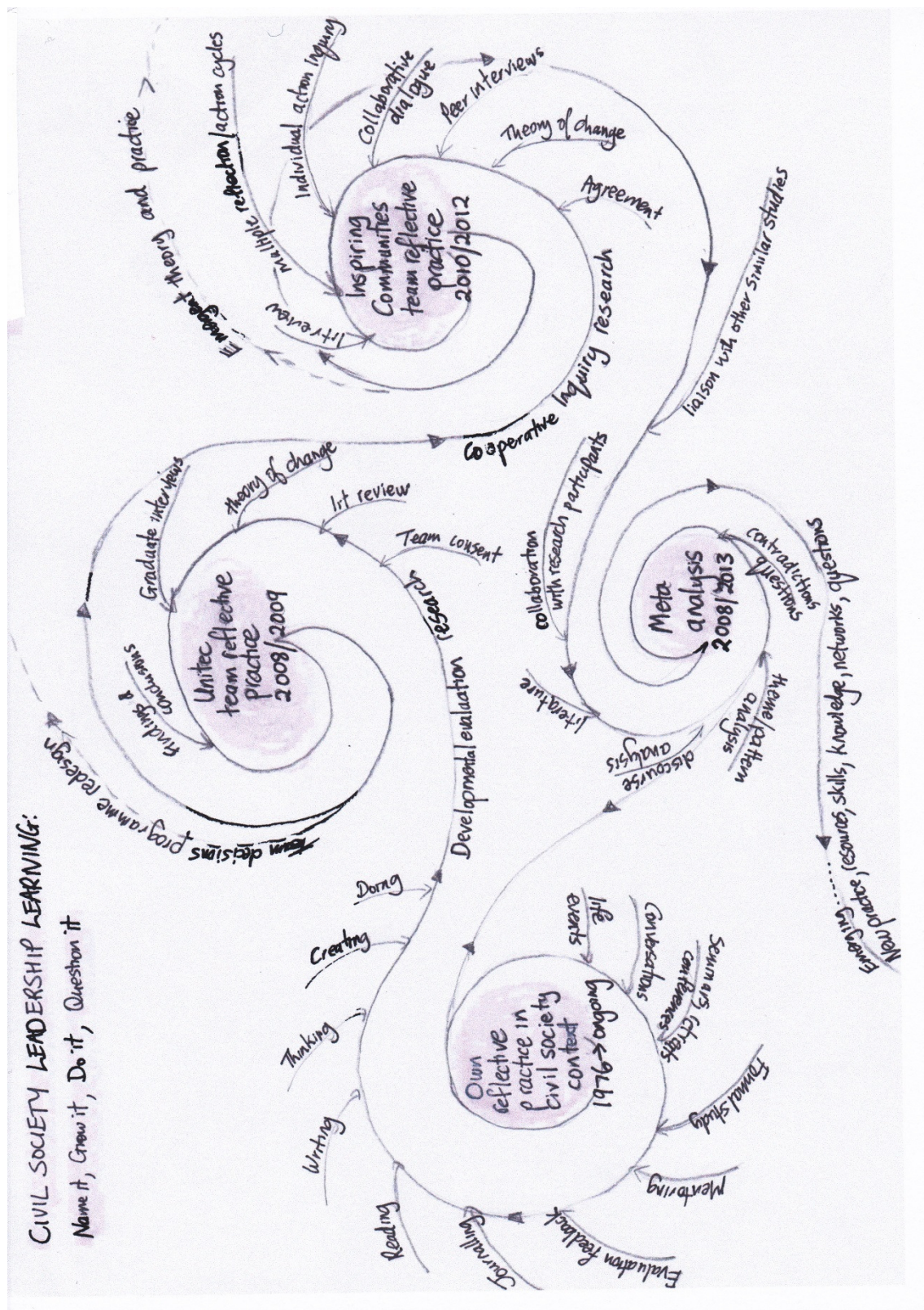
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As a practitioner, I have researched live practice issues as they unfolded in two civil society leadership learning contexts undergoing major transitions. The research design evolved to work with methodological tensions around being an insider researcher undertaking collaborative inquiry, while honouring the praxis intent of delivering timely, practice-relevant research outcomes. Guiding ethical principles, discussed in the previous chapter, have been important in supporting coherence as the research developed and adapted. This chapter introduces the research design and identifies how developmental evaluation Patton (2011), theory of change (Gutierrez & Tasse, 2007), appreciative inquiry (Reed, 2004) and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996) helped to align ethical principles, complexity thinking and the practical realities of praxis-related, practitioner action research.

My research role is best described as bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), bringing together a multi-dimensional quilt over time. I was working with intentional and emergent structures, between the many parts and the whole, piecing together diverse, dynamic data sources from action research as living daily practice (Carson & Sumara, 1997). Data analysis was both collaborative and individual, systematic and emergent, rapid and slow, in the different stages of the process. The writing process itself has been a significant method (van Manen, 1997) supporting the stitching together and emergence of new knowing. This chapter provides a chronological account of the different phases of the research as it cycled between action, reflection, exposure to diverse perspectives, collaborative sense-making and praxis outcomes.

The research design is presented as a koru pattern, representing a learning system for both myself as researcher and the research participants. Figure 4 represents only one layer of a multi-layered repeating fractal pattern of living reflective practice, of diverse sites of inquiry and of meta-analysis that informs praxis. The spiral koru form of an unfolding fern frond has symbolism in Māori culture of new life, growth, perpetual movement and a strong inner core. My koru pattern represents an ongoing learning orientation, which lies at the core of CAS capacity for emergence: what van Manen (1997) calls a pedagogic orientation. “The question of ‘how does one conduct educational action research?’ is thus replaced with the question ‘how does one conduct a life that includes the practice of educational action research?’” (Carson & Sumara, 1997, p. xvii). This goes beyond the application of research methods to an everyday lived practice of ‘facilitating inquiry within and with others’.

Figure 4: Research Design



## ***Praxis-related, practitioner action research***

Methodological tensions arise from researching live practice issues as they are unfolding and changing. My research design needed to work with the tension between enough structure to give coherence and sufficient flexibility to adapt as new questions, knowledge, and practice possibilities emerged. As insider practitioner researcher I needed to balance the strengths of my immersion in the research context with a level of reflective, critical distance. The collaborative nature of the inquiry aimed to support the praxis research intent of informing committed action, generating new knowledge and strengthening an ongoing learning orientation in the teams involved. This section introduces how praxis-related, practitioner action research understandings helped shape the research design to work with these ongoing tensions.

This research is positioned within the broad field of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and practitioner research in particular (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007). Practitioner action research focuses on practitioners initiating research within their area of practice in order to both theorise and improve practice. Praxis-related research brings a specific social change focus to practitioner action research, supporting the development of new knowledge to inform committed action at an individual and wider societal level (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007). Action research is not always a force for social change (Carson & Sumara, 1997), but in this research there is an explicit social change intent, from both the theorising and the practice application of the findings.

Action research aligns well with a complexity thinking approach in its focus on supporting the capacity of any system for its own ongoing learning and adaptation. Action research brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in a participatory process focused on developing practical knowing (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The action researcher is not so much “trying to describe the world as it is but to realise visions of what it can become” (Gergen & Gergen, 2008, p. 167). The action researcher’s inquiry is oriented towards understanding the process of a phenomenon continuing to grow, adapt and learn towards its potential, rather than seeing a phenomenon as in any fixed state of being. Positivist, value free claims are rejected and multiple perspectives are acknowledged.

Reason (2001) identifies three broad strategies for action research. First person action research and practice involves individuals as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983) building an inquiring approach to their own life, acting with awareness of the impact of their actions, intentions, choices and what they are learning. Second person action research requires an ability to inquire face to face with others to explore questions of mutual concern to improve

personal or professional practice, for example, in a learning organisation. Third person action research aims to create a wider community of inquiry across people who are less personally connected, for example, a virtual network or a social movement.

This research involves a mix of first person and second person action research in the first instance. The outcome, in a third person action research sense, is to support the development and diffusion of practice learning through networks that learn from each other, but apply the learning in their own unique way (Gustaven, Hansson, & Qvale, 2008).

Adopting a *practitioner* action research approach was important to provide the skills, context knowledge and relationships for this inquiry. Practitioner action research is systematic, intentional inquiry aiming to deepen understanding of practice and its theoretical underpinnings. Such research supports informed decisions, participatory development of knowledge, ownership of changes in professional practice and makes a contribution to public conversations about professional practice and policy (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007).

Practitioner action research questions usually arise out of a specific practice context, and draw on academic insights to support meaning-making. Action researchers who are not already practitioners in their field of research have a particular challenge to be able to identify relevant research questions that participants are motivated to engage with. They may not have enough context knowledge or the particular competencies needed to facilitate the action side of their research (Levin, 2008). Levin argues that “no other role in social science demands a broader spectrum of capacities, bridging practical problem solving, reflective and analytical thinking than an action researcher” (Levin, 2008, p. 670). Being a civil society practitioner has played an important part in providing the context knowledge, trust relationships and facilitation competencies necessary for this action research engagement, while my adult education role has provided useful academic insights.

Practitioners however face the different challenge of being insider researchers. They need to balance deep immersion with a level of reflective, critical distance. Practitioners engaging in action research need to be open to questioning their professional knowledge, beliefs and assumptions, open to using their learning for changing their practice, and open to sharing their learning widely for critique, review and application (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007).

A ‘critical research friend’ can play an important part in supporting research and researcher integrity in working with these tensions, asking provocative questions, bringing different perspectives, critique, advocacy and researcher expertise to the inquiry (Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007).



Coglan and Shani (2008) signal three key capabilities needed for an insider action researcher as they work with pre-understanding, role duality and organisational politics at first-, second- and third-person inquiry levels. First is the capability to surface *pre-understanding* (that is, knowledge, insights and experience) in a way that this becomes explicit and able to be tested. Working with pre-understanding builds on the insider researcher's closeness in order to achieve some distance. The second core capability is to work with the often conflicting demands of *role duality* as practitioner and researcher. For example, power dynamics need to be managed around consent, voluntary participation and voice, when the research participants have an existing relationship with the practitioner. Thirdly, the insider researcher needs *political skills* to work with the organisation as a social system, its power structures and culture through the research process to build learning mechanisms that are sustainable politically (Coglan & Shani, 2008). These researchers argue that a useful approach to negotiating these insider action researcher tensions is to frame action research as a learning mechanism for developing new organisational capabilities. That was my implicit, if not always explicit, intent.

Particular research approaches elaborated in this chapter identify how I have tried to address the challenges of being an insider researcher/practitioner within this field of civil society leadership learning. The vital 'critical research friend' role of my supervisors is also acknowledged. Chapter Five further discusses the paradoxes inherent in being insider researchers engaged in collaborative action research.

As Chambers (1997) argues, participatory action research calls for a new professionalism requiring more than skills and practice knowledge. The practitioner needs to shift from expert mode to learner mode, because the power tied up in the expert mode can become a disability for learning. He signals a necessary role of self-doubt within this new professionalism:

For when faced with complexity, diversity and dynamism of human and local conditions, there is no normal bedrock on which to anchor and few fixed points. Rather, we need a repertoire of skills for staying afloat, steering, finding our way and avoiding shipwreck on a turbulent and transient flux. So much we thought we knew we did not know, or were wrong about; and very likely much we now think we know we still do not know, or have got wrong; and what we need to know is constantly changing. (Chambers, 1997, p. 32)

An intentional culture of inquiry around professional practice has been a key strategy in this research to live in learner mode, continuing to adapt the research process as necessary. First-person inquiry in practitioner action research is more than the application of particular research methods. It is about an attitude of reflexivity, as discussed in Chapter Two. It is a quality of being committed to inner and outward dialogue (Isaacs, 1999), that continues to shape and be shaped by the inquiring researcher (Carson & Sumara, 1997). For me, this has meant building my awareness, skills and tools for more intentionally noticing my daily practice,

using different ways of reflecting on and making sense of emerging patterns, meaning and possibilities, and consciously choosing my responses (Carson & Sumara, 1997; Isaacs, 1999; Kaplan, 2002; Raelin, 2010; Torbert & Associates, 2004). This first-person inquiring approach is an essential basis for building the second-person inquiry skills for facilitating inquiry with others (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

A collective inquiry culture is important in supporting praxis, understood as “informed, committed action” (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007, p. 186). Kurt Lewin (1948), often considered the founder of action research as a modern discipline, emphasised the participatory nature of the research process and social change outcomes as key ingredients in praxis. Second-person action research using participatory, collaborative approaches (see for example, Chambers, 1997; Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999) has supported a collective culture of inquiry and capacity to work in complex, dynamic situations in this research. Praxis-related research seeks to influence change in individuals’ and groups’ practice, and the social fields and structures that sustain those patterns of practice (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007). Praxis integrates theory and practice by focusing “attention on day-to-day activity and the ways in which our understandings prompt our actions, and, vice versa, it attends to the ways in which our experiences prompt our understandings”(Mayo, 2006, p. 126).

Yet praxis-related research serves purposes beyond generating new knowledge (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007). Propositional knowledge, in the form of new theories, concepts and ideas, helps our understanding of social reality and can be a product of praxis-related research. But the intent is also to support research participants to deal with that social reality in a better way: that is, to deepen praxis (Heron, 1996; Mattson & Kemmis, 2007). The question becomes “not which theory is best, but what insights various theories offer in this situation, and what they deny. Theoretical diversity is needed, teamed with a desire to question relevance rather than seek essential truth” (Mayo, 2006, p. 122).

The process therefore becomes as important as any end product of praxis-related research if those involved are to use the learning gained to deepen praxis. The research methods discussed below aimed to support the highest potential participation in the research process and to minimise the sense of ‘others’ being researched (England, 1994; Mayo, 2006; Smith, 1999), building co-research relationships as mutual learners. The process was thus designed to encourage self-organising cultures of collective reflective practice.

From a complexivist perspective, no propositional knowledge is fixed. Rather, knowledge is a temporary construct to be used for now, until the learning system develops new learning. Therefore, building the capacity of the system for ongoing learning from the living practice of



the group of inquirers becomes as important as any particular propositional knowledge that may emerge at a particular point in time. This self-organising, ongoing learning orientation supports third-person action research beyond the immediate cycles of research in focus. Inquiry becomes embedded in organisational culture and learning is shared beyond organisational boundaries. The thesis identifies how the research design and implementation evolved to support conditions that enabled a culture of inquiry learning, within and beyond the action research cycles.

### ***Key stages of each action research cycle***

The timeline presented in Table 1 below provides an overview of the key stages for each of the action research cycles. These stages are not simply a linear, logical progression but interact with and impact each other. In both cycles, different forms of collaborative inquiry were used to harvest tacit wisdom from leadership learning contexts to support theory-building about civil society leadership learning that would in turn support practitioners with a clearer understanding of what works, why and what could work even better. The methodology and methods chosen for the first research cycle supported specific leadership learning programme redesign outcomes. The findings raised further questions about the significance of the process of *how* people lead, teach or do research. The methodological design of the second cycle therefore put more intentional focus on how the collaborative process of the research itself could support leadership learning. The research question for the second cycle had the same underlying intent as the first cycle, but rather than being specifically tied to a particular programme outcome, was reworded to capture a broader intent of theory-building for enhanced praxis.

Three important patterns which thread across these cycles are identified with colour highlights on this table:

- exposure to concepts, research, worldviews, external to the action research sites
- peer learning/co-inquiry relationships within the action research sites including academic supervision throughout
- practice context influence and praxis outcomes

Particular methodological issues and tensions arising at each stage of the research are discussed below. The thesis returns to the three colour pattern themes in the discussion of collaborative inquiry relationship findings in Chapter Five.

**Table 1: Two action research cycles: from reflection to knowledge generation to practice application**

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE ONE: UNITEC	<p>2007: Relationship began with AUT around broad field of research interest</p> <p>2007: Unitec requirement announced to revise all programmes to 15 credit structure by 2009</p> <p>2008: Qualitative Research Methods Course, Otago University</p> <p>2008: Review of some civil society capacity building and research methodology literature</p> <p>2008: Refinement of research focus</p>	<p>2008: Institutional and external drivers impacting programme redesign: *15 credit revision agreement for extra year to implement *Māori cohort programme customising *Pacific programme collapse</p> <p>Mid 2008: Initial discussions with some Unitec team members about research ideas</p> <p>November 2008: Formal Unitec teaching team discussion and agreement to proceed with action research</p>	<p>Sept-Nov 2008: Design of methods: *Developmental evaluation *Appreciative Inquiry</p> <p>interview questions, information sheets, consent forms</p> <p>December 2008: selection, approach and agreement of graduates to participate</p> <p>Jan- Feb 2009: Ethics application and approval</p> <p>Feb 2009: Formal participant consent (6 graduates and 13 Unitec team members)</p> <p>Feb 2009: Revision of research design without focus groups</p> <p>May 2009: Unitec approval for secondary data access</p>	<p>Dec 2008 -Feb 2009: Literature review on non-profit management education and NGO leadership</p> <p>March 2009: Theory of Change drafted</p> <p>March 2009: Pilot interview</p> <p>April/May 2009: Indepth semi-structured interviews with graduates</p> <p>May 2009: Interviews transcribed and checked with participants</p>	<p>February 2009: Literature review paper written for Unitec team meeting discussion</p> <p>April 2009: Theory of Change conversation facilitated at team meeting</p> <p>June 2009: Summary of interview findings for June team meeting discussion</p> <p>July 2009: Fuller report for Unitec team discussion and graduate feedback</p> <p>July 2009: Programme matrix framework of course foci and cross themes developed by MJM</p> <p>October 2009: Further analysis report for Unitec team meeting discussion</p> <p>November 2009: Draft MPhil thesis completed</p>	<p>Unitec team use of research findings to inform development throughout 2009 of new programme curriculum within new 15 credit course structure:</p> <p>* August 2009: New programme course descriptors approved</p> <p>* From August 2009: Detailed course content development including use of some of the literature and findings from the research</p> <p>* From 2010: New programme structure and content implemented</p> <p>2012: Later use of research finding reports in Living Curriculum submission</p> <p>September 2009: Unitec Research Symposium paper presented</p> <p>March 2011: International Nonprofit Management Educators conference presentation based on research results</p>
	Incubation and Framing	Initiation of research relationships	Research Design and Approvals	Data gathering	Data analysis, interpretation and writing	Use and dissemination

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE TWO: INSPIRING COMMUNITIES	<p>Nov 2009: Brussels PhD seminar: Nonprofit Organisation and Management</p> <p>Nov 2009: John Hailey (London) feedback on MPhil draft</p> <p>2010: Search for second supervisor</p> <p>2010: Literature review around leadership as collective work, cooperative inquiry and beginning to explore complexity thinking</p> <p>August 2010: Audit of Canterbury University course: Emergent Research Methodologies</p> <p>2010: Rethinking research questions</p>	<p>July 2010: Conversations with 3 potential new research sites</p> <p>August 2010: Inspiring Communities (IC) express interest to pursue: one page statement provided for team and Governance 'in principle' decision</p> <p>September 2010: More detailed paper for IC consideration</p> <p>October 2010: Proposal presentation to AUT</p> <p>December 2010: Half day workshop with IC developing "Working Together Agreement" for co-inquiry terms of engagement</p>	<p>From mid 2010: Research design *Cooperative Inquiry</p> <p>Aug 2010: Inspiring Communities "in principle" agreement to proceed</p> <p>October 2010: Inspiring Communities signal that founding leader will be resigning during the period of the co-inquiry</p> <p>October 2010: Presentation to AUT of D9 research proposal</p> <p>Jan 2011 AUT approval</p> <p>Jan/Feb 2011: AUT Ethics application and approval</p> <p>March 2011: Formal individual consents</p>	<p>Jan 2011: design of journal template with Denise from IC</p> <p>Feb 2011: Phone meeting to start IC team trialling journals</p> <p>March 2011: Workshop One: Defining and exploring civil society leadership including appreciative inquiry paired interviews</p> <p>March – May 2011: Journalling by co-inquiry team</p> <p>May 2011: Workshop Two: What are we noticing and what does this suggest for our practice?</p> <p>June – August 2011: Journalling by co-inquiry team with revised template</p>	<p>May workshop 2011: Decision to use Quadrants of Change framework for journaling and data synthesis</p> <p>June 2011 and June 2012: Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff workshops: deepening my own seeing and sense-making skills</p> <p>September 2011 Workshop Three: Synthesising reflections within Quadrants of Change framework</p> <p>October 2011: Phonecalls to supplement journal reflections on synthesising the learning</p> <p>Late October 2011 Workshop Four: What's been most important and where to from here?</p> <p>Oct – Dec 2011: MJM write up group findings as shared resource material</p> <p>2012 onwards: MJM write up PhD</p> <p>June 2012 – March 2013: Inspiring Communities writing 'Learning by Doing' with MJ amongst others offering feedback on drafts</p> <p>August 2012: MJ drafts chapter for 'Learning by Doing' for IC editing and use</p>	<p>Co-inquiry group use of knowledge gathering throughout the process to inform practice decisions, evidenced especially in:</p> <p>* May 2011 workshop: Process considerations for selection of new Team Leader</p> <p>* October 2011 workshop: Induction of new Team Leader and transmission of organisational values and culture of practice</p> <p>* April 2013: Collaborative writing work for 'Learning by Doing' IC publication launched</p> <p>* May 2013: Inspiring Communities and MJM discuss design of learning opportunities based on 'Learning By Doing' including inquiry tools for collaborative learning clusters</p> <p>* From 2013: MJM use of emergent research findings in teaching work</p>
	Incubation and Framing	Initiation of research relationships	Research Design and Approvals	Data gathering	Data analysis, interpretation and writing	Use and dissemination

## ***Action Research Cycle One: Unitec programme redesign***

### **Incubation and framing the research questions**

Before I could initiate the Unitec action research cycle there was a lengthy incubation period of my own reflective practice, exploring different research paradigms and methods for framing the research which would eventually ground the research in a clear praxis intent of immediate relevance to the Unitec team's learning needs. An ongoing learning orientation was as an important enabling factor supporting this research, starting within myself and later with the Unitec team.

During my time as Unitec Programme Leader from 2003 – 2007 I noticed daily evidence of the positive impact of the NFP Management programme and sought ways to gather and analyse some of this evidence (Malcolm, 2004, 2006). This early research was focused on applying the social audit methodology taught on the programme<sup>7</sup> as a useful means for managing multiple stakeholder accountabilities, building legitimacy and monitoring progress towards our vision. This methodology informed my initial 2007 MPhil proposal which focused on programme success factors and their developmental impact for participants, their organisations and the wider civil society sector. The research aimed to inform programme development and public policy thinking about effective investment in civil society capacity strengthening (Jan 2008, PG1 form).

Our earlier research (Malcolm, 2004, 2006; Stafford, 2004; Unitec, 2004, 2008) supported the need to demonstrate the programme's value, and provided some general signals about directions for improvement. In relation to the different monitoring and evaluation purposes that The Barefoot Collective (2009) identifies, our Unitec team were using research more to manage and account for our practice than to improve or rethink it. If we were to rethink our practice in some depth for the next phase, a different research approach was called for. As Ebrahim (2003) has identified, the data and reporting done for accounting for practice (for example, to funders) do not necessarily enhance capacities to improve performance. Ebrahim emphasised the importance of building analytical and adaptive capabilities to support a long term, context-specific process of organisational learning to keep improving practice.

My study in 2008, undertaking a postgraduate qualitative research methods course, was to strengthen some of my analytical and adaptive capabilities. This course provided exposure to new research perspectives which changed my research questions. Other Unitec team

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk](http://www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk)

members have also engaged in postgraduate study and research since 2009, which appears to be another factor strengthening a team capability and culture of organisational learning.

What I came to see through this year of study was not only that my initial MPhil research proposal was huge and unmanageable but also that the research questions were not so relevant to immediate programme needs. The significant shift that happened over 2008, as I participated in the Programme Review (Unitec, 2008) and applied my research methods course learning, was to refocus and narrow the research questions towards rethinking programme redesign. I now realise how significant the pressure is from multiple stakeholders to focus on the 'proving impact' aspects of evaluation (often through summative evaluation). As I stepped back from the immediate programme leadership pressures, I was more able to see how formative or summative evaluation does not always provide the kind of research results needed to inform improvements, let alone significant rethinking of practice, as supported by developmental evaluation discussed in this chapter.

And so the research questions shifted during 2008 from a focus on broad impact to a much more specific intent, to support not just incremental quality improvement but a developmental shift in programme design. The overarching research question became: **'What are the key elements for the Unitec Graduate Diploma in NFP Management's curriculum, teaching and learning practices to support current and future Aotearoa civil society organisational leadership?'** Sub-questions identified the aim to provide a clearer understanding of the competencies graduates need and what supports these competencies being applied to the capacity development of students' organisations (Ethics application, December 2008). I was slowly, somewhat reluctantly, narrowing the research parameters.

What allowed me to accept this narrowing was that this quest for new knowledge now had a clear developmental purpose. After a long incubation period, the research implementation had a fairly rapid initiation and intense data gathering phase to honour its praxis intent to be timely and relevant to the developmental process unfolding.

### **Initiation of research relationships**

Three significant drivers from internal and external stakeholders helped shift this research project from 'my vision' to 'our vision'. Unitec senior management sought programme restructuring. The programme needed to be more responsive to Māori student learning needs. A significant Pacific Island programme partnership collapsed. From one conversation at a time with my supervisor, the Unitec teaching team, and potential graduate interviewees, the shared vision emerged, with pressures to rethink practice being signalled from multiple directions.

A Unitec senior management decision in 2007 that from 2009 all programmes would consist of 15 credit courses was the most significant impetus for my research focus and for engaging Unitec team commitment. In 2007, the Graduate Diploma in NFP Management had a structure of 7 compulsory courses and 12 elective courses, ranging in value from 6, 12 to 18 credits to make up the 120 credits needed for completion. The Unitec teaching team had no choice but to redesign the programme. While not a change of our choosing, the team acknowledged there could be benefits in consolidating the programme into fewer courses, with a shorter pathway for students towards graduation and less breadth of topics for staff focus. Programme leadership managed to negotiate approval to delay implementation one year to 2010 to create space in 2009 for a research-informed programme redesign of structure, course content and delivery. A key challenge was to identify how to retain some of the strengths of the programme that were embedded in the elective courses that were to be discontinued. Another challenge was to make sure we were not simply rearranging the current programme based on its perceived success over the past decade without identifying new dimensions needed for the future.

Another important driver influencing the research context was Unitec's promotion of responsiveness to the Treaty of Waitangi<sup>8</sup> in practical teaching and learning strategies. During 2009, programme team leadership secured a contract with Te Rau Matatini, a Māori health workforce development organisation. This led to the introduction of an all-Māori programme cohort, development of a noho marae learning environment, customising of the existing programme and recruitment of a permanent Māori staff member to the team. The development of the working relationship with Te Rau Matatini had a strong impact on the time, space and focus of the team conversations about the design of the new programme.

The other important context influence on this research was the particular creative destruction life cycle stage (Gunderson & Holling, 2002) that the Unitec programme was in. The period of 2008/2009 saw major upheaval and change, even apart from programme redesign. Patton (2011) argues that developmental evaluation is very useful at such a time when an organisation with a relatively strong established practice base is facing significant change. When I stepped down as Programme Leader at the end of 2007, the programme was being delivered in six Pacific Island countries as well as six Aotearoa NZ cities, by a teaching team of 13 mostly part-time lecturers. A new Programme Leader was recruited from outside the existing teaching team and a shared leadership structure established with an existing team member from 2008. During 2008/2009, for reasons external to Unitec, programme partnership

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Te Noho Kotahitanga' <http://www.unitec.ac.nz/aboutus/values/te-noho-kotahitanga/te-noho-kotahitanga.cfm>

relationships in the Pacific collapsed and NZAID<sup>9</sup> funding was withdrawn. The loss of this partnership represented about a third of the programme's work and by early-mid 2009 the teaching team's jobs were under threat. The programme had grown 70% in the previous five-year period and was always stretching the limits of its staff capacity with creative initiatives. The team was now stretched in a very different way to find creative possibilities through a period of significant destruction, especially loss of core business and key stakeholder relationships.

The Unitec teaching team, who all participated in the research process, comprised seven male and seven female lecturers in 2009: seven based in Auckland, one in Tauranga, two in Wellington, three in Christchurch, and myself in Dunedin. Five of these staff had been involved in the founding stage of the programme more than a decade before this 2009 research, with the rest being recruited within the six years prior to this 2009 research, during the period when I was the team's second Programme Leader. Apart from two younger members, most of the team were in their fifties and sixties. When the research began, the team were all of NZ European origins, apart from one who identified as Pacific. By the time the research was completed in early 2010, a Māori member had joined the team. Each member brought a depth of past and current experience in NFP management and leadership practice, their own specialist areas of expertise, and a passion for the programme vision.

Being an insider researcher in this team context meant that I could draw on a strong basis of pre-existing trust relationships and a team culture of collaborative, non-hierarchical leadership. An outsider researcher could have brought useful critical distance but would have had to invest more time in building trust relationships and being inducted into the programme history and culture. The challenge for me personally was to manage the researcher/teaching team member role duality, being immersed in this context at many levels. The research role gave me an appropriate place, identity and role within the team when I was stepping back from day to day operational and strategic leadership. I could contribute to the programme in a different way, while allowing a respectful distance for the new Programme Leaders to lead in their own styles. I was very aware of the complexities of being a member of a team of which I was once the designated leader and how challenging that could be for my successors, despite the established collaborative culture of leadership and mutual respect.

As an insider researcher, I sought a collective learning commitment from my peers around the action research project. My insider knowledge helped me draft relevant research questions and I then asked for team feedback, cooperation and collaboration. The team had time

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<sup>9</sup> NZAID was at the time the NZ Government's aid and development agency

without me present in November 2008 to consider an outline of my research intent before agreeing to proceed. From the outset, role duality was managed with careful attention to ethical issues around power dynamics and voluntary participation in the research. Current students were excluded from the research design to minimise the power dynamics of teacher/student relationships. Graduates approached were given a clear choice to participate or not, and some declined for a variety of reasons. My primary supervisor's PA was the contact point for inquiries and return of consent forms, to create a neutral third party for any concerns. The research relationship got underway relatively smoothly and quickly, with a strong focus on the task and little time spent considering what would be important for the research relationships in the process ahead.

## **Research design and approvals**

Two main research design concepts shaped this first action research cycle during 2008: developmental evaluation (Gamble, 2006; Westley et al., 2006) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). To a lesser extent, theory of change (Gutierrez & Tasse, 2007) and a specific leadership development analysis frame (Grove, Kibel, & Haas, 2005) were drawn on, as further resources for framing inquiry into complexity. This section introduces these methodologies, how they informed participant engagement and the values and ethical considerations that underpinned their implementation. While these research design concepts were particularly to the fore in the first action research cycle, they influenced both research cycles.

### **Developmental evaluation**

Developmental evaluation is an important emerging evaluation approach exploring ways of researching under conditions of complexity (Patton, 2011). Developmental evaluation demonstrates how complexity thinking can be translated into methodology and methods: to track the impact of activities as they happen, to support development, and to guide adaptation and rapid innovation from what is learned (Patton, 2011; Westley et al., 2006). Developmental evaluation differs from formative evaluation which seeks to improve a particular model of practice, and summative evaluation which seeks to test a particular model to see if it achieves desired outcomes (Patton, 2011). Rather, developmental evaluation supports ongoing development and adaptation of projects, strategies, programmes, policies or initiatives in complex, dynamic situations. It can support adaptation of general principles, ideas and innovations to a new context or development of rapid responses to sudden change or crisis. It can support the early, exploratory stage of development of potential models that may later use formative or summative evaluation to test their scalability or generalizability. It can also be



used to provide feedback as a major change or innovation is introduced (Patton, 2011). Developmental evaluation aligns well with action research where the latter has a clear developmental purpose (Patton, 2011).

The first cycle of action research had a primary, developmental purpose of supporting the Unitec team's collective reflective practice as we shaped a major redevelopment of our programme in response to changing stakeholder expectations. Implicit in the research design are process evaluation dimensions (distilling programme success factors) and impact/outcome evaluation dimensions (identifying leadership and capacity development results ), but these are of secondary importance.

As Gamble (2006) emphasises, developmental evaluation is not a panacea and needs a clear rationale around when and when not to use it. Factors he identified were considered, including the stage of the team's development, the acceptance and clarity of the role of the evaluator within the team, the extent to which an organisational culture of learning and reflection was already embedded, and clarity about the end users of the evaluation.

Developmental evaluation uses participatory learning, mixed methods and diverse theoretical frameworks to assist organisations to frame collective interpretations of patterns and themes that directly feed into shaping their strategic responses (Westley et al., 2006). A developmental evaluation approach is best suited to situations when specific goalposts or outcomes are harder to define and a complex, developmental process of innovation or change is underway (Gamble, 2006; Pearson, 2006; Westley et al., 2006). The developmental evaluator works as part of the team and asks questions, gathers data and provides feedback to support team assessments and decision-making about where things are going and where change of direction may be needed (Gamble, 2006; Pearson, 2006; Westley et al., 2006). Developmental evaluation can draw on any quantitative or qualitative methods, including interviewing, facilitated group discussions and surveys, though a number of methods have been identified as particularly useful: network mapping, appreciative inquiry, and use of visual language/metaphor to sum up systems dynamics (Gamble, 2006).

Development evaluation is not solely theory driven or practice driven. Rather, it uses abductive reasoning and interactive dialogue as its process of discovery, moving back and forth between the generalised possible theoretical explanations or hypotheses and the specific observations or data from the actual practice context and relationships involved. "Questioning is the ultimate method" (Patton, 2011, p. 288) of development evaluation and its conclusions are a weaving of reasoning, critical thinking, judgement and argument:

Developmental evaluation is purpose-and-relationship-driven not methods driven. Making methods decisions is one part of this process, but the methods are useless unless they are embedded in a co-evolutionary process of ongoing reality testing, inquiry, learning and action – action informed by both data and values. In short, methods don't stand alone. No matter how sophisticated and rigorous the methods, if the relationship of shared inquiry and co-creation does not work, the potential of developmental evaluation to contribute to innovation development will not be fully realised. (Patton, 2011, p. 288)

Developmental evaluation prioritises learning (how best to attain the desired outcomes) over accountability. It helps to identify paradoxes and to “understand reality as messy, not orderly, emergent, not controlled” (Gamble, 2006, p. 175). It looks for connections between the macro and the micro levels, seeking to understand complexity not just simple indicators. It listens to/observes intently both the big picture trends and the ‘on the ground’ reality. More linear thinking frameworks, such as logic models linking inputs, activities and expected outcomes (Connolly & York, 2002) or theories of change (Gutierrez & Tasse, 2007) may be used to define a pre-understanding, goal or pathway, but not as a static instrument. Like all frameworks used in this research, each needs to be actively reviewed if not redeveloped in the course of the learning, looking for what is emerging, unexpected consequences and new possibilities.

### **Appreciative inquiry**

Appreciative inquiry (AI) was the other key approach that shaped this first research cycle, and later influenced the second cycle. AI provided a positive, strengths-based approach to a situation requiring rapid, in-depth review and redevelopment. AI helped frame the semi-structured interviews with graduates and Unitec team conversations to harvest perceptions about the best of what was working well and to let go of some elements. A vision of an enhanced programme was co-created for the coming years.

AI research methods support a strengths-based, co-construction of knowledge, systematically searching for “what gives ‘life’ to a system, such as an organization, when it is most effective and constructive” (Gamble, 2006, p. 51). AI as a methodology builds from the notion of the social construction of reality, and the power of language, metaphor, narrative and relational ways of knowing to generate a positive organisational development intervention (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI starts from the assumption that organisations “are alive with infinite constructive capacity” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 3), rather than full of problems to be solved. AI proposes that if we ask questions about problems, we construct a social reality of problems, and conversely, if we ask questions about what works and what gives life, we engage participants in the construction of potential and possibility (Reed, 2004).

AI as originally designed has 4-D cycles, seeking to *discover* (success factors from the past), *dream* (what might be possible for the future), *design* (provocative propositions of what will be

needed to support future vision) and *deliver* (effective implementation planning and learning support). AI emphasises transformation through the power of unconditionally positive questioning (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). There are other variants based on the same principles, for example, the 4-I cycle: Initiate, Inquire, Imagine and Innovate (Reed, 2004).

The contribution of AI lies more in the application of its values and guiding principles in ways that suit the context than any mechanistic use of its particular tools (Neumann, 2009). AI research methods grew out of an organisational development context and are increasingly being used in evaluation work (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006), for example in education and leadership development research (Clarke, Egan, Fletcher, & Ryan, 2006; Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2004). AI aligns well with other action research methodologies, supporting simultaneous inquiry and action as groups or organisations shape possibilities for the future (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

AI values and guiding principles also make an important contribution to concepts of leadership and collaborative inquiry. The language, questions, metaphors and images we use have a powerful impact on our sense of future possibility (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI signals that effective leaders have to be able to read, know and understand their organisations as living human systems that are shaped by the way knowledge is constructed about them (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). We build knowledge through collective processes and need to understand the power of language in creating our sense of reality. Inquiry and action are not separate but simultaneous, as the questions we ask become the language and concepts of how we construct the future. Our stories are constantly being co-authored in this action inquiry process. From a complexivist perspective, AI's positive imagery and language could be seen as a 'strange attractor' that has a significant impact on the learning potential of living CAS.

### **Theory of change**

As Coglán and Shani (2008) identified, it is useful, especially for an insider researcher, to tease out 'pre-understanding' or current assumptions of a group, early in an inquiry. With the Unitec team, we described this process as articulating our 'theory of change'. Developing this explicit, shared understanding helped to surface tacit group knowledge and to establish buy-in to a research culture of inquiry. A theory of change, developed through a participatory team consensus process, can provide a clear foundation for programme establishment or rethinking design (Gutierrez & Tasse, 2007). These authors suggest that a theory of change involves higher order thinking around assumptions, strategies and outcomes than more linear, logic models which focus on inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes.

A theory of change is simply a way of summing up understanding at a particular point in time about processes, patterns and relationships within a living system that are assumed to affect interventions and interactions. It is not assumed that these theories enable logical prediction of outcomes and impact. Randomness and unanticipated consequences that cannot be foreseen are acknowledged and expected. Outcome and impact scoping is therefore particularly challenging in advance.

Gutierrez and Tasse (2007)'s pathway map provided a useful framework for developing our theory of change around underlying assumptions about context, strategy and activities that underpinned the Unitec programme design (Appendix One: NFP Programme theory of change). I used my inside knowledge and perspectives to develop a first draft of a theory of change in the early stages of the Unitec programme research. A process of small group and full Unitec team conversation then amended and refined this framework. Yet I found some aspects of the outcomes dimension of Gutierrez and Tasse's framework were too one-dimensional and measurement-focused, so I went in search of other possibilities.

I uncovered EVALULEAD as an outcome framework for shaping and developing leadership development programmes. This framework allowed for diverse context assumptions about leadership itself, about multiple potential domains of programme impact (individual, organisational and societal/community), and about multiple results types (episodic, developmental and transformative) through different forms of inquiry (Grove et al., 2005; Grove et al., 2007). Applying this framework to the programme research context (Appendix One: Programme Results Map), opened a wide potential territory for research. At the same time, it helped focus the research emphasis on gathering opinions, stories and reflections from participants about civil society leadership, how their leadership has been supported to emerge and what this suggests about the future shape of leadership learning strategies.

EVALULEAD uses an open systems perspective to map the potential landscape of results. It assumes a multidimensional interplay of relationships and activities rather than any logical, linear, sequential movement. My research intent was not, however, to provide a comprehensive programme evaluation across all result dimensions. Programme impact evidence was of research interest, but mainly to open a conversation about what factors contribute towards effective learning impact and what concept of civil society leadership one is learning towards.

Looking back, this EVALULEAD framework was more significant in framing my thinking than as a research tool for this inquiry. My interest in EVALULEAD was as an early sign of the emergence of complexity thinking as a way of thinking and acting. Open systems was the

language Grove, Kibel and Haas were using, but this resonated with the complexity thinking approach I was to explore in more depth as the research progressed. The EVALULEAD framework was multi-layered, fluid, supportive of emergent outcomes and offered an ‘and-and’ way of researching complex phenomena. Complexity thinking would later take this framing further, to acknowledge the unknown and unknowable dimensions that emerge from any living, learning system. Theories of change express our understanding at one point in time. The thesis demonstrates how the action research inquiry processes supported the ongoing development, critique and rethinking of a theory of change in each research site, and identified the basis for a theory of action (Patton, 2011) to sit alongside.

Patton (2011) argues that a theory of change is linked to a problem-focused mission and provides focus for noticing progress towards desired results and impact. That is, it has an emphasis on *what* outcomes are achieved. A theory of action, Patton argues, is focused on *how* the work will be done: the processes that inform development, based around a values-driven mission. The two theories are not mutually exclusive, but I find the distinction useful in the context of the pressure civil society actors experience for results. A key outcome, often not acknowledged, is how leaders have built community engagement and grown the leadership of everyone involved. A theory of action is one way to express and validate the importance of such process-orientation. While it was beyond the scope of this research to develop a theory of action, the findings provide a strong starting point for collaborative development of such frameworks with both research site teams.

### **Participant selection and engagement**

Research participants were selected in order to gather some in-depth feedback from graduates and their organisations, to inform the Unitec team’s programme redesign decisions. A programme review process, including a survey of 137 past and present students and stakeholder focus groups in four cities (Unitec, 2008), had already identified some key redesign issues. The need was then for depth of insight, not breadth of responses. All assumptions influenced the graduate participant selection process. Participants were chosen who were perceived to be examples of successful leadership learning, in order to better understand what contributes towards success. The graduates interviewed were therefore not intended to be representative of all graduates. Every effort was made, however, as outlined in this section, to reflect some of the diversity of programme demographics to contribute different participant experiences and insights.

At the November 2008 Unitec team meeting, after agreement to proceed with the research, team members provided a shortlist of graduates whose professional practice and organisations

they perceived had been significantly impacted by the programme learning. These names were checked for eligibility (i.e., that they had successfully graduated) which removed two possibilities from a shortlist of 23. Eight of the remaining list were scattered geographically, making them too costly and time-consuming to visit. I decided not to ask three others with whom I had close professional working relationships outside my Unitec roles. Four graduates who were approached in early December 2008 declined for various personal or organisational reasons. Six graduates agreed to take part. They all knew me to a greater or lesser extent as Programme Leader and I had taught most of them, but I did not consider I had a close relationship with any of them. Overall, these six graduates addressed the specific research intent for a geographic spread across three different cities, a non-profit sector spread across different types, mission focus and size of organisations, and an age and gender mix.

At this stage in the research I was thinking in terms of a diversity of 'case study organisations' not simply interviewing graduates. I planned to conduct focus groups with organisational representatives to gather an organisational perspective on how the Unitec programme could best contribute towards their management and leadership development needs. The three organisations were based in Auckland, Hamilton and Christchurch. One was a faith-based social service provider; another involved in supporting people with disabilities; the third involved in youth leadership development. The organisations differed in size, ranging from one with 25 paid staff and over 1500 volunteers, one with 30 paid staff and five volunteers, to the largest with 380 paid staff and 70 volunteers. Annual organisational expenditure ranged from \$1.5 to \$6.5 to \$10 million, with staff training and development budgets ranging from \$15,000 – \$40,000 per annum. One had been established around 20 years, another 40 years, and the third 100 years. One is a nationally focused organisation with international affiliations, one is local and linked to a church, and the third is a stand-alone regional organisation affiliated to a national sector organisation. While the primary focus of all three organisations is service delivery, each plays leadership roles around service innovation and policy advocacy. Efforts to recruit a participant from a fourth, smaller organisation were not successful.

Four graduates were interviewed in one organisation and one in each of the others, making a total of six graduates: four female and two male. Four were in the 40-year age bracket when they graduated, one in their fifties, and one in their sixties. They had graduated in 2002, 2005, 2006 and 2008 after three to four years of study and thus experienced the programme at varying times and at different delivery sites. Five participants identified as European or NZ European, with one identifying as NZ Pakeha/Māori. Three had no undergraduate degree prior to studying on the Unitec programme, but had 10 – 20 years of NFP sector experience. The three with prior degrees had 5 – 25 years of NFP sector experience.

Six participants and three organisations were considered a sufficiently diverse sample for the research purpose, reflecting well the demographics of the Aotearoa NZ programme cohort at the time, as well as being of a manageable scope. However, unrepresented were smaller, emergent organisations, and Māori, Pacific and younger graduate perspectives. (By 2013, there was a much larger base of NZ Māori and Pacific graduates. The voice of the Māori graduates has since been captured in a separate research project (Penetito, 2012).)

Collaboration was built with the graduate interviewees from the outset, using an appreciative style of questioning, not only in the formal interviews. Telephone contact was made with potential interviewees outlining the research intent, inviting discussion of potential mutual benefits from the research relationship, not simply their consent to participate. This was followed by an emailed written invitation that included an information sheet (an earlier version of Appendix Three) and indicative interview questions (Appendix Two). This consultative approach enabled graduates to consider their participation with transparent information, and provided important feedback that changed my initial research design. Some graduates signalled their concern about the feasibility of my intent to conduct focus groups with organisational representatives. It became clear in the final consent process that this focus group strategy was going to be hard to implement. Some graduates had earlier declined to take part due to organisational sensitivities around this aspect of the research. Even the graduates who agreed to take part felt it would be hard to find people with sufficient time, knowledge and expertise to usefully contribute to focus group conversations. With my supervisors urging me to make the scope of the research manageable, I tuned into this graduate feedback and agreed that the planned interviews would provide sufficiently rich data for the research purpose.

### **Ethics and integrity of process**

The action research processes were designed to protect the values and integrity of the Unitec programme and to support thoughtful, reflective praxis rather than a hasty programme redesign. The ethics application (December 2008) addressed key risks, discussed below, around power dynamics, timeliness and limitations of the research process. The ethics application was approved in February 2009, paving the way for interviews in April and May timed around my other teaching commitments. Explicit attention to values and ethics has been important throughout the research as a key aspect of my own reflexivity.

### ***Power dynamics***

Kaupapa Māori research approaches (Pihama et al., 2002; Smith, 1999) and community research codes of practice (for example, [www.communityresearch.org.nz](http://www.communityresearch.org.nz)) emphasise the

importance of self-determination around the research agenda, process and outcomes to support the social aspirations of those being researched. I expressed these principles in practice through different forms of collaboration in each research cycle. However, collaborative actions in themselves could not fully address the power dynamics of structures, language, identities and roles in which the participants and I were already deeply embedded.

In setting up this research I was very aware of managing the power dynamics of being a past teacher of the graduate interviewees, a current colleague, and a former team leader within the Unitec team. Current students were explicitly excluded from the research to manage obvious conflicts of interest around teacher/student power. The voluntary nature of the consent process for participation was managed through collaboration and use of third party contacts. Chapter Five further discusses the inherent challenges of managing power dynamics associated with past and present roles when seeking to establish a peer learning culture amongst participants.

### ***Timeliness and time commitment***

The Unitec team had one year to create a research-informed programme redesign. This represented a challenging timeframe for generating research outputs rapidly enough to provide timely input into programme redesign decisions. There were also significant time constraints within team gatherings, affecting the depth of engagement with the research findings. Nonetheless, every effort was made to provide timely, relevant, iterative feedback during 2009, to honour the research purpose and participants' understanding that the research would contribute their perspectives to the programme redesign discussions. I managed graduates' expectations with an understanding that this research would provide part of a diversity of stakeholder perspectives informing the Unitec programme re-write, with decisions taken collectively by the teaching team, and influenced by wider external constraints such as funding and tertiary education policies.

A key issue for me as researcher was to be respectful of the amount of time and focus this research could have for participants, without losing sight of my commitment to participatory research. I had to accept that I was driving the process, and had to take initiative in shaping its focus, processes and conclusions. I invited participation throughout to maximise participants' potential to define, describe and analyse their own reality (Cameron, 2001). At the same time, I had to work within the reality of participants' limited time for direct engagement with the research. I had to work with both what was said in the interviews, team meetings and other written/oral feedback provided and read the silences of what was not said (Mazzei, 2003). I sought additional feedback to explore what the silences were about. Yet it was never entirely



clear whether the silences reflected assumed shared knowledge, power dynamics, time constraints or other reasons, as I pulled together my interpretation of what had been heard, seen, felt and sensed from the research data.

### ***Managing risks for participants***

Anonymity and confidentiality for participants were addressed in the research process. Details about who participated in the graduate interviews have been kept anonymous through my not disclosing names or organisations to anyone orally or in any publication. Some participants within the same organisation were aware of each other's participation simply through the logistics of the interview process. Confidentiality of graduates' responses was maintained as far as possible by collation of data across the six interviews and use of pseudonyms where direct quotes are used. They are referred to as Don, Bob, Pat, Ann, Jan and Val in the reporting of findings. Despite these efforts, it is still possible within a small country and a programme with less than 200 graduates at the time the research was conducted, that someone could guess who the participating organisations were, or attribute quotes to particular individuals. This is especially so for the Unitec team who identified the pool from which the graduate interviewees were drawn. My sense from the interviewees was that anonymity and confidentiality were not significant concerns for them, even though these were protected as far as possible. Membership of the Unitec teaching team is information available in the public arena, and this group was therefore not anonymous. No comments have been attributed to any named team members. My own data contributions are not confidential and are identified as 'MJM'.

This research was a small intervention within the wider life of the organisations and people involved. There were small risks that the research conversations could bring into the open organisational internal tensions or personal aspirations that could not be resolved or responded to within the research process. These risks, and the limitations in addressing them, were acknowledged with all participants from the outset. One graduate had just been made redundant from her organisation at the time of the interview. The interview questions enabled her to affirm a number of successful applications of her Unitec learning. While this was a particularly sad time for her, she still chose to take part in the interview and found her involvement beneficial in managing this stressful time. The AI approach used in the research helped facilitate conversations with no intended focus on individual or organisational problems.

Information provided to participants at the outset signalled my commitment to finding a mutually agreed solution if any issues arose. For example, participants were advised they did

not need to answer any questions they found embarrassing or contentious. Participants also had the chance to review the draft findings and conclusions and to comment on anything they believed would put their organisation at risk if published in the public arena. No such issues were identified.

There were minimal risks involved for me as researcher with the graduates, the main one being negative feedback about the Unitec programme or the research itself. There were some criticisms of the Unitec programme from graduates, and as researcher I sought to hear, unpack and understand this feedback without being defensive.

### ***Transparency***

In managing transparency, it has also been important to clearly communicate the limitations of the research. The six graduates were not a representative sample size from which to make generalisations about all Unitec programme graduates. Nor was there a consensus amongst those interviewed on all issues. The research was not trying to establish any cause and effect relationships between graduates' perspectives on programme success and programme impact. Nor was the research proposing an ideal programme design model for any other NFP management education or leadership development programme. Rather, one of the strengths of the research has been in learning about how unimportant these issues are in developmental research when design is grounded in clear ethical principles, collaborative inquiry processes and a clear praxis intent.

### ***One more approval***

I was confidently progressing what I believed was authentic collaborative research engagement when in April 2009 I discovered one other stakeholder I had overlooked. Being an insider researcher, I had not anticipated the need for permission from the wider Unitec institution to use information and documents I had access to because of my past and present roles within the team. Clearly, had I been an outsider researcher, this permission would have been sought much earlier. I had even asked the graduates to consider what, if any, organisational approval they might need in order to participate in the research but had overlooked the same issue for Unitec. In the end, the issue was easily resolved with a submission accepted by the Unitec Research Committee outlining the research purpose, consultation and consent processes already completed and the kind of documents I needed to draw on as secondary data. It was a useful insider researcher lesson about tacit assumptions and the need for democratic engagement of all key stakeholders.

## **Data gathering**

This section discusses the three main kinds of data drawn on for this study: the specific fieldwork data; the notes taken from the literature reviewed; and my own lived experience of the research process. The nature of data is ambiguous, especially when investigating something as it is being lived. “We need to search everything in the lifeworld for the lived experience material that, upon reflective examination, might yield something of its fundamental nature” (van Manen, 1997, p. 53). Yet journals, transcripts or file notes are already transformations of those lived experiences. They are simply tools towards understanding aspects of the research questions. An important learning for me has been about the multiple layers of data involved, when I am bringing a multi-sensory awareness to the process of inquiry. I have come to understand the need for a mix of creativity and structure in how data is both recorded and communicated, to keep information flowing in the CAS of the research environment.

All the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with some handwritten notes as backup. Handwritten notes were the main way of recording Unitec team discussions, as these conversations took place within team meetings across various agenda items. Some of the consultation with the Unitec team involved sharing information and papers by email, and so emailed feedback responses have also been treated as data. I kept written reflective journals during the research process. These transcripts, audio files, handwritten field notes, and journals provided the study's main data sources. As Flick (2002, p. 174) maintains: “... texts produced in this way construct the studied reality in a specific way and make it accessible as empirical material for interpretative procedures.” That is, these texts create a new reality which put specific boundaries around what counts as data.

Beyond this fieldwork data, in the analysis and writing process I drew heavily on my notes from literature reviewed and recorded in endnote and my reflective journals. In these notes I not only summarised key ideas or noted interesting quotes but also signalled my response to the literature at the time of reading, and what I felt was significant. Similarly, my journals capture, to varying detail and style, my reflections on my lived experience of civil society leadership learning, and glimpses of what Heron (1996) would call my experiential knowing, my presence with the research questions in my everyday life and in the specific research activities. They were not consistently maintained across the years of the study but were frequent enough to show the trail and some of the significant turning points. The journals provided data about what was going through my mind and emotions, and examples of relevant or significant incidents. There was no attempt to explain, generalise or interpret these in the journal, except to consider how I might respond in my everyday life to what I was noticing.

## **Literature review**

The literature review helped test the Unitec programme's underlying assumptions against international expertise within the non-profit management education (NME) field. The findings stimulated us to question our practice, its cultural context and what the team could learn from others to inform the rigorous debates about the new programme design. The literature informed my thinking, adding confidence and credibility to my voice in contributing ideas to the team conversations. At the same time, this research resource was available for the whole team to make their own interpretations. The main limitation of this approach was the team's time constraints within and outside of meetings to actually read or engage with the literature review and the thinking behind it in any great depth. In hindsight, I realise I could have put more thought into how to communicate my findings from the literature to facilitate team inquiry around the issues, rather than primarily writing and sharing papers and inviting team response. Instead, I became the guardian of this work, feeding in ideas from the literature as best I could throughout the rest of the year's work on programme redesign and beyond.

The literature review on NME and capacity development was presented as an extensive paper (Malcolm, 2009a) for the February 2009 team meeting discussion. This paper canvassed curriculum, competency and leadership development matters and raised strategic issues about our institutional location and sector-specific learning environments. It introduced the framework for discussion at the April 2009 team meeting of our programme theory of change and results mapping (Appendix One). The theory of change conversation with the team was a brief but still useful way to surface underlying assumptions that were implicit in the programme's history, enabling these to be debated, documented and made more explicit. While this discussion made no fundamental changes to the programme's founding principles, some aspects were updated to reflect the changing context, especially changing relationships with the business sector, since the programme began in 1996. Both government and business sectors now put demands on the competencies of civil society leaders to manage and confidently influence stakeholder relationships.

## **Graduate interviews**

AI was used in the design of the inquiry questions for the semi-structured graduate interviews (Appendix Two). One graduate agreed that I could pilot the interview questions by telephone prior to the six main interviews. This helped confirm it would be useful for interviewees to have my questions beforehand, and highlighted how daunting the questions could be. In my communications immediately prior to the full interviews, I therefore assured interviewees that the indicative questions were a starting point only, not a prescriptive list to cover. In response

to the pilot feedback, I also made explicit to participants my own definitions of civil society and of leadership.

With this preparation, the six semi-structured, face-to-face interviews proceeded from early April to late May 2009. There were some challenges with the quality of the digital recording but these were resolved between my notes, the work of a local transcription service, plus checking the transcripts with participants. Transcripts were then analysed for themes about core competencies of NFP managers and leaders, key messages about the programme success factors, and suggestions for programme redesign. This was written up in summary form for the June Unitec team meeting, with a full draft findings chapter (Malcolm, 2009c) circulated to the team and graduates in July 2009, prior to the final programme design decisions in August 2009. Graduates also received the draft MPhil conclusions chapter later in 2009 with an opportunity to comment, an update newsletter in 2010, and a conference paper I presented in 2011 which drew on the findings.

## **Data analysis, interpretation and writing**

The interpretative process was initially focused on categorising the data sources for each action research cycle. Written reports drew on the voice of participants to summarise themes into a particular structure based around these categories. Thematic analysis was mostly developed from my re-reading of interview transcripts. My interpretative work of each data source (the literature review, the interview analysis) and my later synthesis and discussion of overall findings was presented to the Unitec team for dialogue, decisions and use, as each stage of the research was completed. A very different interpretative process was to be used in the second research cycle, discussed later in this chapter.

Throughout 2009, at four team meetings (February, April, June and October) and many other meetings that the Auckland-based team leadership were involved with, a variety of people shaped the new programme structure and content. I was feeding back the research findings and commenting on the emergent course descriptors, based on the research feedback and my own experience over nearly a decade's involvement with the programme as student, graduate, lecturer and programme leader. The research momentum had to keep up with timelines for decisions and adapt to what was emerging. I had to keep rethinking how to make the research useful and relevant in an evolving, messy yet creative change process.

Analysis of the research data from the literature and graduate interviews was largely my own synthesising, applying my own categories and interpretation. The writing included many quotations from graduates to support this analysis, enabling the graduates' voices to be heard. The programme redesign framework emerged one conversation at a time, supported by the

research analysis tabled at regular intervals. The interactive energy of team dialogue was essential to achieve shared understanding and agreement on the new programme framework.

Once an overall framework for the programme courses was agreed, I acted as bricoleur (or quiltmaker) to develop an extended matrix (Appendix Four) to articulate key themes to emerge from the research and from team discussions that were woven across this new programme design. This extended matrix was a significant research outcome, summing up the key course elements and identifying where some important content from discontinued courses was now being woven in. This matrix has been refined, implemented, and reviewed by the team in April 2012, as a basis for a shared understanding of the whole programme.

The last summative output from this action research was in the form of a draft MPhil conclusion chapter (Malcolm, 2009b) linking leadership theories with the research findings. I identified parallels between the key emerging dimensions of NFP leadership and the pedagogy that the programme aspired to embed (summarised in Appendix Five). While the earlier programme redesign conversations had focused more on ‘what’ we as teachers teach (i.e. programme content), this piece extended the conversation into ‘how’ students learn (i.e. programme processes). There was very limited time for team discussion of this paper when first offered. Yet over time it has been received afresh as team members work on more recent developments (for example, the implementation of a Unitec-wide Living Curriculum teaching and learning strategy). It has made sense at different times, when the immediate pressures of rewriting courses, new programme approval and implementation were not quite so apparent. Thus, written papers theorising practice have become resources in an ongoing culture of collective reflective practice, not fixed outputs with only one specific end use at one point in time.

## **Use and dissemination**

Praxis-related action researchers (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007) would argue that the ultimate test of the validity of this kind of research lies in its use – that is, in transformative practice. Evidence of how this inquiry has been used and its learning disseminated is discussed below, and further elaborated in the following chapters.

This first action research cycle supported a transformed Unitec programme design, grounded in leadership development insights from theory, research and graduate perspectives on NFP leadership competencies. These leadership competencies are now articulated in the programme’s graduate profile and reflected in the programme structure and course curriculum content. Key programme success factors in leadership learning and development have been identified. The inquiry helped articulate the team’s implicit understanding of its

teaching and learning philosophy and showed how this pedagogy can model civil society leadership in the classroom. The research process itself modelled the kind of reflective practice, critical thinking and learning organisation culture that the programme encourages in its students. The strengthening of the team's own culture of reflective practice and research, evident during and since this action research cycle, is likely one of the more important longer term outcomes from this research.

The main use of the Unitec research was therefore to provide insights to inform the transformation of one programme for one context in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Unitec team acknowledged that the research had supported some "higher order thinking" (with an informal award certificate at the team dinner in 2010) in programme redesign. The programme has been further adapted for other contexts, for example Pacific and Māori student cohorts. Dissemination of the research learning has begun locally and internationally, while acknowledging that each programme design needs to be relevant to its own context and developed through its own conversations.

One important immediate use of the research was to test assumptions, stimulate dialogue and inform team decisions, illustrated in some examples below.

### **Dialogue and decisions**

A fundamental assumption of the Unitec programme was the need for a sector-specific learning environment, customised to an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Some working in the NME field (Paton et al., 2007; Salamon, 1998) directly challenged this assumption and argued that graduates' cross-sectoral leadership competencies are of such importance that they should learn in cross-sectoral learning environments. The research invited the graduates interviewed and the Unitec team to debate this issue but most felt that a sector-specific programme still fulfils an important role in NFP sector identity development. Since 2009, the programme has become even more context-specific with its Māori cohort provision. The research outcome was to uphold an understanding of the NFP sector's distinctive needs *and* recognise the increasing requirement for competencies to manage cross-sectoral relationships. Core curriculum content now more intentionally addresses the analytical and practical competencies graduates need for working cross-sectorally to influence public policy, build collaborative relationships and work with community-led development, social innovation and social enterprise.

Insights from the leadership and civil society capacity development literature (especially Baser & Morgan, 2008; Hailey, 2006; Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Patton, 2006) helped define competencies that our graduates might need in the decades ahead, organisational capabilities

the programme sought to impact, and teaching/learning design that supports such development. The findings from the graduate interviews brought a current Aotearoa NZ perspective to these issues, which are discussed further in Chapters Four and Five.

The research findings provided some guidance for difficult conversations about prioritising course content within the new structure. The NME literature review highlighted an important shift in the balance of curriculum focus internationally from primarily internal focus on organisational survival to more external focus on managing for social impact as well (Mirabella, 2007; Paton et al., 2007), and an increasing breadth of theoretical perspectives that practitioners need. These trends supported the decision to make our *Influencing Public Policy and Social Change* elective course compulsory and to let go more specialist skill courses such as social audit. Strategies to strengthen the learning relationship with students' workplaces were also identified, building on identified pedagogical principles for effective management education (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006). Yet ironically, the elective self-directed learning courses which created the strongest work-based learning application of these principles were considered largely unsustainable for the new programme structure.

The most debate within the Unitec team of all the programme redesign decisions was about letting go these elective self-directed learning courses. Dialogue explored how the highly valued aspects of these courses could be sustained, given that all courses were now to be compulsory. All course assignments and classroom discussions require a strong practical application of theory. Yet, there is a significant difference between critiquing current practice and designing a strategy for improvement and actually learning from implementing that new strategy. The self-directed learning courses enabled reflection on live issues as they arose during implementation of projects. Reflective practice and peer mentoring competencies were deepened through the elective course learning structures. The decision was made to introduce skills and structures for peer mentoring within the suite of compulsory courses to enhance conditions for self-organising student learning networks. It was agreed that peer and self-directed learning, stakeholder consultation and reflective practice competencies be reinforced as much as possible within the new core curriculum.

One of the strongest messages from the graduate interviews was that they learned as much from *how* we as teachers taught as *what* we taught; that is, when we modelled leadership competencies in the adult teaching and learning environment we created. The parallels for how these students as practitioners motivated and engaged their staff and other stakeholders were highly relevant. They felt a more clearly articulated teaching and learning philosophy would consolidate this unique learning environment with a more consistent pedagogy into the future. This issue was picked up in the final paper from the research for the Unitec team



(Malcolm, 2009b), drawing out the parallels between leadership and pedagogy and later presented to an international conference for non-profit management educators (Malcolm, 2011).

### **Strengthening a culture of reflective practice**

While the graduates acknowledged the leadership competencies we modelled in the classroom as teachers, the research process has required us to model leadership competencies as learners and as a learning organisation team. We have strengthened a culture of reflective practice and research, just as we encourage for our students and their organisations. Institutional requirements for five yearly programme reviews had earlier supported internal self-assessment and external review, informed by some wider stakeholder consultation (Stafford, 2004; Unitec, 2004, 2008). This 2009 action research was the first time, as far as I am aware, that a research project had been initiated and conducted by a team member on the teaching and learning practice of this programme.

Since this action research, programme demands to keep rapidly adapting, for example to the needs of Māori and Pacific students and introduction of e-learning technologies, have continued to strengthen a research and learning culture. For example, by late 2010 another action research project was initiated by a Unitec team member (Penetito, 2012) through which she engaged team reflection, dialogue and debate about a culturally responsive pedagogy in response to Māori student needs. Other review work began in 2012 as the team responded to Unitec's "Living Curriculum" Framework, a new benchmark standard for learning and teaching across the institution, creating another driver for articulating our programme's teaching and learning philosophy. These "Living Curriculum" principles emphasise conversation, curiosity, inquiry, collaboration, self-efficacy, problem solving, creativity and reflection which put the teachers more in a co-learner and facilitator role than an 'expert with knowledge to dispense' role. Even the language we use to describe our roles reflects this attitude, more often using the word 'tutor' than 'lecturer', although 'lecturer' is still embedded in official role titles.

The programme stepped into new territory to support theory/praxis processes through the 2009 time of major change and upheaval. The Unitec team 'walked the talk' of the kind of reflective learning that we expect of our students – and in doing so tried to increase the congruence between our intent and our behaviour. We experienced the challenges of creating time and space for collective reflective practice. We experienced the power of taking time for researching our practice in a more intentional way to draw out tacit knowledge within the team, and to engage with others' knowledge and wisdom. We built a clearer shared understanding across the team of a coherent rationale for the whole programme, not just the

parts we each teach. We challenged ourselves to rethink our practice around the content of our teaching and how we facilitate learning with students. We applied our new understanding to a new programme design which has since been implemented and continues to adapt. We documented shared knowledge and culture as a transparent base from which to articulate practice when engaging with wider external audiences, inducting new team members, managing succession or negotiating internal culture change. We were validating our emergent practice knowledge through the external discipline of postgraduate study which brought a value and legitimacy to our work by studying it. In committing to this reflective practice, we were living our own version of civil society leadership learning by undertaking the inquiry. We were learning to not just be accountable for demonstrating the quality or the impact of our practice, but to rethink our practice together.

### **Questions shaping the second research cycle**

Rethinking practice continued as new questions arose from this research cycle for both the Unitec team and myself as researcher. For example, one of many issues raised by the research that is not yet addressed is that the programme name (Graduate Diploma in NFP Management) is out of date. Feedback signals that the name does not reflect the leadership dimension of the programme, let alone its relevance to audiences beyond NFP service organisations, such as community development, social enterprise and iwi-based organisations. The lack of agreement on a new name highlights the diversity within the sector and the challenge to find inclusive language that reflects this. For now, the ambiguity of a name that is out of date remains until a good enough solution is found.

The more important methodological question for me as this action research cycle drew to a close was whether there was anything else I could have done to create a more dynamic, creative space for collaborative inquiry in the research approaches I was using. I resorted to written documents to communicate with a large, geographically dispersed, busy team. I used the short periods of time (usually less than one hour) in team meetings to try to engage the team in dialogue about the findings. I brought my 'not-knower self' with all its curiosity and openness to learning to the research and its conversations. I wondered, though, whether it was a safe enough space to acknowledge fears, doubts or questions in a group with a long history together and under time pressure to find consensus on major decisions. I wondered how it could have been a more creative space to further stretch our thinking, and whether our longevity of relationships and time pressures for deliverables kept us within a comfort zone of consensus. Maybe that was why it was easier to focus on the '*what*' of the curriculum content – which was also our primary task – than to more fully explore the '*how*' of our teaching and learning practice. The defined research purpose of programme redesign had been achieved,

but there were contextual constraints limiting the potential to explore the new research questions emerging with this particular group. It was time to let go the insider research role and consider how to take the lessons from this first research cycle into a second cycle as an outsider researcher.

The first research cycle outcomes established my confidence in developmental evaluation and AI methodologies as useful action research approaches for engaging with teams leading leadership learning interventions around what is working, why and how to further enhance impact. I could see the benefit of further inquiry using similar methodologies and research questions, but with a more open-ended research focus on harvesting tacit wisdom about civil society leadership learning without assuming or defining what the praxis outcomes would be at the outset. The message from the Unitec graduates was clear that the process of *how* we taught was as important to their leadership learning as *what* we taught. I was curious about applying this same message to research, to explore the potential contribution of *how* we do research in more collaborative ways to supporting leadership learning.

I decided not to submit the MPhil thesis, but to build on this initial study with PhD research as I explored a deeper understanding of collaborative inquiry and the contribution that complexity thinking would later bring to my understanding of civil society leadership learning.

## ***Action Research Cycle Two: Inspiring Communities Co-inquiry***

### **Incubation and framing the research questions**

The second action research cycle began after the first cycle was largely completed, with a significant period of exploration to restructure the inquiry questions, find an appropriate research site and redesign methods. These cycles were not both planned at the outset. My intent had been to simply refine and submit the writing from the first action research cycle as my MPhil, when my curiosity as a lifelong learner took me exploring further. I needed to reframe the research from a developmental evaluation of one programme into a deeper and broader inquiry that could contribute to new knowledge. I was being challenged to define ‘a field’ to locate my research within, when it crossed many disciplines (civil society, education, leadership, complexity science). I was in search of appropriate guidance to work with wisdom from the diversity of these fields. The first research cycle had highlighted the social construction of leadership in and through teaching and civil society practice contexts. The emerging understanding of leadership as collective work, further pointed towards the role that collaborative inquiry might play as a further site of research and leadership learning.

This was a time of re-investment in exposure to different ways of framing research and conceptualising leadership. When the MPhil thesis was nearly drafted, I was alerted to a PhD student seminar in Brussels on Nonprofit Management and Organisation. This led me to Europe in November 2009 to pursue my interest in engaging with others internationally in this field and also through visits to other UK academics. I returned stimulated, with valuable feedback and encouragement to continue to build on this research as a PhD. I embarked on a long search to find a second supervisor and to rethink my research questions.

Literature about leadership as collective work (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006) and cooperative inquiry as a method (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2008; Ospina, Hadidy, & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008) resonated with the questions emerging from the first research cycle and my embryonic understanding of complexity thinking (Wheatley, 1992). Finding a second supervisor with expertise in collaborative research and complexity thinking was an important new resource, and also opened an opportunity to audit an emerging research methodologies course.

These diverse learning, thinking and reflecting spaces enabled the framing of the research question: ***What supports the emergence of civil society leadership?*** This question was crafted to be inclusive of the first research cycle's underlying intent, and broad enough to open up a new research cycle to deepen insights. *Civil Society Leadership Learning: Name it, Grow it, Do it, Question it*, along with my research question, became my way of communicating my focus and purpose. Work on the detailed research proposal began, alongside initiation of research relationships.

## **Initiation of research relationships**

Setting up co-inquiry to be truly co-researchers, not simply research participants, poses a particular challenge of finding others who share a similar research question or interest. At its most cooperative, a co-inquiry group initiates the inquiry and defines shared research questions as the first step. Yet, the reality is that someone has to be the initiator. In this instance, I had already defined my research question for the PhD. How then could I find synergy with others genuinely keen to explore a similar question without unduly imposing my question or research design?

A key consideration before searching for potential co-researchers was to frame a broadly inclusive question for inquiry with others. This approach was in direct contrast to my efforts to narrow my research questions in the first action research cycle around a more tightly defined outcome. Heron (1996) asks researchers to consider whether their research topic is designed to be informative, transformative, or both. I set out with the intent to create the potential for both. To name the nuances and complexities of practice can also change perception,

understanding and implementation of practice. P. Block (2008, p. 154) talks about a “great question” having three qualities:

It is ambiguous. There is no attempt to precisely define what is meant by the question. This requires each person to bring their own personal meaning into the room. It is personal. All passion, commitment and connection grow out of what is most personal. It evokes anxiety. All that matters makes us anxious. It is our wish to escape from anxiety that steals our aliveness. If there is no edge to the question, there is no power.

There were two key differences in the process of narrowing the research questions for the second cycle. Firstly, the co-inquiry group was to shape the co-inquiry questions, not just myself as the initiating researcher. Secondly, the questions would remain open to the potential of what would be discovered, without a specific outcome in mind. This widened the potential scope for informative and transformative learning to emerge.

### **Getting to maybe**

Three levels of contrast to the first action research cycle were built into the research design criteria in searching for an appropriate co-inquiry site. I was seeking an opportunity to engage with the research questions in a site:

- where I could explore leadership as collective work, not simply focus on individual leaders
- which provided intentional, yet informal, learning, not a formal academic programme
- where the focus was civil society work for change and innovation, not formal organisation service delivery work

I identified and initiated conversations with three different networks engaged in civil society leadership learning that I had an entry point into through my own professional connections. One conversation at a time, it became clear that an organisation called *Inspiring Communities* was the most likely prospect in terms of organisational readiness, capacity and interest to engage.

Inspiring Communities offered a site for co-inquiry with a group of people for whom civil society leadership development *and* learning from practice were central. They were already facilitating learning with eight local clusters of communities engaged in community-led development (CLD). They were aware that they had no equivalent structured learning process for themselves as a national development team. This need was identified in a conversation in July 2010 when I first met Denise Bijoux, the person who was leading the Learning and Outcomes work for Inspiring Communities. When I raised the possibility with Mary-Jane Rivers, the group’s founder, she was enthusiastic about the time being right to pursue a shared inquiry.

The next step was to draft a one page 'launching statement' (Appendix Seven) for consultation with Inspiring Communities' national leadership, setting out my intent and seeking an 'in principle' decision before I submitted my PhD proposal in October 2010. The feedback from the paid staff and their Board identified strong shared interest in the research question that I had framed and a common desire to work with collaborative inquiry process. They were moving from a highly experimental, formative establishment phase into a period of leadership transition, with the founding leader stepping back from her central paid role. Governance, leadership and management were being reshaped. Engagement with the inquiry was seen as a helpful resource to support learning from practice to date and to build a stronger sense of "who we are and where we are heading for the next phase" (Mary-Jane, Conversation Notes, August 2010).

The Inspiring Communities national leadership team comprised five female, mostly part-time, members when the co-inquiry began. One part-time person decided it was not possible to participate within her working hours. The remaining four Pakeha women, who all held various developmental leadership roles, became the core co-inquiry group and participated in all four workshops. One male, who chaired the Board, joined for part of two workshops (May and October) as his time allowed. Mary-Jane, the founding leader, moved from her central paid role to a governance role during the inquiry and her successor joined the group for the last co-inquiry workshop in October. The co-inquiry group lived in Auckland, Rotorua, Wellington and Nelson, and myself in Dunedin.

Pre-existing relationships provided an important foundation for the co-inquiry work. There was established mutual trust and respect within this high performing Inspiring Communities team. I already had connections with two team members from our community work involvement dating back to the 1970s. Mary-Jane and I had a particularly long and deep connection as colleagues and friends since then. This created strong trust to begin the working relationship and yet also raised a caution to make sure that all group participants owned the decision to proceed. The fact that another team member had initiated the idea of working together and continued as the key liaison point within the co-inquiry group throughout, together with Board involvement, ensured that the decision to proceed was not just something that the two MJs had dreamed up or imposed on others.

### **Investment in co-research relationships**

Having agreed to proceed, the first challenge of the research fieldwork was to establish authentic collaboration. What would co-research look like in terms of a culture of inquiry and our respective roles in it? At least three factors influenced a stronger investment in

relationship building from the outset of this research cycle compared to the first: my role as an outsider researcher; the values, culture and skills of this particular group; and my own research questions about exploring collaborative research approaches.

An important investment in the relational and conceptual foundation for this research phase came through time spent first testing interest in the co-inquiry work, then co-designing the agenda (Appendix Eight) and then co-facilitating the half day spent building our 'Working Together Agreement' (Appendix Nine) in December 2010. My role was to initiate the inquiry, the process of agenda creation, feeding in relevant conceptual frameworks for the conversation. Co-inquiry members made thoughtful contributions to refining agendas, sharing facilitation and engaging with the agreed content focus within and beyond the workshop space. Shared facilitation as co-inquirers was particularly strong in this first workshop (as evidenced in the role allocations on the agenda to lead conversation for different sessions), drawing on the diverse group strengths around partnership facilitation. By the end of this first workshop we had outlined a robust written agreement (Appendix Nine), and established a co-inquiry culture of being co-researchers and co-participants in in-depth dialogue.

Engagement with conceptual frameworks about co-inquiry and the underlying theories that informed my initial framing of the inquiry was also important in this workshop. The group critiqued my initial assumptions about civil society, which had also been challenged in my PhD proposal presentation in October at AUT. The first research cycle had put civil society organisations at the centre of civil society. From this group's perspective, civil society was a cross-sectoral space between all the different sectors, spheres and roles within society. There was also new language. The introduction of the term 'leaderful communities' was the group's way of expressing their concept of civil society leadership at its best. The term 'and-and' thinking was well embedded in their lexicon, conveying a more expansive sense of possibilities than the term 'both/and' commonly used to counter the limitations of binary 'either-or' thinking. Active, intelligent engagement in the co-inquiry conversation and unpacking of language gave me confidence that we had authentic collaboration underway with a different power dynamic and potential than in the first action research cycle.

My role as an outsider researcher in this cycle may have supported this critical thinking engagement to a greater extent than as an insider researcher in the first cycle. My various roles within the Unitec team, team cohesiveness and time constraints may all have influenced perceived ability to challenge assumptions or language. The group conversation spaces created in this new co-inquiry offered more time and opportunity for such critique than one-off, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews or short team meeting agendas. I felt an enormous sense

of confidence in the level of engagement from the outset and our collective abilities to facilitate robust learning together:

I am feeling very safe in terms of the expertise in this group and the commitment to be co-researchers – co-facilitators, co-inquirers, co-subjects. I don't have to be the expert or the extractor, but I do have a clear role to facilitate learning in this space and bring different perspectives that may not have otherwise been here – maybe even a 'critical friend' role? (MJM, Journal, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2011)

As the inquiry progressed, it became clear how important my role would be in facilitating inquiry, and how the co-research role would make me more of an insider researcher over time. The Working Together Agreement process and product provided a strong shared understanding from the outset. Without time invested in developing this relational foundation, I doubt that the co-inquiry could have proceeded. Nor do I think research entry to this group would have been possible without commitment to some form of co-inquiry, given their deeply embedded culture and competencies around collaboration. The ongoing negotiation of what was possible and what expectations needed to change during the inquiry was important validation of the authenticity of this collaboration. By the last workshop, in October 2011, when we had developed a plan for research products from the inquiry with Inspiring Communities team members' names beside a majority of the products, I could confidently say this was 'our' research, not 'mine'.

## **Research design and approvals**

The purpose of the second research cycle was quite different from the first: drawing tacit knowledge from practice to distil learning more widely. The first action research cycle had raised methodological questions about strategies to fully engage people in collaborative inquiry research, which shaped a different research design. Cooperative Inquiry (Heron, 1996) made an important new contribution to the research design mix discussed in this next section. Developmental evaluation, appreciative inquiry, and theory of change, still played a role, as did ethical considerations and approvals.

## **Cooperative Inquiry**

Cooperative Inquiry (referred to here as co-inquiry) is a form of second-person action research where all participants work together as co-researchers and co-subjects within a structured inquiry group (Heron & Reason, 2008). Co-inquiry is well suited to practitioner, praxis-related research in supporting collective meaning-making. Co-inquiry promotes research *with* people, not *on* or *about* people (Heron, 1996) and thus provides one way to address the challenge of researching 'others' raised by feminist, Kaupapa Māori and other postmodern theorists (Mayo, 2006; Reid & Frisby, 2008; Smith, 1999). In co-inquiry everyone has the opportunity to be



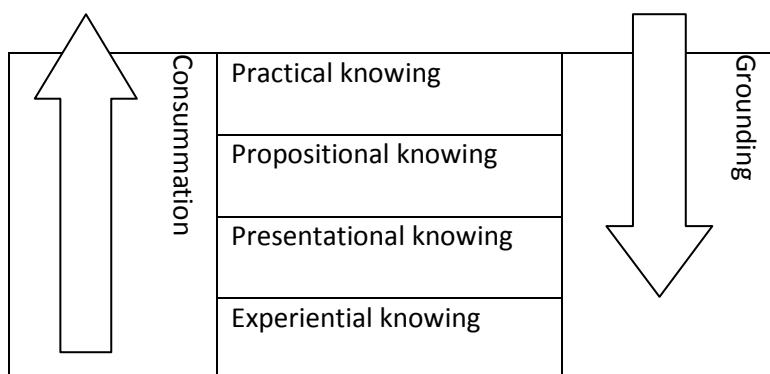
engaged in all decisions about both the content and the method of the research (Heron, 1996). Like developmental evaluation, there is a strong focus on supporting a group's capacity to learn from and rethink practice, in this case through intentional cycles of reflection/sense-making and experience/action.

D. Craig and Courtney (2004) argue that partnership language is often used to loosely describe different ways of working together: from co-existence, to networking, to cooperation, to collaboration, to partnership. The partnership end of their continuum is where there are "shared goals, power, resources, risks, successes and accountabilities" (D. Craig & Courtney, 2004, p. 12), which reflect the intent of this particular Inspiring Communities co-inquiry. The first research cycle was more one of collaboration with the Unitec team, supported by the cooperation of the graduates interviewed. There were power dynamics of being a previous team leader, risks of staff hours (including my own) being cut during the research process, and risks to manage of team non-engagement with the research goals and process. Success was evidence through holding myself accountable for delivering timely research outputs that the team chose to use to inform their collective thinking and decisions. Clarity around what partnership meant to all parties was more explicitly negotiated in the co-inquiry through development of the 'Working Together Agreement' as an ongoing basis for our mutual accountability. Partnership clarity has a particular significance in Aotearoa NZ context, given our history with the Treaty of Waitangi as a founding document of the country with many different understandings of what partnership meant then and means today. Shared goals were more explicitly negotiated at the outset, with clear mutual accountabilities for the design and implementation of the research. My role in facilitating and driving the process, and managing the risks of engaging busy people in research required similar adaptive responses in both cycles. However the shared power to analyse, interpret, write up and disseminate the findings created a much higher level of research partnership and commitment in the second cycle.

Co-inquiry differs from developmental evaluation in its emphasis on shared decision-making and active collective participation. Developmental evaluation may involve a researcher (insider or outsider) gathering data from cooperating 'others' for collaborative group reflection or decision-making. Co-inquiry positions the group as the key researchers and their own practice as the core focus of the inquiry. This required me as the initiating researcher to intentionally share power, risks and successes throughout the research process. The other key emphasis of co-inquiry, Heron (1996) argues, is on theory- building. He argues that much action research risks disregarding the generative power of theory and theory-building. In this research I see developmental evaluation as using theory and research to inform collaborative reflection and action, whereas at the centre of cooperative inquiry is building theory from practice with the

purpose of informing practice. In action, both developmental evaluation and cooperative inquiry approaches may look similar, as both approaches see the practice/theory/praxis dynamic as cyclical.

Heron (1996) provides a particular extended epistemology of cooperative inquiry, emphasising validity built through procedures and skills in the co-inquiry process that establish a solid grounding and congruence between four forms of knowing: “*experiential* knowing of what is present, the *presentational* knowing of imaginal patterns, the *propositional* knowing of conceptual constructs, and the *practical* knowing of skills and competencies” (ibid, p.164). Congruence is established through the dialogic inquiry process. Heron emphasises the interdependence of all four forms of knowing but also the primacy of practice knowing as the consummation of all the other levels of knowing that support it. Practice knowing is in turn validated by its grounding in the other three forms of knowing. This extended epistemology is fundamental to cooperative inquiry, but can be applied to “everyday practice and all forms of action research practice” (Heron & Reason, 2008, p. 367). This extended epistemology concept is expressed in Figure 5 below, adapted from Heron’s representation of the same (Heron, 1996, p. 167):



**Figure 5: Extended Epistemology of Cooperative Inquiry (Heron, 1996)**

Co-inquiry provided a framework for investigating civil society leadership at multiple levels of learning. It enabled the enactment of leadership learning which provided the potential for what Heron (1996) would call transformative inquiry, with practical or skills outcomes. At the same time, the potential for informational inquiry was supported by developing propositions and/or presentations that describe, explain or portray a sense of civil society leadership and learning processes. The emergence of this knowledge was supported through reflective analysis, sharing of findings, interaction with others, and ongoing loops of systematic investigation to build emerging theories (Heron & Reason, 2008; Mayo, 2006).

Co-inquiry, based on Heron's work, was intentionally applied in the second research cycle with Inspiring Communities, with a rigorous process of collaborative design, shared data gathering, collective sense-making and collaborative writing. A clearly negotiated working agreement laid the ground for solid co-inquiry relationships. As co-researchers we all made a commitment to keeping individual learning journals around agreed research questions relevant to our practice. These reflections were then shared in a series of four one-day, semi-structured workshops co-facilitated to support collective sense-making, refinement of our research questions and application of the learning to live, current situations. Dissemination of the learning for third parties was planned within the last inquiry workshop and followed through the next year, in joint writing work.

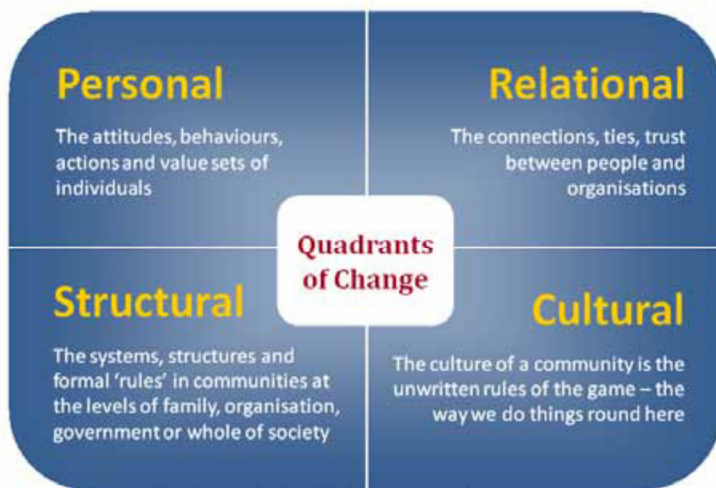
Some elements of co-inquiry were also present in the first research cycle, especially the collective sense-making of the data gathered and shared implementation of the revised Unitec programme structure. However, the Unitec graduates interviewed were not fully engaged as co-researchers in the analysis phase, and the Unitec team were not engaged in the research design, data gathering or literature review process. This meant there was less co-researcher quality to that research phase. This was expressed by one Unitec team member in a light-hearted comment that she felt the team had contracted out their thinking to me. That was only partially true because the data, literature and my analyses were always brought back to the team for collective sense-making, reshaping and decision. In the first cycle, many of the co-inquiry principles were applied intuitively in a more organic way, within the constraints of the situation. With a geographically dispersed Unitec team of 14 tutors and a limited budget of time and money to meet, a full co-inquiry as Heron describes would not have been realistic. In the second cycle, co-inquiry principles and practices were applied more intentionally from the outset.

### **Theory of change**

In the second cycle of action research, the Inspiring Communities team had already developed a working theory of change for their practice (Inspiring Communities, 2010, p. 39) as summarised in Figure 6 below:

**Figure 6: Inspiring Communities Theory of Change 2010**

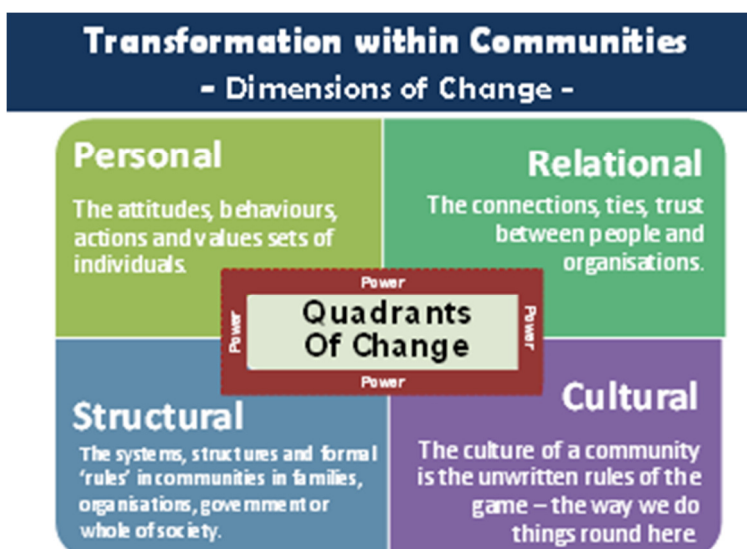
**Transformation within communities requires influencing four dimensions of change:**



Adapted from: J.P. Lederach, Neufeld, and Hal Culbertson. (2007). *Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Toolkit*. The Joan B Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies.

During the second co-inquiry workshop (May 2011), the group decided to use this theory of change as an analytical framework for our research reflections. Meanwhile, other practitioners involved in the Tamaki Transformation Project (Chilcott, Ngaro, Patuwai, & Ngaro, 2011) were questioning the important overlay of power in community-led change. This created the impetus in the third workshop to tease out the power dimensions of what we were noticing, so it was explicit rather than implicit in Inspiring Communities' thinking and analysis. As we discussed what we had identified from our practice, we felt that power was more accurately reflected as an interwoven part of the other four quadrants, rather than being artificially separated as a standalone dimension. Inspiring Communities therefore developed an amended theory of change out of the co-inquiry process (Inspiring Communities, 2013, p. 29) as summarised in Figure 7, with the power dimension encompassing/wrapping around all four quadrants:

**Figure 7: Inspiring Communities Theory of Change 2013**



## **Appreciative Inquiry**

AI principles continued to influence the second research cycle, in the research quest for understanding conditions that enable a system to self-organise towards its own potential. AI informed some of the design of the Inspiring Communities co-inquiry questions. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) tools were useful for identifying propositions about success factors we were noticing from our practice and for engaging presentational knowing with stories, symbols and metaphors. The March workshop agenda (Appendix Eleven) was particularly influenced by these methods, starting with us all sharing a symbol of a memorable civil society leadership moment or process, and later using a metaphor of a civil society leadership awards ceremony to tease out how the group perceived civil society leadership at its best. Paired semi-structured interviews identified stories of effective civil society leadership and insights into formative factors over each person's lifetime shaping their leadership formation. These were similar to questions used with the Unitec graduates (Appendix Two). This helped ground the co-inquiry in participants' own stories and experience, though some Inspiring Communities team members commented that they felt inhibited from exploring their leadership development challenges by the unconditionally positive questions shaping their conversation.

Framing of our inquiry questions and our 'noticing' work continuing from the March workshop had an AI orientation towards enabling conditions for leaderfulness<sup>10</sup>. Inquiry questions also included an intentional focus on factors that could block that potential emerging. Our aim was to name key principles relevant to our current and future practice. There was thus a knowledge-building intent in the Inspiring Communities action research cycle and this translated into practice learning more than specific programme or organisational redesign that is typically developed from use of AI methods.

## **AUT proposal and ethics approval**

There is a paradox in the PhD proposal and research ethics approval process around timing and the ultimate power of the academic institution to approve or decline research agreements. Fieldwork could not commence without AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC) approval, and I totally respect the underlying rationale for ensuring ethical protection of research participants and processes. Yet I needed to engage in some depth with my fieldwork participants in an ethical participatory process of partnership building in order to prepare a robust ethics application. This was a very important beginning to the fieldwork relationship which needed as much, if not

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'leaderful' comes from Raelin (2003), expressing leadership as concurrent (more than one person leading at the same time), collective (not just held by individual leaders), collaborative, (participatory decision-making) and compassionate (reflected in 'whole person' relationships, rituals and events)

more, consideration for ethical process as the later stages of the fieldwork after AUTECH approval. The AUTECH commended “the level and quality of the consultation and of the Working Together Agreement” (approval letter 7 Feb 2011).

In the event that AUTECH had not approved the ethics application, I question how they could have ethically exercised their power to influence a partnership agreement in which research participants had so clearly defined their terms of engagement. This raises the question of when fieldwork truly begins and how this vital early relationship building time is somewhat invisible in the academic decision process compared to the more tangible data gathering phases of research. As the research findings will highlight, the ‘*how*’ is definitely as significant as the ‘*what*’ in building ‘leaderful research’ – and beginnings are crucial.

The co-inquiry group understood that they could not be anonymous as the composition of the Inspiring Communities team is publicly available on their website. They were not keen to attribute comments made in group conversations to particular group members as they felt that the knowledge being generated was arising from an interactive process that could not be attributed to any one individual source. Only personal entries in journals or individual comments in peer paired interviews have been attributed to individuals. An alphabetical code (B,C,D,E and F) has been used to protect confidentiality in these instances .

One important ethical issue is to acknowledge the limitations of what this co-inquiry is and what it is not. It cannot represent anything more than perspectives on civil society leadership learning from this particular group of people, at this particular point in time. Even the resulting writing products – this thesis and *Learning by Doing* (Inspiring Communities, 2013) – reflect different insights from the rich conversations convened across the period of one year, distilled from different participants’ perspectives for different audiences and purposes. The core inquiry group were all female, middle-aged, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual and Pakeha. We do not pretend to reflect a male, youth, elder, working class, disability, gay or lesbian, Māori or Pacific perspective or that of any other group. However, we hope that in communicating our co-inquiry group’s learning we will engage others’ curiosity and conversations about how they see things differently. As an inquiry group we have already been shaped and influenced by others’ perspectives and look forward to the conversations that documenting our learning evokes.

As a co-inquiry group, we see the strength of our research as supporting a process of ongoing reflective practice. We reject any search for fixed truth, and support an understanding of knowledge as always in movement. What we are noticing from our practice is the real importance of our “honesty and openness. Just saying this is a learning journey. We don’t have

all the answers. This is what we have heard from you and not to fudge it [our limitations] was really, really important ..." (May workshop transcript, p.26). So if as reader you do not feel that our responses to this research question speak to your experience then we would honour your truth and insights and welcome ongoing conversation that keeps asking: What's missing? What endures? What's important? For, as Eugene Ionesco reminds us (as cited in Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, p. 75), "It's not the answer that enlightens, but the question" –and the questions will keep this emergent knowing growing.

## **Data gathering**

Heron's (1996) conceptual framework was a reference point for me in shaping cycles of action/reflection/analysis and application that would support our data gathering and research intent. As a co-inquiry group we wanted to articulate tacit knowledge from participants' life experience and practice to build new knowledge/emergent theory to inform relevant action in our practice contexts. The discipline of Cooperative Inquiry's four forms of knowing (experiential, presentational, propositional and practical) provided the framework for the co-inquiry procedures that would ultimately validate the outcomes achieved. Heron puts primary emphasis on the consummation of the knowing, that is, that propositions are "true because they work" in practice. Yet he is equally clear that practical knowing is true because it is grounded in the other three forms of knowing, that is, "it works because it is true" (Heron, 1996, p. 169). The journal tools (Appendix Ten) and workshop processes (Appendix Eleven) discussed below sought to keep the data gathering cycling through these four forms of knowing, checking our insights through different inquiry strategies.

However, it was not possible to meet Heron's recommendation of a minimum of five to six sessions for effective co-inquiry. Realistically, for time and cost reasons, we could achieve only five workshops over one year, including the initiating session establishing our Working Together Agreement and four workshops focused on the inquiry questions. These workshops were originally planned to be two to three months apart but workload, staff changes, and an unprecedented snowstorm pushed the third workshop out to a four-month gap. Less than one year of inquiry was a relatively short timeframe for generating new knowledge. The subsequent collaborative writing work provided one way to extend some of the co-inquiry thinking space (see examples, Appendix 12).

Challenges arose maintaining the inquiry focus between the workshops with a very busy team in transition and geographically spread across the country. The progress made over this relatively short period was possible because of the team's existing expertise, past history and systems for reflective practice. It was a much smaller group (five members) than the Unitec

team of 14. Using conference calling for group communication was much easier, and a more embedded practice, for this team than for the Unitec one. We made the most of these strengths to achieve as much progress as possible across the year.

### **Journals, random jottings and dumpings**

The original research design assumed that the main data gathering tool for inquiry in between workshops was to be a reflective learning journal. Members were expected to use these to record what they were individually noticing in relation to the agreed inquiry focus for that particular period. I liaised closely with Denise to design workable formats for these journals, to be returned monthly from the time of each workshop. We trialled one format with the group for a month before the March workshop and continued to modify it after each of the next three workshops (Appendices Ten A and B provide two examples), based on changing inquiry questions and group feedback. There were consistent reminder emails in the week before the journals were due, backed up by verbal prompts through Inspiring Communities' conference call meetings. There was a regular flurry of apologetic emails after each monthly reminder but most journal deadlines were missed. The group appreciated my 'no blame' response which they reported as encouraging to trying again (October 2011 workshop notes). While journal submission deadlines were rarely met, I noticed how collective accountability seemed to kick in closer to workshop time when group members were going to see each other in person. The deadlines seemed more real and a higher rate of return was achieved. I summarised the journal material for each workshop, progressively building a picture of significant common themes, questions and paradoxes arising.

I did not interpret the lack of journal writing as a lack of commitment to the inquiry, or 'laziness', but as symptomatic of the sheer busyness of people's lives and lack of time for reflection. Time on aeroplanes was identified as one of the most likely spaces for thinking and writing. Journal writing can be challenging to maintain over a significant period of time. Momentum was lost especially with the long period between the May and September 2011 workshops. We tried to find what could work instead, rather than letting anyone feel guilty about what was not happening.

By early August, one group member posted me her "random jottings and dumpings" and suggested she and I make a time to discuss them. Informal language and hand-written notes seemed to be more manageable than the formality implied by 'journal'. Further, the dialogue possible in a phone call was more motivational than yet another writing commitment in an already busy writing workload for this group. Each member of the group was telephoned to discuss individual 'jottings and dumpings' between the third and fourth workshops as a



preferred way of achieving reflective engagement between workshops. In hindsight, more phone calls could have been peer-to-peer, not just initiated by myself, to help the inquiry go deeper and sustain more momentum.

I noticed how the shift in language mandated a more informal style. I had expected journals to be 'jottings and dumpings' but may not have made this clear. Clarifying expectations in language appeared to be a turning point for some to become motivated for the task in a form that worked for them. It is possible that the academic construct of the PhD had put an unconscious level of expectation on the kind of writing that a journal 'should' be and/or that the template formats were not helpful. Invariably, the quality of the journal work, whether random jottings and dumpings or not, was never in doubt when I did get them.

The purpose of the journals was discussed in the co-inquiry before and during the workshops. The group identified three key purposes: keeping their 'noticing' behaviours tuned to 'on' with more intentional awareness; providing a dumping ground for gathering 'ahas' and observations; and warming people up for the thinking they would do together in the workshops (September 2011 workshop). The group valued the deadlines and felt that we came closer towards embedding individual reflective practices by the end of the inquiry. The Inspiring Communities team can monitor how at least the oral gathering of reflections finds its way into their regular meetings in future, to sustain their team culture of reflective practice.

### **Workshops for building collective knowledge**

The workshops were each designed to deal with a different stage of the inquiry process. Their draft agendas (Appendix Eleven) highlight their different purposes, processes and focus:

- March: Unpacking shared understanding of key concepts and surfacing inquiry questions
- May: What are we noticing and what does this mean for our practice?
- September: Synthesising our propositions about what we are learning and what does this mean for our practice
- October: What's been important? Where to from here?

The established group relationships helped the workshops to quickly achieve a high trust, safe environment for in-depth dialogue. We co-created the workshop agendas through email and phone conversations, including decisions on the content, processes, questions and facilitation roles. The group was clear from the outset (Appendix Nine: Section 5: Roles and Responsibilities) that I should be the primary facilitator of the workshops to allow the rest of the group to be focused on the inquiry content. My role was therefore to hold the space as an

enabling constraint for the co-inquiry within and between workshops. I also asked for or received offers to share facilitation roles in the moment, working with the energy and skills in the room on each workshop day.

Regular review at each workshop supported reflection on how particular processes had worked, where to next and how things might need to be reshaped (see Appendix Eleven agendas). For the final workshop I combined the principles of Cooperative Inquiry and our Working Together Agreement into a framework for reviewing our progress (Appendix Six). We noticed how this created more depth to our review conversation, and then realised it was a tool that could have used at each workshop.

### **Dialogue and the art of thinking together**

The validity of Heron's (1996) Cooperative Inquiry research approach rests on a strong capacity for generative thinking dialogue in co-inquiry group conversations. I brought together a range of dialogue concepts, processes and skills (especially influenced by Isaacs, 1999; Raelin, 2010; Torbert & Associates, 2004) to share in the first co-inquiry workshop as a resource and for critique. The strengths of the co-inquiry relied heavily on the existing skill sets of the group, but there was as well a genuine interest in these new resources.

Isaacs (1999) identifies three languages that ideally combine to master the art of thinking together: the language of meaning and scientific inquiry; the language of feelings, aesthetics, rhythm and timing; the language of power, turning ideas into influence and action. It was challenging, yet worth trying, to bring together these often fragmented, different disciplines which reflect different ways of seeing the world. The concept of dialogue as a cornerstone of civil society dates back to the Ancient Greeks (Isaacs, 1999). Dialogue as a means of thinking together was probably more important for our group than any other method. Our discussion about dialogue itself provided a rich resource for stimulating questions:

How do we balance advocating and inquiring, honouring our own 'truth' and suspending our own worldview? What helps shift conversation from heated debate to generative dialogue? What questions help acknowledge and draw out the three different languages? How do these relate to different dimensions of wellbeing? ...It feels like the potential for civil society is all about dialogue, the capability to shift, the potential for a different kind of conversation. How is that enabled from any point you are at, how can we shift to a more constructive, a more creative place? (MJM, summary notes of workshop discussion, March 2011)

Particular processes and skills fostering capacity for co-inquiry dialogue were presented (adapted from Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Torbert & Associates, 2004) that supported individual noticing, inquiry and dialogue:

- listening with awareness of the congruence and dissonance between our intent and action; of our own worldviews and what disconfirms them; of our own emotional projections

- respecting the 'other' as our teacher; seeing behaviour of the other that is irritating as also in me; holding space open for all perspectives long enough to inquire into them
- suspending certainty that one's own opinion is right; resisting the temptation to fix things; acknowledging and observing thoughts and feelings without having to act on them; mining conversations for good questions without demanding answers...trusting they will emerge. (Workshop poster adapted from Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Torbert & Associates, 2004)

Collaborative dialogue processes were also structured into the journal formats (Appendix Ten) and workshop agendas to encourage:

- Framing the dilemma, the problem, the assumptions, the underlying concepts about how we are looking at the issue
  - Voicing/advocating an idea, option, perception, feeling, strategy in relation to the issue framed
  - Illustrating with a story or example that helps support the proposal
  - Inquiring with questions to really learn from and engage with others
  - Reframing with alternative frameworks, categories, language, ways of seeing reality as a possible outcome
- (Workshop poster adapted from Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Torbert & Associates, 2004)

For example, this framework was applied in an exercise from Raelin (2010), adapted for use in the May workshop (Appendix Eleven, p. 287), inviting participants to frame, voice and illustrate their noticing in relation to our inquiry questions over the previous two months. Everyone then took silent time to note questions that arose from listening to each participant. The subsequent dialogue explored these questions, without allowing participants to return to advocating their particular view. It was a structured experiment in balancing advocacy and inquiry. This process supported the purpose of listening to each other's learning in a different manner, and the resulting questions shaped the next steps for the inquiry.

Posters with these dialogue processes and skills were on the wall for each workshop as a reminder of these core capabilities that were assumed to already be part of group members' professional practice, yet worth underlining. Work preparing this material certainly reminded me that I needed to suspend any thoughts that I might be 'testing' the 'model' of civil society leadership that I had developed from the first research cycle and to be fully present to what I was hearing in this cycle.

While these processes and skills supported our capacity for dialogue, we also at times abandoned some of the structured agendas by mutual agreement, as answers were sought to new questions that arose. We were seeking to establish a generative thinking space which takes on a life and a flow of its own. We had to decide as we went the most important emerging issues to pay attention to. In my journal after one workshop I noted:

Heaps of learning about holding the agenda lightly, listening in the moment for where the energy needs to go in the room and working with where that is. Handing over to Megan to use her facilitation strengths, then taking back the role to give her space to participate differently. Great lesson in a good night's sleep is more important than heaps of preparation time....but also pleased I did prepare mindmaps because the group is really ready for tracking back sweeps....(25 May journal entry MJM)

My challenge was to work with and trust the energy and expertise in the room. At the same time, I was holding our overall intent: to describe our experience; evaluate assumptions; articulate propositions from our practice; build emergent theory; inform relevant action in our own and wider context. The literature I had drawn on was useful, but my practice as a researcher needed to keep adapting and responding to what I was noticing and what was emerging.

## **Data synthesising and theory building together**

We knew that synthesising data together and building emergent theory from a short co-inquiry was a big ask. The first half of the inquiry work was focused on drawing out and naming what we were seeing and the sense we made of it. The second half focused on further sense-making, listening for big picture themes, and synthesising core messages and propositions. Interacting with each other was a key resource for building theory: “I can’t come up with my own theories myself – I need a group – and others’ ideas to bounce from without it being constraining” (March 2011 workshop comment). My challenge was to resist the unconscious pressure that I should be synthesising and theory building alone as the PhD student (that is, analysing data and drafting reports for group feedback as I had done in the first research cycle). I needed to embrace the important co-inquiry principle that people who generate data have a say in how it is explained and used. Co-inquiry challenged me as a co-researcher to design processes to support group analysis of our data. This section discusses how I facilitated a collective synthesising/theory building process.

Co-inquiry data analysis has to grapple with how to categorise data: who decides the themes? In this co-inquiry, I was applying my own categories to some extent: pulling together workshop and journal summaries and presenting them to the group. Yet I also wanted the group to apply their own categories. I therefore chose to share full transcripts of workshop conversations as much as possible, as a resource for the group’s own review and sense-making. The group made an important collective decision in the May 2011 workshop to frame our theory building around the group’s current theory of change. They were therefore choosing their own categories to organise their journals for the next period. My challenge then was to design a process for the September workshop that would support collective synthesising of conclusions and theory building. The answer emerged, one conversation at a time, as I talked with my supervisors, other researchers and the co-inquiry group, to shape what proved to be one of the more innovative and original processes used in this research.

One of my supervisors described a process she had been part of at a British Council workshop in Africa. Participants each contributed a limited number of their own ideas to a ‘brick wall’,

one at a time, at short intervals. The process enabled silent reflective time and collective noticing of patterns emerging. I adapted the format from a 'wall' to a 'quilt', a metaphor that resonated with my own creativity. Multiple pads of bright coloured sticky notes provided the raw material for building the 'quilt' onto large flipchart sheets. With a chart for each of the four quadrants of change (personal, relational, structural and cultural), one at a time we created the surface patchwork. Further questions identified the batting (the layer underneath that gives warmth and energy), the backing (the context), the binding (our beliefs, values, assumptions and worldviews), and the stitching (the linkages and relationships that connect the pieces).



**Figure 8: The emerging quilt for synthesising learning**

I had planned and described a structure for the quilt-making process: putting one idea up at a time, taking time to notice what others were putting up, discussing if necessary before I rang a bell for the next round of ideas. The group immediately self-organised to set their own pace without waiting for the bell. I referred this abandonment of structure to the group and they quickly decided to let that parameter go. I continued to use the bell as a 'pause button' occasionally to reinforce the intent of some quiet, reflective time to notice what each person was putting up. I wanted to create a still space for thinking alone and together. Facilitating self-managing teams to work at their own pace is a great principle. This can, however, risk reinforcing entrenched group behaviours and norms. I was providing some enabling constraints to manage their tendency to prioritise action over reflection time.

The relatively silent nature of this activity created a different kind of thinking and reflection space than verbal dialogue. There was a different energy between our individual thoughts and engaging with others' thoughts, a letting go of some of our own thoughts and some alchemy that was greater than the sum of individual contributions. One consequence was that the group decided to add a fifth quadrant of power: restructuring their framework in response to what they were noticing. This required more creativity and collective thinking in the moment that none of us could have prepared for. In the end, we wondered if we had created anything particularly new and affirmed that we had named some of the nuances that were important and often hard to explain about 'how we do what we do'. And is that not at least part of what theory building is about? An edited version of this work (Appendix Twelve A) has since been published (Inspiring Communities, 2013).

The final workshop in October continued to work with the concepts from the 'quilt-making' exercise to clarify key messages, propositions and actions emerging. I wrote, circulated and refined a working draft report before and after this workshop, linking our ideas back to evidence from earlier workshops and journals. Everyone agreed to similarly review for themselves what had been significant across the inquiry (in terms of what we were learning about leaderfulness and conditions that enable it) as their preparation for the final workshop. Is the learning about "what is" (i.e., what we are doing already) or "what might be" (i.e., what we could be doing differently in the future), or both? Does our new knowledge challenge, stretch or reframe common assumptions or practices? Does our learning open up new possibilities for future practice? In community-led development? In Inspiring Communities? As a team? As individuals? I telephoned each of the group before the workshop to stimulate preparatory thinking around these questions. Group members were also each asked to come prepared to share the three most important 'AHAs' that had emerged for them as a starting point for the workshop. These different preparatory processes provided a pathway towards bigger picture findings from the more detailed work that actively encouraged collective sense-making, or 'quilt-making'.

## **Use and dissemination**

Heron (1996) and the wider field of praxis-related research (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007) would argue that the ultimate validity of a co-inquiry is in the transformation of practice. This section identifies evidence of how this co-inquiry is contributing to social change outcomes, especially as a catalyst for change in people's thinking, focus, energy, and actions. The use and dissemination of the findings are further elaborated in the following chapters.

## **So what? How does this inform or transform our practice?**

From the outset the co-inquiry group members were clear that this inquiry needed to inform our practice, and ideally we would realise our potential to also transform practice. Co-inquiry agenda processes and questions (Appendix Eleven) supported the ongoing linking of emerging propositions to live practice issues.

One example of fresh thinking was questioning how our emerging propositions about leaderfulness might impact recruitment of the founding leader's successor. The group discussed how typical selection processes are set up for people to demonstrate their competencies and what they know. Reframing this assumption, the group decided a key competency they wanted demonstrated to the interview panel was candidates' "not knowingness" and their ability to facilitate an inquiring conversation towards "collective knowing" (May 2011 workshop notes).

Our emerging propositions and theory were about community engagement as a key input, process, outcome, indicator and impact of active citizenship. We named some of the key qualities of leaderfulness and some of the nuances of leaderful practice in CLD contexts arising from our practice and observations. We developed some emergent propositions about conditions contributing to the growth of civil society leadership – from an inner understanding that 'I can' to a community identity that 'we can'. We identified some of the interplay between the 'who, why, how and what' factors that shape the thinking spaces and the tools for leaderful practice in CLD. We identified a number of the paradoxes, contradictions and polarities within CLD systems and came to understand them as part of the energy that helps us work with complexity. As practitioners, we can all apply this learning to our everyday teaching, facilitation and consultancy work with people in civil society leadership roles.

We applied our learning to developing some resources to share more widely. We affirmed the unique contribution of Inspiring Communities' role, especially in articulating some 'how' intelligence for CLD practice and shaping leaderful conditions for people to do CLD themselves. We documented shared knowledge and organisational culture as a transparent base for negotiating culture change internally during leadership transitions. We planned products from this work, including this thesis, another publication (Inspiring Communities, 2013), and workshops that are now enabling others to learn from our process. The external discipline of the PhD process brings a value and a validation to this emergent practice knowledge by studying it.

We created a space to exercise civil society leadership learning and so 'walked the talk' of the kind of reflective learning that we expect of others. In doing so, we tried to increase the

congruence between our intent and our behaviour. We experienced the challenges of creating time and space for reflection, noticing, stillness and thoughtful silence. We experienced the power of taking time for reflection and being more intentional in our noticing of our practice and how this influences others. We confirmed our commitment to reflective practice as an ongoing “luxurious necessity” for our team (October 2011 workshop notes) and ourselves as individuals, and know how difficult this is to sustain. We acknowledged reflective practice as a particular presence in our way of working with our inner vulnerabilities and strengths, and the external complexities and opportunities that can intentionally model leaderful practice. We challenged ourselves to rethink our practice around how we facilitate learning with others (for example, learning calls, writing of learning stories, role of core learning clusters in hosting learning with others, extended forums through webinars, workshops, retreats, presentations) as part of our contribution to growing a pool of CLD practitioners.

We questioned our understandings of civil society leadership learning, including our own Theory of Change. We put a clearer spotlight on the ‘power with’ dimension that runs through the four quadrants of change (personal, relational, structural and cultural) and made it more explicit than before. “At the heart of the culture of practice is a redistribution, sharing, redefining of, construction of power around some core embedded values about the leader in everyone” (Dec 2011, Working document). We questioned the language of leadership, civil society, and voluntarism. We noticed and encouraged a shift towards a discourse of community engagement, reciprocity, co-creation, multiple contributions, leading together, and active citizens strengthening communities together. We questioned Raelin’s (2003) concept of leaderful practice to the extent that leading together is not the only approach required. There is a place for catalysts, facilitators, organisers, mentors, companions, boundary spanners, and partnership brokers who are leading out front, in the middle, and together. It depends on our discernment of what is needed at different times on the journey.

We questioned our own binary thinking about enablers and blockers and came to see both as part of a bigger, dynamic flow. Blocks can be enablers or vice versa, depending on context and how we see and respond to them. There are cycles of creation and destruction, an ongoing interplay between the quadrants of change.

We noticed the gendered nature of our thinking and the impact of the core inquiry group being all women on our particular assumptions and worldview. We acknowledged the clear influence of the ‘feminine’ and an orientation towards nature, metaphors, symbols, cycles, chaos, complexity, and abundance compared to a more ‘masculine’ focus on organisation, machine, logic, scarcity, risk, and empire (October 2011 workshop notes).



We noticed and questioned the dissonance between our own lack of self-care and our commitment to the importance of the whole person. Self-care is important for the team and their practice as it becomes a way of life. The fact that practice enables an integration of personal and work values is both a motivator and a major risk. The group acknowledged the need to create more spaces to 'feed' ourselves and our families, not just our work. Our inner world vulnerabilities, self-awareness and insights are vital to our work in the outer world. We need to keep paying attention to what sustains and constrains us, individually and collectively.

### **Reflective practice as luxurious necessity**

From a complexivist perspective, this action research cycle has drawn heavily on the energy of collaborative neighbour interactions to support the emergence of new learning. Solo, paired and group forms of reflective practice have been used to support co-inquiry. Taking time for reflective practice does feel like a luxury. Getting away from the demands on our time and resources is hard, yet also acknowledged as a necessity. It may feel counter-intuitive to increase investment in reflection at a time when immediate work pressures are most intense, yet the experience of this group was that the co-inquiry provided an enabling structure for a leadership team going through a significant transition as its founding leader exited the day-to-day hands-on role. The reflective practice processes (solo, paired and group) supported the group, one conversation at a time, to name some key concepts and processes that underpinned their practice and their organisational culture as they prepared for the next phase of their leadership team work.

The inquiry conversations highlighted many different paradoxes, contradictions and polarities that exist in civil society leadership. As I learned more about complexity thinking, I came to understand these tensions as potential energy sources that support the emergence of higher order learning. The tensions (for example, between tightly planned structures versus more organic, adaptable spaces) were reframed by our group as ongoing, pendulum-like movements that leadership needs to work with, not resolve with one solution. What we recognised as tensions, I later came to see as powerful possibilities for creating new learning. Tensions honour diversity, co-existing alongside a level of coherence. New questions emerged for me as I worked with the co-inquiry findings in writing the thesis: What could emerge from these tensions if we viewed them as something always in movement? Like a stretched rubber band, what energy might be released if we let go of our need to control or fix them, if we could look at them differently?

As in the Unitec team, coherence was evident in some fractal patterns that repeatedly focused the culture of inquiry research: a strongly shared intent around agreed research questions;

shared values and dialogue as a team; and the power of positive inquiry framing and language. The quest for new language to help name the nuances of our thinking and practice was an important part of our conversation. Language like 'luxurious necessity' emerged to embrace our sense that ambiguity can be a welcome stimulus to dialogue and generative thinking.

### ***Emergence of thesis understandings and interpretations***

Three important aspects, discussed below, supported the emergence of the thesis: writing, triangulation of data and what I have called a bricolage process between parts and whole.

#### **Writing as a method of inquiry**

As the writing process flows from the fieldwork to writing initial findings, towards a more substantive research text for public expression of the research experience, "fieldwork and writing blur into one another. There is, in the final analysis, no difference between writing and fieldwork. These two perspectives inform one another ... " (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 17). Beyond the final co-inquiry workshop, as I wrote, read, reflected and worked with the data emerging from the second action research cycle, some diagrams, concepts, and metaphors about patterns and movement within civil society leadership learning began to emerge. These built on seeds sown in the co-inquiry and were discussed with some of the Inspiring Communities co-researchers, and Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff whose writing (Kaplan, 2002) and workshops had influenced the hermeneutic flavour of my interpretation. The resulting feedback encouraged me to explore these emerging propositions further. I now held my very provisional, emerging understanding of the whole and the layers of learning about the parts, and set out to reread all the research data.

I was not in search of any essential truth about a fixed phenomenon, but was drawing on my emergent understanding of complexity thinking to support my reading of patterns that might give some coherence to understanding the movement within this complex leadership learning system. In re-reading the data I was particularly looking for:

- Similarities and differences between the two cycles of action research in terms of organisational and community-based practice of civil society leadership; formal and informal leadership learning processes; language and discourse about how leadership is perceived, talked about and enacted
- Overall patterns, stories and examples that provided evidence or counter-evidence for my emergent propositions about some key polarities, qualities and tensions that support civil society leadership emergence

This analysis was achieved with the gift of some quiet space to reread the research documentation. I highlighted text of significance with different colours for the different

purposes, supplemented by annotated comments. I kept a reflective journal alongside me to note key thoughts emerging beyond the immediate data. Walks, meditation, knitting, dreams, and drawing also fuelled my multi-sensory awareness as I intentionally moved between the parts and the whole, presentational and propositional knowing, in a systematic daily rhythm – albeit still regularly ‘interrupted’ by my daily lived practice with family, work and wider civil society practice that I found impossible to ignore.

This latter cycle of interpretation took place after the writing of the first draft of the early chapters of the thesis, and is reflected in what was to later be shaped and reshaped into Chapters Four, Five, and Six. The reflexive function of this interpretation played an important role in supporting my readiness for framing and writing this meta-analysis. Writing is an important part of the method, not just a reporting process, mediating reflection and action, fixing thoughts on paper, exercising our ability to see and make sense of our lived experience (van Manen, 1997). Van Manen explains how the author is making something visible that has been hidden, in and through how the words are written and the silences, not just the words themselves. “Writing, true writing, is authoring, the exercise of authority: the power that authors and gives shape to our personal being” (van Manen, 1997, p. 130). The chapters were to be written, unpicked and re-stitched before the authority of my voice and the thesis evidence were to emerge in their current form.

For me, the process of writing, rewriting, rethinking, reflecting, recognising and recollecting has been a key part of the method of building understanding, interpretation and, importantly, the confidence to write and speak authoritatively about this emergent knowledge. The block about writing is not always about not feeling confident to write, but more a fear about the way our writing might be interpreted by others. I have let go that fear, by inviting the reader into their own response to the research questions and the multi-dimensional sense-making process to discover their own interpretation of the thesis. Any individual interpretation will be partial, temporary and biased by who we are, the context we are working in and our own experience of leadership. The point is for everyone to keep thinking, learning and exploring this complexity to see what new possibilities emerge for our living practice.

## **Triangulation**

Denzin (1989) distinguishes four kinds of triangulation that build a strong strategy for knowledge or theory generation: data, investigator, theory and methodological triangulation. *Data triangulation* is supported by studying phenomena with different persons, at different times and places. Data triangulation has been achieved between and within the two action research cycles in this research. *Investigator triangulation* is achieved through the systematic

involvement of different researchers' influences on the issues and results of the research. Investigator triangulation has been supported through the collaborative nature of these inquiries, engaging participants as co-researchers in design, data gathering and analysis. *Theory triangulation* approaches the data from multiple perspectives, with multiple hypotheses in mind, drawing on various theoretical points of view. Leadership theory, educational theory, hermeneutics and post-structural perspectives have all influenced the sense-making of the fieldwork data, with complexity thinking providing the underlying framing that holds this diversity and supports theoretical triangulation within this research. *Methodological triangulation* can be achieved within or between methods. In this research, methodological triangulation was more between methods, by using a mix of semi-structured interviews, journals and group conversations in different action research cycles. Overall these different forms of triangulation underpin the integrity of the research, despite the limitations noted about the inevitability of multiple interpretations of the data.

### **Bricolage between parts and whole**

This research is best described as an interpretative bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), piecing together different representations of a complex situation in an emergent construction of something, such as a quilt. The quilt takes different forms as different colours, patterns and pieces are added, as different tools, techniques and methods are applied. The original quilt (research design) grows and adapts as the bricoleur applies her/his own pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive judgement to what emerges. The design and interpretation are also influenced by the feedback loops from interactions in the fieldwork, with the literature, and with the author's own creative process of writing, thinking and sense-making. The quilter builds multiple layers of interpretation as different patchwork pieces of reality are stitched together, or indeed unpicked. The finished quilt (or thesis) is not simply a functional object but an artwork that continues to evoke the senses, inviting engagement from an active audience in ongoing co-creation of its meaning and its use.

I know from my quilt-making experience that there is a necessary mix of attention to detail and big picture pattern-sensing to be a successful bricoleur. The movement between the detail and the big picture is an ongoing process of trying to see the relationship between the parts and the whole, to see the invisible threads, connections, gaps and silences that bring the emergent whole into form and movement. This seeing and sense-making work calls on our creative imagination to see the flow, pattern, repetition, rhythm and layers of the whole, not simply the individual pieces. We need to use two different, distinct processes: being clear and accurate in our seeing of the detail, and using our analytical and sensory awareness to see the emergent whole (Kaplan, 2002).

During the course of this research over six years, my focus shifted from trying to see the parts that would make up an effective whole programme, to trying to see the whole rhythm and movement that supports the ongoing emergence of civil society leadership learning. In the first instance, I was seeking to understand the whole through building up a model from component parts. The research questions for the first research cycle focused on programme elements, curriculum parts, and individual competencies as pieces of the whole. In the second action research cycle, I was trying to sense the wider pattern and to understand some underlying enabling conditions through the question: *What supports the emergence of civil society leadership learning?* This movement from parts to whole was also reflected in the shifts in the research approaches over time, importantly influenced by my own professional development opportunities during the course of the research.

Particularly significant for me, was to experience others' facilitation of reflective processes that uncovered my own tacit knowledge and learning as a participant while I was working with a similar intent with others. My own heightened understanding about seeing the parts and sense-making about the whole was supported by opportunities to learn with Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff (<http://www.proteusinitiative.org>). They used multi-layered, multi-sensory learning processes to embed ways of seeing, thinking and acting from a perspective of understanding everything as a living system in movement: the natural world, the social world and ourselves. The facilitators reinforced the importance of separating our seeing, noticing and observing from our interpreting and sense-making. Applying these competencies builds awareness of our assumptions, openness to multiple interpretations and counter-intuitive possibilities for any particular situations. These workshops deepened my understanding of action research as living practice (Carson & Sumara, 1997), as my way of being in the world, of noticing the world, of thinking and sense-making about the world I am daily immersed in: as practitioner, teacher, daughter, mother, aunty, grandparent, volunteer, mentor, consultant, let alone researcher.

Alongside this particular learning was a shift over time in my understanding of complexity and the place of complexity thinking within this study as an interpretative lens. I began the research thinking I had a clear understanding and experience of the ambiguity and dynamic nature of the civil society leadership *context*. This drew me towards literature that made sense of leadership knowledge, qualities and competencies for civil society leaders to work within this complex environment. Thematic analysis of the research data enabled me to develop an emergent model of key dimensions of civil society leadership to inform our team decisions about a new programme design. The complexity had reduced, through increasing agreement

and decreasing uncertainty. The resulting programme redesign was complicated, but knowable, practical and implementable.

As I got further into complexity thinking and understood complex systems as systems that learn (S. Johnson, 2001), I came to see complexity thinking as a useful lens for understanding *leadership and learning*. An important message from the first research cycle was that 'how' we learn is as important as 'what' we learn from curriculum content. That is, effective learning of civil society leadership competencies is aligned with student experience of these competencies in our pedagogy (Malcolm, 2009b and summarised in Appendix Five). This finding affirmed much of what was already being modelled, and highlighted how important it was to embed these practices into a consistent programme culture and philosophy. The question shifted from the 'what' (elements or curriculum parts) towards the 'how' (the flow, rhythm and shape of the whole process). The strong links between leadership and learning were summed up in the idea that leadership is neither taught nor learned but is itself learning (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004). The study of complex adaptive systems as systems that learn therefore pointed me in the direction of complexity thinking to provide the focal theory for my study of leadership and learning, not just for understanding the research context.

The second research cycle engaged with complexity thinking more explicitly as a sense-making analytical framework, supporting awareness of paradoxes, contradictions and polarities inherent in community-led development of leaderful practice. Thematic analysis was supported by much more group dialogue, even though in both cycles I did background analysis as well. All four layers of knowing as outlined by Heron (1996) were explored, not only propositional knowing.

By the time I came to write the thesis, as bricoleur I came to see how complexity thinking was by now my knowledge theory, not only my focal theory for understanding leadership, learning and the civil society context. Complexity thinking was *shaping my way of seeing and interpreting the world*. This had become my whole way of understanding knowledge and knowing, as a living learning system in constant movement. I started to see how deeply embedded the discourse of models, conclusions, findings and answers were in my unconscious expectations of what research ought to produce. I came to realise how such discourse supports assumptions: about reality as fixed, complete, finite, rather than always in the process of becoming more whole, always adapting. From a complexivist worldview, different learners and different ways of seeing were bumping into each other and generating my own, new, transformative learning.

## **Contrast and coherence amidst two research cycles**

The two research cycles used contrasting forms of collaborative inquiry. In the first cycle, participants cooperated with the research process largely designed and implemented by one researcher, using its outputs to inform collaborative team dialogue and decisions. In the second cycle, there was collaboration as co-researchers in the design, implementation, analysis and dissemination of the research findings. In the first cycle, there was a search for convergence, common themes, consensus to support decisions, whereas in the second cycle there was more exploration of divergent data, varied perspectives and contradictions in the search for new knowledge. In the first cycle, semi-structured interviews and team meetings were searching for definitive answers for programme redesign decisions, whereas there was more scope for questions and exploring divergent perspectives in the second cycle with the use of journals, full day workshops and a knowledge harvesting purpose. In the first I was facilitating inquiry as an insider researcher, in the second I was more of an outsider. Together the different approaches added to the data, investigator and methodological triangulation of the study.

The study is not claiming to make generalizable conclusions for other contexts. The data and findings reflect the perspectives of the co-researchers and participants involved, at particular points in time, in particular contexts, influenced by their exposure to particular life experiences and literature. Variances between individuals' perspectives were a resource for transparent collaborative dialogue and debate on issues such as the future of the self-directed learning courses in the Unitec programme, and the enabling and blocking conditions for leaderfulness that the Inspiring Communities group considered. From a complexivist perspective, the small number of 'learners' involved enabled an exchange of information and knowledge through neighbour interactions to support the emergence of new understandings that were validated as relevant and useful for these contexts. As the findings resonate or collide with other perspectives and contexts, this knowledge will continue to be constructed. The legitimacy and trustworthiness of these particular research findings lies in the lived practice of the five praxis-related, practitioner action research principles identified at the end of Chapter Two. These principles are evident in the study's strong emphasis on democratic engagement, the processes used to support articulation of tacit knowledge, the trustworthy relationships developed through sensitivity to insider and outsider researcher dynamics, the questioning of underpinning assumptions for each team, and social change outcomes achieved in programme redesign and publication.

Coherence of the research inquiry was grounded in an understanding of the social construction of reality: that is, that reality is created and explained as we interact with our context. Further,

simple, complicated, complex and chaotic contexts vary in the extent to which they are known, knowable, unknown and unknowable. Multi-ontology sense-making (Snowden, 2005) and complexity thinking's trans-disciplinary learning orientation (Davis & Sumara, 2006) enabled different, often incommensurable systems of knowledge to collide. Developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and collaborative inquiry (Heron, 1996) methodologies supported the interaction of diverse systems of knowledge with different practical action contexts. Action research enabled attention to interventions as they were evolving through significant periods of change. An iterative learning dynamic enabled emergent theory and praxis to feed each other for developmental purposes. Bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) expresses this learning dynamic between seeing and sense-making, use of diverse perspectives in the search for understanding of the invisible threads, connections, flow, patterns that express the relationship between parts and whole. New knowledge emerged and was validated through the praxis outcomes arising from methodologies that were ethically and practically compatible with a complexity thinking, living practice, learning orientation.

Three fractal, repeating patterns of learning interactions run through the action research cycles discussed in this chapter: engagement in collaborative peer learning relationships; engagement with new perspectives, ideas and worldviews; engagement with practice contexts. Together these core neighbour interactions have supported the emergence of higher order learning around the research question: *What supports the emergence of civil society leadership?* The concept of 'facilitating inquiry within and with others', around everyday living practice, has been an important foundation of the methodology for this research. This concept has a strong echo in the learning from this study reported in the following three chapters, and becomes a repeating phrase to express the inward and outward inquiry that supports leadership learning. Chapter Four describes a paradigm shift in my own thinking as I expanded my understanding of leadership across the research cycles. A framework emerges for understanding civil society leadership as ongoing collaborative learning within complex contexts. Chapter Five expands on the three core learning interaction patterns noted above, that researchers, teachers and civil society leaders need to pay attention to in order to foster leadership learning. Chapter Six identifies how complexity thinking constructs have supported the fostering, analysing and understanding of this collaborative action research and enabled new learning to emerge.



## **Chapter Four:**

### **Making sense of leadership**

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The previous three chapters have outlined the context, methodology and research design. The next three chapters outline the main findings in relation to the research questions. This chapter describes a paradigm shift in my own thinking about leadership. I began with essentialist assumptions (Grint, 1997), seeking to identify distinctive leadership competencies most suited to the civil society context. Over the course of the research, I have shifted my thinking towards the idea of leadership as learning, conceptualised as complex adaptive systems continually constructing leadership in response to context. My understanding of leadership has shifted from a search for some fixed, knowable qualities of individual leaders to seeing leadership as complex learning systems in constant movement. This reframing opens up the potential for civil society leadership to emerge through an inclusive discourse.

I began this research aware that many people do not perceive themselves as leaders. Leaders are often portrayed as strong and charismatic, engaging followers around their vision, taking decisive action to achieve agreed outcomes. This stereotype creates the perception that leadership involves specific characteristics inherited or learned by only a few individuals. This belief limits the potential for active citizenship, with many people not seeing themselves as having these particular characteristics. I began the first cycle of this research with my own implicit leadership theory (House et al., 2002) that the culture of leadership in civil society was different from this dominant discourse. Yet I was still seeking to define essential competencies of individual civil society leaders.

This chapter first describes how my learning about leadership emerged across the two action research cycles of this study. In the first cycle, I set out to identify participants' perceptions of what competencies individuals needed to be effective leaders in the civil society space. The findings identified civil society leadership as strongly relational, collaborative work. The focus then shifted from characteristics essential to the individual leader towards understanding leadership as a process. The language of complex adaptive systems became relevant as one way of understanding the social construction of leadership as collective work. The second phase of the research focused on identifying enabling conditions (Davis & Sumara, 2006) which could support the potential for leadership of everyone as active citizens in the community. I explored trans-disciplinary perspectives (Davis & Sumara, 2006) on leadership, which further expanded understanding of social constructions of leadership as a dynamic process.

The latter part of the chapter develops a framework for understanding leadership that emerged as I, together with others involved in this research, challenged assumptions about the nature of leadership. The framework shows how four inter-related, dynamic dimensions of civil society leadership (personal, relational, cultural and structural) can be used to describe important leadership qualities, competencies and practices. Leadership is reframed as a complex, interactive, learning dynamic which moves between polarities of potentially contradictory leadership responses. This emergent model supports an understanding of civil society leadership as ongoing collaborative learning amidst complexity. Civil society leadership as learning opens up opportunities for active citizenship from small steps in our own whanau, neighbourhood and community to participatory engagement at every level of organisational leadership, community-led development, policy advocacy and systems change.

### ***What is your definition of leadership?***

Storey (2004) provided a useful framework for conceptualising leadership and its development, as driven by perceived leadership and leadership development needs, industry/organisational context, behavioural requirements, stakeholder priorities and ideological perspectives. His framework shaped the basis for my early literature review, seeking insights into the academic non-profit management education (NME) industry and NFP sector context, alongside research and stakeholder perceptions about NFP leadership behavioural requirements and leadership development. The findings stretched my own and the Unitec team's thinking beyond our immediate knowledge.

It was not until the early stages of the first research cycle fieldwork, however, that I realised I had paid relatively little attention to actually defining leadership. The absence of a definition was questioned during the pilot of the graduate interviews, prompting me to adopt a working definition of leadership: as a competency that managers, governance, staff or volunteers can exercise as "a process whereby an individual influences a group or individuals to achieve a common goal (Hailey, 2006, p. 10)". This definition was designed to encourage participants that no matter what their role within their organisation they would be considered capable of exercising leadership, and as an opening for discussing their understanding of leadership with me in the interviews. My implicit assumptions at the outset of the research were therefore that leadership is: a competency of an individual, and a process of influence, evidenced in the achievement of a common goal.

My explicit assumption was that leadership in civil society was in some ways distinct from leadership in other contexts. Sector-specific leadership research was sparse, but Hailey (2006) provided one important perspective on NGO leadership competencies, roles and styles (see

Chapter One, p. 29). Baser and Morgan (2008) offered important insights into civil society organisational capabilities, expanding on the “insightful agility” (Fowler, 2000, p. xii) or “analytical and adaptive capacities” (Ebrahim, 2003, p.1) international NGO leaders need to engage effectively in a complex, chaotic and changing world. The literature review (Malcolm, 2009a) also provided some generic perspectives on leadership and leadership development. Storey (2004) identified three leadership meta-capabilities: big picture sense-making, ability to deliver change, and competence in inter-organisational and ambassadorial roles. Mintzberg and Gosling (2002) identified five mindsets, each managing one of five domains: self, relationships, organisations, context and change. This approach has been successfully adapted for a voluntary sector leadership programme with the addition of a sixth, ethical mindset (Patton, 2003). Within my research intent, the question of distinctive characteristics of NFP leadership was significant, given the NFP sector-specific focus of the Unitec programme.

The literature review challenged the Unitec team to find ways to recognise NFP sector distinctiveness with practical programme relevance for this specific context, while at the same time managing the risk of academic isolation and lack of interdisciplinary academic rigour. The paper canvassed issues about the impact of different institutional positioning of programmes (Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella et al., 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2000) and arguments for and against distinctive academic non-profit management education (NME) programmes (Lyons, 1998; Mirabella & Wish, 2000; M. O'Neill & Fletcher, 1998; Paton et al., 2007; Salamon, 1998). Sustainability lessons arising from the closure of the world's first voluntary sector management course at the London School of Economics (Palmer & Bogdanova, 2008) highlighted the risks of the weak research foundations of the Unitec programme for long term academic rigour. International NME curriculum developments were outlined to understand the wider industry context, and highlighted a shifting balance in curriculum focus between management for organisational survival and leadership for social impact (Mirabella, 2007). Another theme that emerged was an increasing emphasis on a breadth of theoretical perspectives (including complexity thinking) that non-profit practitioners need:

There has been a growing recognition that managers have to be capable of making sense of and dealing with complex, fast-changing, and ambiguous situations that involve not just rational management approaches but also new ways of thinking and engaging with the “emotional” life of organizations. Management and organization theory have been grappling with these issues for some time, and there is a range of concepts and theories that can help deal with these issues (e.g., adaptive systems, nonlinearity, emergence, complexity theory, sense making, managerial paradoxes and dilemmas, and emotional intelligence). (Paton et al., 2007, p. 155)

I was already clear at this stage that leadership and leadership development could not be reduced to a simple universal template or model of competencies or attributes (Mole, 2004), or cause and effect relationships between particular characteristics and effective performance

(Bolden & Gosling, 2006). Bolden and Gosling's research alerted me to the limitations of leadership competency frameworks and how these can be overly focused on individuals' capabilities to motivate others to achieve performance and particular outputs. Rather, their research evidence highlighted the richly textured, relational dimensions of leadership in action: with the leader as sense-maker of complexity "on the basis of strong moral beliefs and an emotional engagement with others" (Bolden & Gosling, 2006, p. 156). Their study highlighted for me the usefulness of an inductive approach to researching perceptions of leadership competency with those involved in leadership development initiatives, rather than a deductive 'testing' of prescribed frameworks which do not allow for leadership discourse to emerge from the real world of practice.

I was already curious at this stage about more dynamic, inquiry focused concepts of leadership. Antonacopoulou and Bento's (2004) idea of leadership as learning, reflecting and questioning appealed to me, as did Torbert and Associates' (2004) conceptual framework about action inquiry leadership. However, I was not yet sure how to translate these ideas directly into research design. I was new to postgraduate research and realised I needed a manageable starting point and scope for my research and learning. I acknowledged that for all their limitations, competencies do provide a language for talking about what managers need to be able to do to manage well (Salaman, 2004). Institutional expectations were driving the first research cycle towards development of a graduate profile and curriculum framework. I accepted a competency approach as simply "a representation of one layer of the leadership landscape for training design purposes ... not [to be] seen as a universal, mechanistic 'answer' to what leadership really is" (Malcolm, 2009a, p. 20). I welcomed the idea that if we treat competencies like the "sheet music", then we understand that it is "only in the arrangement, playing and performance where the piece truly comes to life" (Bolden & Gosling, 2006, p. 151).

Student and sector stakeholder feedback from past programme review processes (Malcolm, 2006; Stafford, 2004; Unitec, 2004, 2008) was analysed to inform understanding of local NFP sector needs. Feedback was generally very positive about programme quality and impact. The challenge of meeting the wide range of academic needs of students for both theory and practice-relevant skills was acknowledged, and echoed similar tensions identified in the literature (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002). Students wanted more Aotearoa NZ, Māori and Pacific theory and research resources. Students identified challenges in managing time, costs and geographic distance in order to participate. Staff identified challenges in sustaining research activity alongside heavy teaching workloads and increasing staff/student ratio pressures. Increased use of e-learning technologies was identified as a strategy for improving programme

accessibility for students, as part of a blend of learning opportunities, but not as a simple answer to the resource issues.

My working understanding as I embarked on the fieldwork was that civil society leadership requires a balance: of management competencies for organisational survival and a range of leadership styles for leading change for social impact (Hailey, 2006; Mirabella, 2007); of rational, problem solving competencies and systems thinking approaches to work with complexity, creativity and emotional intelligence (S. Block, 2004; Hailey, 2006; Paton et al., 2007; Torbert & Associates, 2004). Further, civil society leadership and its development needed to be solidly grounded in local cultural and sector context understanding, holding a balance between theory and practice relevance (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002).

### ***Qualities and competencies for civil society leadership***

Academic programme design is typically anchored with a profile of an ideal graduate. A graduate profile sets out intended qualities and competencies that the learning is designed to support. The curriculum outlines core course content designed to staircase a pathway towards this profile. There is a logical reverse engineering rationale for this approach, beginning with the end in mind and then planning how to get there (Covey, 1990; Gottlieb, 2009).

In fieldwork communications, graduate interviewees were offered my working definition of leadership. The interviews began by asking each participant what characterises leadership success from their perspective – with a prompt asking them to think of a time, situation or event that epitomised this. Their concept of leadership was probed further by asking about criteria they would set if they were organising an awards ceremony for really effective NFP organisation leaders. What competencies or attributes would be reflected in their criteria? (Appendix Two provides a full outline of the indicative interview questions.)

This exploration of leadership perspectives drew out graduates' perceptions of four core qualities and competencies contributing towards NFP leadership success:

- Self-awareness: a clear sense of oneself, one's personal values and ethical standards; a humble reflective learner mindset; and a positive, strengths-focused attitude
- Strong interpersonal relational skills: empathy and engagement with others to build trust; enabling others' voices in shaping shared vision; motivating and mobilising people's strengths
- Clarity of organisational vision, mission and values: grounded in understanding of the wider community and cultural context; shaped through engagement with key stakeholders

- Creative analytical ability: translating vision into effective practical action with appropriate knowledge, systems and processes

Evidence of this thematic analysis is elaborated below.

## Self-awareness

The graduates expressed, in various ways, the need for effective leaders to be self-aware, grounded in a clear sense of knowing who they were, their personal values and ethical standards. Understanding values “as the source of what kind of manager you are [was] just such a really, really important learning” (Pat, April 2009 interview). One graduate talked about how she grew her own authentic leadership style appropriate for the NFP context she was leading in:

With leadership you ... feel that there is this image that you have to portray... [I] developed my leadership style through a for-profit environment with an autocratic model quite early on ... [but wasn't] comfortable with it. And it wasn't until I started working here that I realised you do much better to be alongside people rather than having that power. But I still ... had some of those old learnings and didn't really understand how different it needed to be. It wasn't until through that journey that I actually learnt that it is okay to be yourself, from your value base really. (Pat, April 2009 interview)

Graduates conveyed a sense of being on an ongoing learning journey and emphasised personal qualities like humility and reflective practice as central to effective leadership. As one graduate commented: “To my mind the best leaders are not actually the ‘in your face ra ra ra look at me’ type people, they are actually incredibly humble” (Val, May 2009 interview). With this humility came a resourcefulness, flexibility and adaptability to keep working with the unknown, with a learner mindset:

... [knowing] how the learning needs unfold, [because] the more you get involved ... the less you realise that you know, so there's ... the changing face as a learner, as you get deeper and deeper ... [and] the more you realise what you don't know. (Bob, April 2009 interview)

These graduates expressed a passion for ongoing formal and informal learning as a deeply embedded inner driver. Major life events, like the death of a child or spouse or divorce, interrupted formal study for some yet in the longer term learning was their practical response to these challenges:

Going back into my Masters was a breath of fresh air for me ... When you're so busy ... you haven't got time to read ... but when you're studying you have to. And it's fantastic. I've been so invigorated by the learning and it gives you another lift really to keep growing ... being challenged personally ... how you're growing your organisation, how you're growing your staff, community development ... I think that's hugely important and ... probably gives the edge to successful leadership. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

This humble self-awareness of what one does not know could spiral into paralysing self-doubt if it were not for other personal leadership qualities graduates emphasised as a positive,

strengths-focused, non-judgemental, inclusive attitude. Personal experience of challenging life events and a belief in one's own ability to learn and grow from these, translated into wider belief in others similarly to impact social change in their lives and the wider community:

You have to be really open-minded and think laterally and be able to see the big picture of what's going on ... and be able to create something out of it. (Pat, April 2009 interview)

[You have to have] an ability to look for opportunity and capacity rather than [being] deficit focused. Looking for opportunities rather than problems. (Ann, April 2009 interview)

One of the things I've learnt is if you can see past the image that a person presents and really engage ... like just losing that whole judgemental attitude and getting to know the person. (Pat, April 2009 interview)

They [leaders] have to be honest, hard-working, with a clear sense of direction, and fun. You know a good sense of humour ... that's always a motivator. (Val, May 2009 interview)

We have leaders right through at all levels. So really for me successful leadership is also unlocking that desire and the willingness to lead in whatever positions that people are sitting in. (Ann, April 2009 interview)

Thus the graduates portrayed their sense of this personal leadership dimension as a clear sense of oneself, one's personal values and ethical standards; a humble reflective learner mindset; and a positive, strengths-focused attitude.

## **Strong relational skills**

Graduates felt that excellent NFP leaders linked this humble, learner, strength-focused self-awareness with a "strong, strong empathy with people" (Don, April 2009 interview) to build trust and engagement. They felt NFP leaders require particularly strong interpersonal relational skills to be aware of others' strengths, vulnerabilities and motivations in order to create an empowering environment with everyone confidently contributing:

One of those [great leadership] characteristics is actually taking the team with you. You're not driving them, you're not pushing them ... it's actually a pull ... so that people are engaged, they feel valued, they feel that they're contributing and they are an important part of the team. (Val, May 2009 interview)

Empowering staff and volunteers so they're part of it, they've got a voice in it ... and that they have the tools and resources for what they have a passion to do ... and seeing the people that really move on. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Successful leadership is about minding the gap between where you are and where others are ... narrowing the gap between the individuals that take the lead and those that contribute to that leadership ... we are constantly working toward a more ... emergent and collaborative ... way of being as opposed to the more traditional sort of power based [leadership]. (Ann, April 2009 interview)

Interpersonal skills that you need [include] things like mediation, change management, conflict resolution, building staff satisfaction, team building... (Val, May 2009 interview)

Some graduates argued that the interpersonal competencies were the same in any sector. Others felt there was a higher expectation of these in the NFP sector – and that the consequences of not having them had a higher impact on a NFP organisation's success:

I actually have a higher expectation of the NFP sector. It's not quite fair is it? I think because often, particularly if you're working with volunteers, you're depending on those people who are good at building those inter-relationships, those people skills, people who've got empathy and understanding... whereas I think in the commercial sector, you can possibly get away with not having those. (Val, May 2009 interview)

There was no disagreement, however, that strong interpersonal relational skills were essential for civil society leaders: to show empathy, to build trust and engagement with others, to enable others' voices in shaping shared vision, to motivate and mobilise people's strengths.

### **Shared vision grounded in context understanding**

Graduates felt that a collaborative, participatory leadership style empowered staff, volunteers and other stakeholders to have a voice in shaping a shared vision and direction, that people are then motivated to engage with implementing. This involves an "excellent [ability to] collect up the collective voice – [it's] not autocratic" (Don, April 2009 interview):

We're doing the values around that [project], and the vision. And that's been a great exercise to work with everybody ... inspiring people and having a shared vision of what it looks like in the future. And to be able to bring people on board with it too, that staff and volunteers, they're part of it, they've got a voice in it ... then what does that look like in the community as well, how you network ... and have a voice alongside others, not working as an isolated unit sitting here doing your own thing ... that project had a few elements of what I thought leadership's about. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

A variety of graduate comments suggested that these NFP leaders held a vision of the social change they hoped to achieve in the world *and* a vision of engaging others in a process of shaping that vision into action. The important outcome from whatever leadership style was that people developed a sense of shared ownership of vision, values and direction:

I think that the role that I have within the organisation is more as an influencer, or as a prodder, a questioner, a reflective thinker ... a sounding board ... So it's about not being totally in control ... but more leading from behind ... I'm certainly not out front. (Don, April 2009 interview)

This same graduate described an NFP leader's role as having a strong sense of organisational direction and leading through influencing and persuading "in a very nice mild 'come with me' sort of way" (Don, April 2009 interview). Others identified a more collaborative, participatory determination of strategic direction:

The best sort of leadership for me is ... that the leader's almost in the background ... the people who are being led, the team members, are ... almost oblivious to the fact that they are being led ... because the momentum is there. (Val, May 2009 interview)



Some graduates identified a key characteristic of NFP leadership as understanding the vital role of values as both a yardstick and a motivator. They felt NFP organisations use values more than profit as their bottom-line measure of success and as an essential leadership lever. The upholding of these values and the progression of the organisation's vision and mission in turn provide key intrinsic rewards for staff and volunteers compared to extrinsic, monetary or other rewards:

I would really hope that staff would feel that ownership of the vision and feel valued for what they do, not just [the money they earn] ... well they aren't all paid at all are they? So, it's about the sense of being able to give back into the community ... Their values ... would be the biggest [driver]. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Effective NFP leaders, these graduates felt, are in touch with and have a sound understanding of the wider community context they are working in. They think analytically and creatively, and draw on knowledge exchanged through stakeholder relationships, in order to innovate and to influence this wider environment:

I think [a NFP leader needs] a wider context perspective on the sector that they're working in ... So if people are working with youth, they have got a wider perspective about community that involves other sectors with shared interest ... and [an understanding of] power and power dynamics. (Ann, April 2009 interview)

This outward community focus challenges leaders to work collaboratively with other groups that share their vision to affect underlying policies that impact their clients, mission and vision, "seeing outside of your own organisation ... it's being an influence in policy ... we've got so much that we can inform the leaders of our country ... we actually have to allow time for all of that" (Jan, April 2009 interview).

Civil society leaders were thus perceived to shape clarity of organisational vision, mission and values through a solid understanding of community and cultural context which emerged through their engagement with key stakeholders.

## **Practical analytical ability to translate vision into action**

Graduates identified that to be innovative and effective within their practice setting, a NFP leader needs to be "a broad wide thinker, a person who can be analytical, in a way of not just sort of blindly following trends" (Don, April 2009 interview). They felt that a NFP leader needs enough understanding of core management functions to be able to critique a variety of approaches, to implement and/or appropriately delegate and coach others to work in these roles. Graduates identified that the external interface with the community requires competencies such as stakeholder analysis, PR, marketing, funding and advocacy. Internally, NFP leaders have to be able to "lead but not control the Board" (Pat, April 2009 interview) to engage with challenging decisions involved in creating change and innovation. Everyday

service delivery requires leaders to have enough understanding of the “nuts and bolts of management” (Ann, April 2009 interview) to be able to source, use and oversee practical systems like accounting, human resource management and marketing, while maintaining their focus on the big picture. A NFP leader is seeking to lead the organisation “into a place of some form of sustainability” and at the same time being aware that they are “not just a service. If lives aren’t being changed ...” (Jan, April 2009 interview) then some major rethinking is needed. Managing this complexity between organisational sustainability and vision impact is why having a “whole lot of theories and models to pull apart” (Ann, April 2009 interview) is important for building sound analytical thinking and adaptive competencies.

The core curriculum content was considered to have “hit the nail on the head about the biggest challenges in the sector. In my experience, the content must have all been relatively sound because it resulted in change” (Ann, April 2009 interview). Exposure to a wide range of worldviews, mindsets, theories and frameworks was seen as more important in building graduates’ capacity to think, critique, apply, reflect and review tools and approaches for their practice than more detailed mastery of any one approach. “I think it’s a little bit like being in a lolly shop, there’s a whole lot of stuff and it’s all useful, [we need the ability to] figure out what’s more useful than other things” (Ann, April 2009 interview). One goal of programme redesign was therefore recommended as introducing students to a wider range of concepts and tools with which to pursue their own learning:

... challenging students to really think, really outside of the square ... really laterally ... that there’s not just a model of doing things ... to draw on lots of different models ... challenging them to feel okay about ... really trying something different and new. (Pat, April 2009 interview)

Civil society leadership was therefore seen as requiring creative analytical ability to translate vision into effective practical action, using sound judgement about what knowledge, systems and processes appropriately enable progress towards the vision at any point in time.

### ***Bricolage towards Unitec programme redesign***

As bricoleurs and peer learners, the Unitec team collaborated to piece together insights from the literature review, programme review, fieldwork with the graduates and our own grounding in the programme and NFP sector context. Triangulation of these different data sources informed final programme redesign decisions, and the emergence of new questions about making sense of civil society leadership. This section describes this bricolage work.

Hailey’s (2006) NGO leadership literature review identified similar qualities and competencies to the four themes from graduates’ feedback outlined in the previous section. The graduates’ feedback mirrored other research findings (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Bird & Westley, 2011;

Hailey, 2006; Stansfield, 2001) about the significance of relational leadership competencies in the NFP sector which underpin each of these four themes. Graduates saw no need for huge change in curriculum content, but there was a clear message to keep the content relevant, fresh and up to date with a “cycle of constant review” (Don, April 2009 interview) to be embedded in the teaching culture, not just the student learning culture. As a team we compared the Unitec programme content with the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council Curricular Guidelines (NACC, 2007) as a useful benchmark to confirm the graduates’ perception that the overall curriculum was sound. The graduates’ feedback also reflected international NME curricula trends (Mirabella, 2007; Paton et al., 2007) about adjusting the curriculum balance towards more emphasis on external leadership relationships for social impact (compared with internal organisational sustainability) and a breadth of theoretical perspectives.

Our Unitec team assumptions about NFP leadership distinctiveness and the associated rationale for a sector-specific learning environment were tested through the graduate interview questions and team conversations. Graduates were asked to consider whether it was time to move towards a cross-sectoral leadership learning space to better prepare graduates for more collaborative ways of working beyond their organisational and sector boundaries. Were there not commonalities in management and leadership across all sectors? Would increasing this level of diversity help their learning? Their response was that even though many leadership competencies might be similar across sectors, the NFP sector context differences were considered significant enough to justify a sector-specific learning environment. They felt this NFP sector learning environment helped them build their identity, networks, skills, knowledge and social analysis for leadership in this particular context. Unitec team conversations suggested that at master's degree level there may be more commonality of learning abilities, and sufficiently strong sector identity to embrace the full potential of cross-sector learning. But at the undergraduate level, these graduates felt that they were first coming to know who they were in their own context in order “to [then] stand your ground with other sectors” (Jan, April 2009 interview).

I saw my role as supporting the development of a research-informed rationale about NFP leadership knowledge, competencies and qualities to underpin team agreement about the revised curriculum framework, programme structure and graduate profile. The underlying programme assumptions spelt out in the Theory of Change (Appendix One) had been tested, and affirmed the rationale for having a NFP sector-specific learning environment. Across the framework of eight compulsory courses, I articulated core themes from the research data and collaborative inquiry, to show the threads that linked the course elements into a more

coherent whole (Appendix Four) as working resource. The action research had achieved its intended outcome to identify knowledge, competencies and qualities, yet there were more rich data gathered, especially about factors contributing towards leadership learning.

The new curriculum framework shed light on *what* was to be taught, yet was silent on *how* leadership was to be taught or learned. The framework focused on the individual leader's knowledge, competencies and particular context, but did not make explicit the social construction of leadership as relational, collective work (Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Storey, 2004), nor make sense of leadership learning as part of wider complex adaptive systems.

All graduates interviewed emphasised that the way the Unitec programme was taught had as much, if not more, impact on their leadership learning as the curriculum content. They highly valued the interactive learning environment, supported by structured peer learning and reflective practice, having their thinking challenged from multiple perspectives, and being required to apply their learning in course assignments. They learned about leadership processes, not just concepts, by reflecting on the way the tutors facilitated the learning within the classroom as relational, collective work. They learned from the way they as students facilitated learning with their peers in more self-directed learning spaces and from trying out such approaches back in their organisations. They reported some of their most transformative leadership learning had come from the most self-directed learning courses. The paradox of the new curriculum framework was that, after much debate, we had agreed to let go of these particular courses. The challenge was to find new forms to embed similar properties or principles into the philosophy and culture of *how* the whole programme was taught.

Both the literature and these findings pointed to our pedagogy as crucial (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006) in creating a site of learning to support the social construction of leadership. A qualification gives recognition to particular knowledge and skills, and plays a role in influencing stakeholders' perceptions that can enable graduates' leadership development opportunities. Leadership was identified by the graduates as a socially constructed *process* of validation by others, building one's identity and mandate as a leader. One graduate talked about leadership not as a job you apply for but an identity that you earn by respect from others for the results you achieve. Leadership formation is a process of earning your mana, something sanctioned by others' perceptions of your performance:

At some point, I can't remember the actual day, but it was deemed that I had that particular mix which enabled me to be a facilitator. That was something that I was seen as being competent in and to have that acknowledgement amongst leaders was not as somebody born to service or 'gosh there's nobody else in the pack we might as well give that role to him'... It

was more ... performance based ... something that I was competent at: leadership in a group, so that to me, that was my brand of leadership success. (Bob, April 2009 interview)

The message from the graduates was clear: to build on the strengths of the current adult learning culture with a more consistent, explicit teaching and learning philosophy embedded across the whole programme's practice (Malcolm, 2009c). The findings pointed to strong parallels between the leadership competencies identified and effective teaching and learning practice, and challenged us as teachers to reflect on how we model these competencies in the learning environment.

I placed the four themes about civil society leadership qualities and competencies and the fifth theme about the process of leadership formation into a new analytical framework. This elaborated how each of these five themes were reflected (or could be further enhanced ) in the learning processes, teaching culture and curriculum (Malcolm, 2009b and summarised in Appendix Five). My thinking about leadership as a process and a pattern that repeated across different layers of a whole learning culture and system was beginning to emerge. I had started to engage with Antonacopoulou and Bento's (2004) construct of leadership as learning, to understand more about the role of a teacher in creating the conditions for leadership learning.

The time was not yet right at the end of 2009 for in-depth collaboration with the Unitec team to shape my initial framing into a team-owned and articulated pedagogy or theory of action (Patton, 2011). The analytical thinking and writing from the action research, the frameworks developed and the contextual analysis were affirmed by the team in our October 2009 meeting as a useful contribution towards building a more coherent programme pedagogy. However, the significant task of implementing the new programme design in 2010, developing our revised courses and customising a new noho marae programme for Māori student cohorts, took all the energy of the team at this stage. The findings from this action research were put to one side as I moved to a second cycle of action research in 2011 in a different context.

### ***Reconceptualising leadership***

In stepping back from the first cycle of action research, it was time to again stretch my own thinking about leadership with new literature, experiences and relationships. Grint's (1997) work, introduced in Chapter One, was significant in helping me question my search for some essentialist truth or model about NFP leadership distinctiveness. I wanted to explore beyond ideas of leadership as traits, qualities or competencies of individual leaders, to consider social constructionist perspectives on the *processes* by which leadership is constructed. I was interested in the dynamics of the leadership process enabling movement towards some new direction, as an interplay between the individual leader, their relationships with others and

formative context issues. Grint's writing helped me conceptualise a different way of looking at leadership: "If the word 'leader' means to move in a new direction ... don't trace the leader, don't even trace the follower; trace the mobilization" (Grint, 1997, p. 17).

I went on to explore social constructionist perspectives on leadership and, in particular, the idea of leadership as collective work (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Yorks et al., 2008) shaped my search for the second action research site. The research design drew on others' experiences of how cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008; Ospina et al., 2008) could be used as a methodology to both explore and enact leadership as collective work. I was no longer tracing the individual leader (or follower). I was interested in the process of the whole system's movement and interactions that would enable leadership to emerge.

Complexity thinking became an increasingly significant focus as I returned to the idea of leadership as learning (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004) and came to understand complex adaptive systems as systems that learn (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). I had earlier enjoyed reading about leadership from a complexity thinking perspective (Wheatley, 1992) in community contexts (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006) and was now exploring complexity thinking linkages with learning through an education lens (Davis et al., 2008; Mayo, 2003). My understanding of complexity thinking was still embryonic, but I was starting to work with concepts of enabling emergence, self-organisation and distributed intelligence (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; S. Johnson, 2001). Images of ant colonies with no queen ants, the reproductive resilience of starfish, and our leadership role as jazz players rather than orchestra conductors (Malcolm, 2010) were dominant metaphors I began using to convey an emerging understanding of leadership that was very different from my early definition of leadership as a competency of an individual, and a process of influence towards a common goal. I went into the second research cycle with an understanding of leadership as collective work, an adaptive process of interaction, supporting the potential for transformative outcomes.

### ***Civil society leadership as collective work***

An important step in the setup of the co-inquiry culture of the second action research cycle was to explore our respective understandings of the language I was using: 'civil society', 'leadership', and the group's use of terms like 'leaderful'. We needed to make our assumptions clear before we set out to ground our understanding of these constructs in observations of our practice and collective sense-making. This section outlines how we arrived at some shared understanding of this language and theory of change assumptions that informed our co-inquiry.

The word 'leadership' evoked a range of positive and negative associations and identified leadership as part of the culture of a whole system. The idea of lateralism expressed the group's understanding of leadership as everyone leading together, and of a collective culture shift away from ideas of a hierarchy of individual leaders and followers:

There's an example where a local school principal noticed that the children involved in [a community-led development project] were more confident and expected their views to be taken into account – not in an arrogant way. The younger children noticed this expectation and it shifted the expectations of the younger ones in that they would have views and be listened to. [This initiative] therefore shifted the culture of the whole system – an example of lateralism. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

The word 'leaderful' was seen as one way of naming this particular kind of leadership, and of reframing leadership as collective work. In conversation, this group developed a definition of leadership as:

...intentional action by any individual *or group* that seeks to sustain and/or change the way things are. Leadership is not always about change. It can be knowing what is important to keep, maintain or uphold around particular practices or values. (Workshop transcript, March 2011 – *emphasis added*)

We were searching for language to express a different discourse about leadership and were not yet quite clear about what that would be. The term 'leaderful' came from Raelin (2003), and was already part of the group's everyday language, expressing their interest in developing leadership in everyone. Raelin coined the term 'leaderful' around four 'C' dimensions that are different from traditional leadership discourse: *concurrent*, meaning more than one person leading at the same time; *collective*, meaning leadership is not just held by individual leaders; *collaborative*, meaning participatory decision-making is the dominant style; *compassionate*, meaning leadership is reflected in 'whole person' relationships, rituals and events, rather than a detached, dispassionate focus on work tasks and boundaries.

We chose to use the term 'leaderfulness' in the ongoing shaping of co-inquiry questions as the group's way of expressing our aspiration for civil society leadership in place-based community-led development (CLD). In the Inspiring Communities group's discourse, this language created a disturbance in the system, challenging traditional assumptions about leadership, with new perspectives. Yet we raised questions about whether this new term was helpful or not. The group were experiencing resistance to this new language, which could be seen both as a barrier and an opportunity to engage with a new discourse:

Leaderfulness is an interesting term, it polarises people. Some people really do not like it and think of it as jargon. I quite like it and use it even when I know some people don't like it. It pushes them into discussing it, which is a bit naughty I know but I am fascinated by their resistance. And they often don't have any reason, simply that 'leadership' works for them and leaderfulness is nothing new. But I think it is – it is about having leaders at all levels of the organisation but operating not only within their allocated level: crossing those boundaries. I

think that is potentially very threatening and lends itself to a very loose structure which can be very uncomfortable. I think we have become very accustomed to quite tight structures and therefore feel out of control when things aren't mapped out, or if things come suddenly out of left field. Being leaderful is embracing fluidity to an extent and being creative, cognisant and conscious as well as conscientious. I find I am increasingly interested in creating space and silence to see what happens, [and] who steps into that space. (F journal, April 2011)

Leaderfulness covers multiple areas and requires new language for 'old concepts' – jargon around leadership and [and yet the term] 'leaderful' stops the very people we want to engage, engaging. [We] need to find better language that's understood by all. Leaderful is when:

- People come back to the table and stay
- People laugh, smile, enjoy being part of working together and/or seeing results from what they've done
- People begin thinking of goals and outcomes that are bigger than themselves/their organisation and how what they're doing could be done differently or adding to what they already do
- What you've done has helped someone or something else – is something that's selfless and self-gratifying all at the same time.
- People want to do something else/more
- Spirit of doing and contribution spreads across communities – culture of doing 'for this place' is created" (B journal, May 2011)

My assumption in using the term 'civil society' had been that it was a more inclusive and positive term for the non-profit sector that otherwise gets defined by what it is not (i.e. not-for-profit, non-government). It quickly became clear in our first meeting as a co-inquiry group (December 2010) that the group strongly rejected this perspective. Their disturbance of my assumptions led me to explore Edwards' work on civil society. As I questioned and expanded my understanding of civil society, I realised that non-profit organisations are just one means of achieving a civil society. Civil society can also be understood as a goal to aim for and as a public sphere where people engage with each other about what means and what goals are important for civil society (Edwards, 2004). As we explored these ideas and our shared understanding of 'civil society', we identified civil society as:

An overarching sphere – the space in the middle that enables the business, government, family, community spheres to come together – not representing just one sector. Any one person is in many different roles in different spheres of society ... These [roles and spheres] are historically totally connected. If we keep dividing stuff like this [into separated spheres], then the potential in terms of community is really limited ... We can define all kinds of spheres and they will be overlapping, not exclusive, with porous boundaries and the space in between will be critical. We all have multiple roles ... there's an interdependence. Leaderful communities/civil society are communities where people actively wear many of these hats ... at once. If we are able to be whole, rather than in role – individually, and in our streets and in our communities ... then there is a greater chance of the society hanging together more effectively. The people that can hold the big picture are the people that can navigate and broker in all or many of these different worlds – with the ability to be the 'and-and people', who know the particular strengths of the spheres each can connect with. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

The working definition of that surfaced from our lively co-inquiry conversation was:

Civil Society is the space where people participate from their many different spheres/roles in society (in family/neighbourhood/community; whanau/hapu/iwi; local/regional/national;



government/business/NGOs/households) in a leaderful way to define and build a 'good society'. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

The group's definition reflected a more inclusive cross-sectoral perspective on civil society than the definition in Chapter One (which conveys a relative independence of civil society from government and the market). As Edwards (2011) fully acknowledges, civil society is an enduring, useful, yet confusing and contested concept. Our own working definition was therefore an important starting point for our inquiry.

With these shared understandings established, we began to ground our exploration of civil society leadership in our intentional noticing of and sense-making about our practice. Our research questions focused our reflections on civil society leadership and what supports its emergence. We asked ourselves: "What are we noticing about 'leaderfulness' and the conditions that enable or block leaderful practice in particular settings of cross-sectoral, community-led development? In our communities? In our teams? In ourselves? What does this suggest for our practice: what are we doing and what could we be doing differently?"

The Inspiring Communities group's Theory of Change framework (Inspiring Communities, 2010) was the other important concept that underpinned the co-inquiry. The group adapted this from a reflective peace-building resource (Lederach, Neufeld, & Culbertson, 2007). According to this theory, the Inspiring Communities group believed four key quadrants of change (personal, relational, structural and cultural) must be considered in influencing any transformation in communities:

- Personal attitudes, behaviours, actions and values sets of individuals
- Relational connections, ties, trust between people and organisations
- Structures, systems, formal 'rules' in communities at the levels of family, organisation, government or whole of society
- The culture of a community as the unwritten rules of the game – the way we do things round here (Inspiring Communities, 2010, p. 39)

This 'Quadrants of Change' framework became particularly important as our group analysed and made sense of our observations and reflections on the research questions.

While these four categories arose from a different context, there are close parallels with the four themes of leadership qualities and competencies identified from the Unitec research data: a strong sense of self; strong interpersonal relational skills; practical ability to design appropriate structures, systems and processes; a vision and culture of leadership grounded in context understanding and stakeholder relationships. The research findings from the second

research cycle presented below, shed further light on these personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions of leadership.

The co-inquiry findings emerged in conversations that expressed, adjusted and extended individual and group understanding about deeply held personal beliefs and values. High levels of trust, care and skill within the group's collective capabilities enabled shared understandings and subtle changes in meaning and insights to emerge. The extended period of collaborative insider research over a period of nearly a year provided a very different kind of data to the six, semi-structured graduate interviews in the first action research cycle.

In this next section, I try to convey our 'and-and' thinking about multiple leadership responses, rather than a fixed sense of any particular leadership model or style, that emerged from our co-inquiry group's exploration of the research questions. Potentially contradictory findings are identified within each of the four dimensions of leadership. Some of the paradoxes identified include: leaders have a strong sense of self – and are able to be vulnerable; they have their own voice and vision – and build relationships to encourage other voices to shape shared vision; intentional structures can help translate vision into action – and more organic, self-organising ways of working. Each of these leadership properties also has a shadow side – that is, has potential for being a destructive force if taken to an extreme. For example, a strong sense of self can become an overly dominating ego; the vulnerable self can become paralysed with self-doubt.

Table 2 at the end of this chapter pulls together my interpretation of the research findings about civil society leadership from across both research cycles. An understanding of civil society leadership emerges as ongoing learning in response to the tensions arising from complex contexts that are always in movement. Leadership properties are identified as polarities always in movement and in tension with their shadow sides. Some enabling qualities, competencies and practices are identified that support the discerning of leadership responses amidst the ongoing movement of these complex adaptive systems (CAS). Some of the key properties and polarities reflected in Table 2 are highlighted in italics in the text below, to help the reader discern the pattern emerging from the narrative.

## **Personal dimensions of leadership**

*"Curiosity is almost at the core of effective development and change" (Workshop transcript, May 2011)*

The personal dimension of leadership refers here to personal attitudes, behaviours, actions and values that shape a person's sense of identity and influences their engagement in

leadership. The life stories of the co-inquiry participants and their observations of the leadership formation of their colleagues in CLD spaces highlighted some important influences on the development of this personal dimension of leadership. The stories tell of fears, vulnerabilities, self-doubt and difficult experiences. They tell of the energy from their interactions with role models they observed – those who believed in them, built their courage, confidence and motivation to serve others – and those who sparked warning signals of unhelpful power and control. They tell of curiosity amidst uncertainty, of finding possibility amidst discomfort, of building habits of self-leadership around reflective practice and self-care, of coming to more confidently know oneself and one's vulnerabilities.

Childhood experiences in family, community, education and employment laid the foundations for *a sense of self*, an adult *identity*, and *values* about active citizenship for all co-inquiry participants. Personal qualities of *generosity, curiosity, humility and motivation to serve others* were typically built from watching parents play often quiet leadership roles in neighbourhoods, church, school and community or, for example, as the following comment from one participant illustrates, through helping in a family business:

We were there to serve. So I think I always got that sense of ... doing good customer stuff. And that was about the smile and ... asking people more than just the transactional stuff ... I've always been mindful of what others were thinking. I've never just acted within my own stuff. (B, peer interview March 2011)

Family was the basis of participants' sense that '*I can, we can*' transform the world to be a better place, yet in very different ways for each person. This was not simply a hope or possibility that things could be better, but a responsibility, a passion and a calling to act. This sense of being born into a responsibility and mandate for active citizenship was summed up by one group member with a George Elliot quotation: "What do we live for if it is not to make the world a better place?" (Workshop transcript, March 2011) that epitomised her understanding of civil society leadership. She felt that her strong family base built a strengths-focused "optimism like a belief that *there are always other ways possible* ... and that you can change things, people can change things, a belief in collectivism and ... that families that are strong give, and they get stronger." Her sense of self and relative power with others "ebbed and flowed" across different life situations with a clear values base and an attitude that:

I will do what I am doing while it feels right and then when it doesn't feel right I will look for another way ... [There was] a really strong [message] from my family about trusting your instincts and you know Mum and Dad both made very hard decisions and they always appeared to be around what they believed in. (C, peer interview March 2011)

Key influential people from within family, school and community situations helped build this values base, modelled behaviours and conveyed important messages. Often short-lived, small

experiences amplified into strong significant life impact, demonstrating the non-linearity principle at work (Gleick, 1987):

I learnt by *watching others* ... and I think a whole lot of that stuff happens collectively and via osmosis, it rubs off and probably makes you who you are, based on what you've seen others do that works ... So I ... think that I've got quite a strong sense of myself, ... morals and values about what's right and ... wanting to support and help others. And not needing to do stuff just for me. (B, peer interview March 2011)

[This nun at school] had this ability to inspire practically everyone in that small school with the sense that they could do and be anything that they wanted. She's the person who stands out to me as having moral courage, a moral compass, around being true to your own self and your own values and *believing in yourself and also believing in other people around you* ... she practised it in lots of different ways and she'd never exclude anyone in the class discussion... she had a significant influence in my life. (D, peer interview March 2011)

Not all the group had positive family experiences. For some a sense of self and *self-leadership was born out of necessity and really tough experience*. Finding a place of trust and care for this person eventually enabled further learning, growth and passion for making the world a better place:

I grew up in quite a violent family so as the oldest I had to take kids away and that was my first leadership role was keeping people safe, and I know at that point my attitude was [that]...I would never be like you ... because I didn't trust them at all, I didn't believe them, so it comes from quite a hard place for me. When I was about twelve, I made an escape plan as I called it and I knew that I had to get an education at least but I didn't have any concept of University or anything like that. Even though I was in the top stream at school I never considered myself bright ... and I had learned too that less attention was better ... because if you don't get noticed, it is much better, safer. So ... I don't think of my self-esteem as being very high at that point but I still had a sense of what I knew I didn't want it to be like, and in fact everything that happened around me just fuelled that more ... I moved away when I was sixteen and I met some people ... who showed me a completely different way of being just because that is what their world was. They didn't consciously do that and I learnt from them ... and I could trust them and that is how I learnt that I could do things for others as well ... I found that they actually cared about me ... I had a migraine and they took me home ... they did things for me and I realised that I liked that and I needed that and didn't have to not have that and then it became just natural that it needed to be a two way street. (F, peer interview March 2011)

This person's experience highlighted the need for a level of *self-care* that in turn supported care for others: an experience of communal reciprocity, *giving and receiving*, offering and accepting. An outward "generosity of spirit, generosity of time, generosity of effort, generosity of courage ... [was evidenced in] wanting to give something a go, of being prepared to hang in there while it has been difficult to get things going"(Workshop transcript, March 2011). Yet group members were not always so generous to themselves. Group members acknowledged "it felt uncomfortable, self-indulgent to focus on myself" (Workshop transcript, May 2011) and the problems that lack of self-care can lead to. "As I get tired, I get defensive and I get tense and nervous" (Workshop transcript, May 2011). The need to make space for replenishment, individually and collectively as a group, was seen as essential, yet difficult to create in the face of internal and external pressure for results.

There were plenty raw, vulnerable places for this co-inquiry group which felt out of control amidst enormous uncertainty. They all had experiences *of disturbance, challenge, hardship, or being marginalised*: for example, through organisational power dynamics, others' envious attacks in the light of their success, having children at a young age, being ill and in pain for long periods, moving cities, being an outsider not fitting in. These experiences fuelled their sense of social justice and gave a taste of possibility that things could be different, that "there are always people who are worse off ... and there is always a way forward" (F, peer interview March 2011). They had come to see these experiences as their learning ground about themselves, about power dynamics, reciprocity, and the solid commitment needed to make the world a better place. *Vulnerabilities, self-doubts and questioning* continue as a strong part of their leadership experience. Notice how in the naming of this vulnerability, a shift towards naming strengths happens, a moving forward:

There's a fundamental paradox of exhilaration and tiredness that I feel as though I am carrying at the moment. It is letting go of that particular carrying [of the vision] and what does that mean around leaderfulness? ... The personal stuff is just that I don't think I have been in anything where I have learned more almost minute by minute about letting go, getting clearer, being more structured, being unstructured, having a big vision and noticing the little things. And the noticing 'the little things are the big things' is one of my BIG things that I have learned ... and constantly adapting and learning and constantly, constantly feeling as though someone else would be doing this so much better, that sure it might be my passion but actually someone else doing this role could probably be, would probably be better. And then, coming to the conclusion, well actually I am all I have got [*laughter*] so let's go with who I am. So letting go of all the things I clearly don't do effectively, cos there have been pretty continual reminders of that, to just saying well, let go of it ... and that has been really good, it's been quite empowering actually. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

The group affirmed the power of *curiosity*, of a 'not-knower', learner mindset, that had a naivety and simplicity about it, that enabled them to live with the vulnerability and complexity of the unknown challenges of leadership. A natural inquisitiveness, always listening, noticing, seeing potential and mining it, enabled these people to step out into the unknown with questions rather than answers. This learner-leadership mindset contrasts with the dominant discourse of the leader who presents as 'knowing' where they are going and what is needed to get there:

I have come to believe that curiosity is almost at the core of effective development and change.

It's a core of learning, really, isn't it? But I wonder how curiosity suffers when people are under pressure to deliver tangible results or have got so many tasks? Does it become a luxury, an added extra, even though it is core and so critical?

I think that is the very tension we have all lived with in the last three years is how to keep it alive. Being leaderful for Inspiring Communities is about learning how to feed curiosity and keep it alive at every level ... personally, for us as a group and for growing leading edge thinking as a movement. (Workshop transcript, May 2011 dialogue)

At a personal level this quality of curiosity is expressed in *facilitating inquiry within ourselves*, our own reflective practice, without letting this questioning tip into *paralysing fear, self-doubt and self-criticism*. The group acknowledged all sorts of fears “of change, of not knowing what to do, of failure and loss of face” (Workshop transcript, September 2011) that get in the way of people stepping up into community leadership roles. The key issue was how to not stay stuck in these fears, in order to keep the system in movement:

[People may be] ignorant about why they should step up, not think their contribution will be wanted or needed, doubt their own skills and abilities, [not] see support available to help them step up or to support them once they’ve stepped up, feel culturally out of their depth, [be] turned off by the people or kaupapa around them, not see a place for themselves in the vision/purpose, think they’ll be left holding things, not have skills to bring others in around them if/as they step up, not have time or energy, [or] expect that others will so they don’t have to. (B journal, May 2011)

If as facilitators we can listen to the fears, we can lead with useful questions to open up possibilities that could tame the forces that block the practice of leaderfulness. The group identified blocks such as the “*overdominance of individual egos*, the control freaks who think they have all the right answers, the rigidity of *top-down* prescribed ways of working, an *over-emphasis on doing and tasks*” (Workshop transcript, September 2011). *Reflective questions* were identified as a way of shifting these blocks: What would it take to truly invest in *walking alongside* people, believing in their strengths and supporting them to ‘step up’? What opportunities can be offered for ‘apprentices’ to learn from others? How do we support those with a sense of *over-responsibility* to ‘step back’ and leave space for others? How do we overcome our fear of letting others down, or of failure, and accept ‘failing forward’ as useful to learning to lead?

Focusing on curiosity within our co-inquiry group allowed us to notice that we were naming and reframing a variety of qualities of leaderfulness as paradoxes: for example, needing to be vulnerable to be a strong, effective leader; seeing an apprentice or learner mindset as a legitimate part of a leader identity and practice:

I recall a previous mentor ... asking me when I was going to stop thinking of myself as an apprentice and step up to claiming my leader identity ... I think apprentice will always be part of the humble, curious inquirer I bring to leadership. I get excited about [working with this group] cos I feel I can learn from them. I do position them as somehow more expert than me but I don’t deny my own [expertise]... (MJM journal, October 2011)

These insights helped me claim the authenticity of some of my own leadership qualities. I saw how curiosity and openness to vulnerability were supporting a culture of mutual learning in this co-inquiry and how this challenged some conventional discourse about leadership. Between a secure self and a vulnerable self lies a tension that can enhance learning.

These insights were not in contradiction to the findings from the Unitec graduate interviews about personal self-awareness: a clear sense of oneself, one's personal values and ethical standards; a humble reflective learner mindset; and a positive, strengths-focused attitude. Rather, the nature of this inquiry process was digging into a deeper conversation about this personal dimension of leadership, and surfaced many more everyday examples than the timeframe of one semi-structured graduate interviews could have allowed.

## **Relational dimensions of leadership**

*"Relationships are the currency of enabling leaderful practice"* (F journal, August 2011)

The relational dimension is used here to refer to connections, ties and trust between people and organisations. Investment in relationships is discussed as essential for growing leadership. The inquiry findings illustrate a dance between the 'I' and the 'we' as one way of expressing the interaction and movement of this relationship development. Paradoxes emerged from what people said. My voice counts: your voice counts. I can make things happen: we can make things happen. I can lead out front: we can lead together. Active facilitation *and* spontaneous network interactions each play a part in creating the momentum between the 'I can' and the 'we can': finding and moving towards a shared purpose, and motivating each person to see their role in this purpose. The movement of the whole system shifts in different directions depending on whether the focus is on the *why* purpose, *who* needs to be around the table, *how* are we working together, or *what* doable chunks of action are needed next. When tensions build, relationships are a central resource to reach a new, temporary equilibrium.

The inquiry conversations explored two sides to the inclusion/participation relationship: "one about *people stepping up* and one about those intentionally *helping others to step up*." (B journal, May 2011). One party has to be prepared to 'step up' – to make a shift into participating in something in the community and then seeing they could have a role. Some dare to take on one-off tasks then find themselves taking on other roles and responsibilities. The other party, "the leaderful shepherd" (Workshop transcript, September 2011), has to read what would be helpful in walking alongside the person. It might be finding a task that is within – or even outside – the person's comfort zone, then watching their response. Part of this is the art of *framing bite-sized pieces of manageable action* that encourage people to be personally involved and to see their part in a wider movement. It requires patience, offering practical support, noticing points of change, being alongside to help sustain and build confidence and competence as necessary, and *stepping back when no longer needed*:

[It's an] I can/we can journey that builds from an individual's spirit – their beliefs, behaviours, attitudes, potential – which represents their power. From their sense of self within the context

of their whanau, household, neighbourhood, community, culture [i.e. “I can”], what enables their interest in others, their exercising or demonstrating some control over their lives, the sparks, the motivators that invoke “we can” leaderfulness? (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

That ‘we can’ energy starts from initial ‘I can’ experiences: small beginnings with big ripple effects. *Finding and seizing opportunities* to take action within their own lives and the wider community were central to leadership development:

[There was] a woman who had not been very participatory in a workshop but explained, when asked, that her biggest learning so far had happened over the shared lunch provided. By watching others fill their sandwiches she discovered mesculin and that she liked it and that it was affordable for her family. She took the opportunity to be a leader in her space, in the group, by speaking up, and also in her family, by what they ate, and this went on to her doing other leaderful things in a wider space ... [taking] responsibility for herself and for others and for speaking out too. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

The role of leadership grounded within family/whanau is central. Until families are more functional, have the basics, then the potential for a really civil, inclusive society is really limited ... We are seeing the changes in the Bay, started by the women in families/whanau, who are stepping up to take leaderful roles, catalyst roles, encouraging others, making space for others to come beside, daring to do something new. There are the individual actions, and the way that you do it, to provide licence/support for others to do it. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

[Being] leaderful is also when people ask to do more or they are ready to do something more and they articulate that spirit of contribution in their own way ... and how that actually spreads over time ... This guy is a street person, for want of a better word. He actually tells Jenny what he is doing now, rather than involving her in everything he does, so that is kind of a transition point ... in terms of his actions, but the other thing is ... he has actually offered to be involved in more than his street now ... So clearly it is when you go beyond your initial offering of what you thought you could do – and that’s the confidence building. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

Leaderful practitioners who are supporting such ‘I can/we can’ growth are mirroring another level of the same pattern, discerning when they need to act as catalysts, when to awhi others to ‘step up’ and when to let go and *leave space, silence and gaps for others to step into*. The art of facilitation, of quietly walking alongside, was richly expressed in the following story told by one of the co-inquiry group:

At the farewell there were numerous comments about how this leader continually held the space to enable everyone to make a contribution in a way that they could see. And how he constantly reflected back that they were bringing their networks, their whanau, their way of doing things to the table, so that the growth was theirs. They were leading it. And a number of stories about the sudden shock these young people had, when they realised they were fully responsible for whatever area they’d advocated to be part of. They ended up actually leading it, and taking it somewhere, and being responsible for it! And the growth that that enabled was enormous. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

The group agreed that there were times when leaderful people need to lead with new ideas and shape action, before there are any followers offering a mandate. In being the first to ‘step up’, such leaders were vulnerable, needing “huge courage ... to embrace the ‘oh shit’ moment” (B journal, May 2011) as they put the “kaupapa out there to be shot down in flames by the wider community” (B, peer interview March 2011). The response was usually one of support,



yet this group was very aware of the contradictions of *leading out front* while working with a strong intent about *leading together*:

I remember when I first suggested some of this stuff and started to write it down, feeling really nervous, which is ironic now, but here I was, putting this idea out for people which was brand new and knowing that in putting it out I also stood the risk of having it trashed, because sometimes, you know, how ideas are ahead of their time? (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

If you wait for a mandate, how can you be entrepreneurial, innovative ...? And the contradictions ... you earn your mandate through trust and delivering or creating in whatever your space is. Sometimes you've got to hold the mandate lightly ... [and give yourself] some freedom to create yourself a mandate and I think it's the 'how' that is really critical. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

There is something about seeing that others can do it and then taking on that challenge ... in putting yourself out there. So I think recognising when people are being brave and acknowledging that is really important ... I was thinking about my behaviour ... Part of it was the control freak in me and part of it when I thought about it strategically was setting up the conditions for people to be able to do what they need to do. Cos I know in my head I am often three or four steps ahead of where some of the people I am working with are. Some of the gifts I can perhaps bring are to dump that stuff and then provide room for people to throw it out, edit it, do what they want with it, to define a way forward...So I think there is a role in that leaderful space for some of the charting to be done that allows people to see where they fit and to mould it and shape it whereas it might have been too big for them even to engage in to start if that first chunking work hadn't been done. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

Discerning when to *step forward* and when to *let go* and simply let things evolve was an ongoing important theme in group discussions: when to claim *one's own voice* and when to stand in others' shoes and *acknowledge their voice*, their worldview. The courage to speak out when others' use of power needs challenging, and acknowledging one's own part in a conflict, were relational competencies that enabled constructive shifts in dynamics:

Leaderfulness may be as much about learning to let go as it is to facilitate a way forward. (F journal, March 2011)

I notice that I can let go as well as step up or back but that it requires much more conscious effort than the glory of running with a good idea [myself]. I think it is important not only to make conscious effort sometimes (often!) but to consider what lies behind that effort – what is the motivation? (F journal, February 2011)

I have been noticing my learned behaviours which can confuse politeness with always being positive (or silent) in one-on-one situations. I need to practise forms of constructive criticism. Sometimes perceived power differences get in the way. It takes practice and time. (C journal, August 2011)

Actually that space of me being wrong ... actually completely softened my relationship with [her] and it's a completely different space [now]. So that humility I suppose is just owning 'I am sorry I think I have stepped out of line here' – so the fierce [conversation] and the humility are definitely two different sides of a coin ... and they often follow quite fast on each other. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

[It felt at times] like a one-way blood transfusion of conversations with people ... starting off how do we work on this together ... trying to negotiate a way through that and trying to work out when to let go and when not to let go and when to push and when not to push, what to push over, was absolutely fascinating ... [There was a] real wish [on our part] to have something

growing and developing and therefore it mattered that those conversations were happening ... [before we came to accept in this case] it's not going to work so let's not sweat it. But we had to have ... the experience of having tried really hard in order to be able to let go ... and in getting there we said on what conditions would it be acceptable [to continue] ... that is the richness in what we learned ... because in a way we were talking about the enabling conditions for growing leaderfulness. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

At the heart of the relational dimension of leaderful practice are *communication competencies* of listening, noticing, asking powerful questions of oneself and others, reframing what has been heard, creating and facilitating spaces for learning, sense-making, co-creating community vision and action – and all the time knowing that we 'don't know what we don't know.' "An attitude of respect, an openness to what people might bring and how they might engage, seems to be a precondition [for leaderfulness] compared to slotting [people] into roles you have predetermined. Good question asked about: how is our behaviour keeping people out?" (MJM journal, March 2011). The co-inquiry itself required such facilitation skills on my part, to design processes to frame group conversations and to discern when to let go of my plans:

The process of asking everyone for 3 AHAs worked really well ... I had thought we would then synthesise/summarise themes from our AHAs but actually C, B and D each led in with different frameworks that really helped extend and deepen the conversation. You can't build knowledge in a straight line ... I didn't even understand what B was getting at and could have shut it down as a tangent if I had used my power as facilitator to control and direct conversation. Instead I held my curiosity/not-knower mindset and encouraged the group to do so too and it soon emerged as a useful scaffold for naming the contrasts between traditional organisational leadership and this leaderful practice concept. (MJM journal, October)

All the co-inquiry group were skilled facilitators, so this was a constant resource for the co-inquiry, while we were also noticing such facilitation processes in our practice. The dialogue below arose out of a task that required listening to each other's summary of what we had been noticing since we last met and identifying questions for each other. The dialogue shows the synthesising of a theme that appears to be a commonality, the power of questions that explore the different views and the reflective listening going on to understand each other's perspectives, as we explored the tensions between process and outcomes-focused leadership:

C: One question that's emerging for me in leaderfulness is around the content of any fierceness. It felt as though [that theme] came up for 4 out of 5 of us ... and the question for me is ... is the content of any fierceness [in leaderful CLD] actually always about process, values, mutual commitment? So those words feel important for me – it's not driven by the *what* ... if it's ever about the doing, or the what should happen next, we have lost our role, we have lost our way.

F: Explain that more. That's interesting.

C: So if our role is as enablers and if we truly believe that people from many sectors working together in places can transform [communities] then our role is about process and supporting that to happen. So if there is ever any fierceness then would it always need to be about the things that are stopping people working together? ... [for example] no shared values or processes for making decisions or breaking ... something that had been agreed. So it's not about the '*what* should happen', it's more about the enabling ...

F: Cos one of the questions I had for you that relates to that is this thing between a brokering role and a leading role in terms of the 'how to' and the content – and how much we actually shape even though we are brokering ... sometimes unconsciously.

C: So tell me what you think the 'what' is there ... why has that come up for you here?

F: Because you are saying that our role here is about the broker one whereas I think we ... are actually leading ... And I see our role as we are sometimes actually holding both.

C: What are we leading?

F: We are leading perhaps the way that communities might find themselves into doing or being more community-led ... Sometimes they might want to get there but they don't know how to, so sometimes our stuff is about leading, suggesting, which is different than just kind of...

C: But I see that 'how to' as still process stuff. It might be a language thing we are talking about.

MJM: So is this about leadership being about a process? (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

The spaces, gaps and silences were seen as just as important for leaderfulness as *active facilitation of dialogue for engagement, direction setting and action planning*. The quilt exercise, described in Chapter Three, created a relatively silent space for collaborative analysis that was very effective in eliciting different contributions towards analysing and synthesising ideas. Sometimes we fill space with words or actions that get in the way of collaborative thinking and leaderfulness:.

Sometimes leaderfulness is a bit like silence. To be leaderful is to leave gaps in conversation, space. When the space is always filled by others, due to their position and/or skills, leaderfulness of the many retreats to leave leaderfulness of the few. No doubt this is related to perceptions (and experiences) of power. Maybe we are too easily disenfranchised? (F journal, March 2011)

One of the things I notice with gaps is that they are really hard for me personally in the immediate term but actually in the big picture often you don't even see where the gaps were because they often just do fill themselves ... things do fall over and other things take their place. The timing of immediate term things can be quite hard but in the big picture those are not the things that matter at all ... it's almost the opposite to what you were saying that the little things are the big things...but maybe they are not so important? (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

*Investment in relationships from the outset* builds on pre-existing trust in a group, providing a safe, relaxed space for people to share of themselves, uncovering collective strength in the diversity of people in the room. Out of relational, participatory space, people "find their part in it ... and grow it themselves"(Workshop transcript, March 2011). An intrinsic motivation comes from the joy of "being part of something that is bigger than [oneself]... people can all of a sudden see themselves in the context of others" (Workshop transcript, May 2011). Relationships were identified as critical for effective partnering with organisations, requiring people to see beyond themselves and their organisational boundaries to a shared community vision:

The strengths of [one particular] leaderful group to me is that everyone brings food to share. I used to do it ... And then people realised that I was doing it, and now everyone just brings stuff. There's always laughter. We always start by sharing something about ourselves and our weeks before we get onto the business ... And people often do come talking about 'I feel really fragile' or 'This is happening in my place' ... So it's got that human-ness to it ... the language of emotion ... it feels safe to talk about that stuff. People talk about their fears or their joys ... and there's multiple competencies that sit around that table ... Some people that are good at peacemaking. Some people are good at challenging. Some people are good at thinking about how to. Some people are good at reaching out to wider connections. So I think that actually strengthens the ability of the wider group to be leaderful and have leaderful outcomes ... the diversity of competencies. (B, peer interview March 2011)

There's a partnering project where the leader in one party is very domineering and self-sure and seems not to be a great listener – at times – which has only recently become apparent ... [There's] a risk that the partnership approach might fail at an early point ... without some massaging. [There's] also the possibility that the structure of the partnering could be actively used to help discuss and clarify expected behaviours. (C journal, August 2011)

Building relationships with local residents is fundamental in CLD: *"Those with the lived experience have to grow this or nothing will change"* (Workshop September 2011). Community engagement is paramount, not just a means to other ends. Just as residents respond beyond their individual or household needs, so *organisations, brokers and intermediaries who look beyond their organisational walls* bring other capacity, experience and critical mass for long-term results. Time and timing are highly influential in terms of what relationship opportunities open up. The relational dimension was described as *using all the senses* to see, hear, think, feel, sniff out opportunities, from the past, for the present, to reshape the future together. An ability to live amidst the unknown and with contradictions also seems important:

There were [three] people on the roof over there ... the two guys [cleaning the windows] who were going to jump off were quite confidently landing on this edge and I was going oooo I didn't like it at all ... and the guy in the suit didn't come up to the barrier. So it's kind of interesting the ... fears we have and we create. You are not going to fall off the building unless you step off the building. There is not a magnet that is going to pull you off, which is like I feel when I get to the edge of something like that. That's a bit like this [leadership conversation] too – to feel the fear and just put yourself out there ... it can actually be really good to be out of control even if it's uncomfortable.

With leaderfulness ... it's kind of messy. It's instinctive if you like, its sensory as well, it's about feeling and sniffing out the opportunities. All the language I wanted to use was very sensory. It's being present and quite conscious and not just hooked up in the task. It's taking a step back ... and then taking a step in as well. I can't remain at that abstracted level, there has to be some action ... There are all these polar opposites that are ... pulling against each other when I think about leaderfulness. It's also about skills ... actually learning, having a toolbox to dip into when things are tough ...

And I think also there is another tension – there is a real role for being humble but when I think of my successes in this period, [they] have actually in some ways been quite fierce. I had to throw my toys out of the cot at Council three times. It was quite fun actually by the third time ... I put some demands rather than being nicely, nicely, humble, humble ... and we actually started to shift things. I think there is a time and a place and that's the real gut kind of stuff where you just have to suck it up and see and other times you just have to jump off the edge of the building.

So being leaderful can actually be quite a ... frightening space and it's not that you're alone necessarily although sometimes it might feel that way. It's just that you are in an edge kind of space ... There might be lots of good people with you – and sometimes that's what we hold onto that we are all going to jump off this building. It's not a comfortable space at all. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

As with the previous quadrant, there were shadow sides identified that could be seen as blocking leaderful practice, or defining contrasting attitudes and behaviours. Leaderfulness involved some leading out front, but not a '*come and follow me and my vision*' style; rather, a '*building the vision one conversation at a time*' style. Conflicts, tensions and historical grievances could be useful catalysts for change, but not if they were not dealt with or at least considered a potential resource for moving forward. When people were focused more on differences than commonalities, holding to *fixed ideas*, or bringing a blaming attitude or a deficit focus, the potential for leaderful practice was constrained or blocked. *Embedded power dynamics* take a lot of letting go, at many levels. There are no simple, proven recipes but sharing of power can start within the relational space of CLD.

These findings about the personal and relational dimensions are building a picture of leadership that is very different from dominant individual leader/follower discourse – or a particular emphasis on the influence of interpersonal skills or emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2002). The findings are more akin to Relational Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), which frames leadership as a moving construction, shaped by dialogue and interaction, inseparable from context.

The findings remind us not to essentialise leaderfulness (Raelin, 2003) as always leading together. The findings show evidence of a spectrum of styles from leading from the front, leading from the middle, to leading together. This resonates with Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) which emerged from organisational contexts. However, the civil society context of this research provides less evidence of Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey's administrative, top-down leadership and more evidence of adaptive (bottom-up, self-organising) and enabling (from the middle) leadership. Even in the civil society organisational contexts of the first research cycle (compared to the more developmental CLD contexts of the second cycle), top down relational leadership was not strongly evident, compared to more participatory leadership styles demonstrating empathy and engagement with others to build trust, enabling others' voices in shaping shared vision, motivating and mobilising people's strengths. The catalytic role of change agent is not the same as a top-down or CEO style (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006), evidenced here as leadership thinking, facilitation, discernment and response appropriate for each situation.

In exploring the cultural and structural dimensions of leadership learning, the following sections expand this trans-disciplinary understanding of leadership from different perspectives.

## **Cultural dimensions of leadership**

*“Those with the lived experience have to grow this or nothing will change” (Workshop transcript, September 2011)*

The cultural dimensions of leadership express how and why we do things the way we do (Henderson et al., 2006). Our co-inquiry group articulated a culture of leaderful practice as a way of working, making this practice more visible as a touchstone on which to test everything we do. Cultural dimensions are multi-layered, involving beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, values, language and norms that shape the past, present and future. *Rituals and celebrations, such as welcomes and farewells*, are important in diffusing culture as they honour history and share stories that illuminate or reframe perceptions of the way things were, are and can be: “Rituals recognise values not just achievements, strengthening the culture we want, e.g., manaakitanga, co-design.” (B journal, August 2011). Particular symbols and artefacts can have a high impact in translating, framing and brokering a group’s core identity, for example:

[We wrote a] high impact one page charter that supported buy-in ... In a tight, clear way ... [it provided] enough framing that articulates who we are and what we’re trying to do ... [so] people lead with confidence with some stuff behind them. (B peer interview March 2011)

In times of transition, culture, belonging and identity are simultaneously important and disturbed. Culture is never set in stone, but there are underlying tikanga that endure. This was expressed by one community group in a “shared tikanga that every decision is tested against: how does this help young people?”(C peer interview, March 2011). In a year of leadership transition, explicitly naming this co-inquiry group’s embedded values and culture of leaderful practice, helped define what mattered in the succession planning and transition. Individually and collectively, the group needed to let go of some things and work out what was central to retain as they co-created the next phase. Cycles of “life and death, creation and destruction” were noticed at personal, team and wider community levels of this group’s work:

Everything is part of the cycle of creation and destruction ... life and death cycles ... Leaderful practice that has worked before may actually block at a different stage ... Enabling conditions vary with stage. Sometimes we need to focus on what we know, other times we need to be more open. Plotting where we are at, can help make decisions about whether to hold on or not. Many of us are reverting to what we know...and that is comforting but not necessarily empowering in this time of change. We all need to let go AT THE SAME TIME as carrying on. Notice our changed context and work with what works now. Grieving for a past is getting in the way, as is pretending we are all somehow ‘one’ all of a sudden. Embrace our difference and let a [new] picture ... emerge as a mosaic. (F journal, August)

Cycles of life and death, the panarchy stuff, has been absolutely in my dreams and in my processing and so I have learned to notice that stuff ... within what we are doing ... Feeling the pressure from our primary funders and wanting to deliver on [their expectations of results, but we are] starting from scratch rather than starting from a big experiment ...or a programme which has been tested and then is going to be rolled out. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

One recurrent theme in co-inquiry conversations was an unwavering commitment to building a *culture of 'doing with' compared to 'doing for'*. "By 'doing for' I create an expectation that I can always do this, and also (more importantly) that their ideas were 'wrong'" (F journal, August 2011). Underlying values and expectations are "that we actually build community in what we do" (B peer interview March 2011), "including voices/people who have traditionally been excluded" (D peer interview March 2011), for example children and old people. "It's about people and what's shared not the gear (or the building or the event ...) the co-creation, the doing it together" (C peer interview March 2011). "We are not trying to do things for people ... [we try to be] a conduit not a roadblock" (B peer interview March 2011), "a conduit not an entity – offering values and frameworks" (A peer interview March 2011), "sowing seeds about needs and then letting them sprout without control"(C peer interview March 2011). This was about "seeing possibilities beyond a one-off project and mining the project for its wider potential – a clear vision beyond services, projects – yet still oiled by action" (D peer interview March 2011). Projects were not ends in themselves but tools "keeping alive the values, relationships, culture to support a culture change" (D peer interview March 2011). "A belief that everyone has something to contribute [and that] good learning is associated with a degree of discomfort" (E journal, March 2011).

A culture of investment in manaakitanga and whakawhanaungatanga built the *foundation of relationships needed* to create room for newcomers and new leaders. "[A] culture where people know they can and do ask for help to make things happen, [where there is] hospitality – food, people know they're welcome – people feel listened and responded to" (B journal, May 2011), embeds a culture of reciprocity and support when people are feeling out on an uncomfortable learning edge. When this relational foundation is not shared, leaderful practice is not easy to co-create:

He was not interested in any conversation to get to know [us or] our backgrounds ... He was happy to talk about himself and his life and his dream. He continued to say, yes "I will do that", not "we". He didn't listen to what the ... group agreed ... not listening/respecting the group's wisdom/strengths ... There is no way to have the conversation with [him] about norms, group process, values ... [he doesn't seem to be] interested in others' worlds ... I have to work differently to work with this difference. Explicit co-created agreement is not always possible. Co-creating culture around this person is what might work! (MJM journal, August 2011)

A culture of 'doing with' calls for *resourcefulness to 'work with what is'*, sometimes covertly, sometimes overtly, and with the complexity and diversity of people who come forward to participate. Resourcefulness was an important theme in the co-inquiry conversations, to the

extent that having no funding or time was seen as a strength for building strong collaboration, leaderfulness and co-creation “Not having time to do things yourself [is] perfect: [it] encourages you to look out and wider to actively find others to share the load ... big gaps in resourcing can actually be a really positive thing” (B journal, August 2011):

I think the fact that we could get going with ... no money ... has made a difference. Because Inspiring Communities invested some of my time ... I used my networks to get the venue paid for ... we didn't need a lot ... Sometimes the money's actually the distraction. So getting going ... without it ... and adding it over time ... I actually think is a better way to go. You need a little bit to get going ... but ... it's not the be all and end all. (B peer interview March 2011)

We resisted pressure to stay doing it all ... went back to the people who said they wanted to contribute ... Every time we've asked ... people have stood up. So it's been a really good reminder about ... asking. Just because people don't come forward ... doesn't mean to say they don't want to ... you actually have to ask. (B peer interview March 2011)

I think not having the money was critical too because really busy people created space to do particular things which meant it resonated with them. And we didn't have a paid coordinator ... there was a whole bunch of reasons why that was both good and hard. If we had DIA funding for three years we would have got the organisation and not got half the way we have got already. (F peer interview March 2011)

Part of it is seed funding and part of it people being able to seed it themselves. (Workshop May 2011)

Underpinning this resourcefulness lies a *strengths-focused attitude* challenging assumptions of despair and victim identity with a different worldview:

To me the leaderful stuff is the behaviour change and hope and inspiration that lies within people. We often think it's about the infrastructure but it's about holding both the projects and how we do things with people that creates a different way of being. (B peer interview March 2011)

The group acknowledged situations of absolute *scarcity or poverty* where there can be:

... so much hardship there is no leaderfulness ... [yet] between relative and absolute scarcity sits a mindset/attitude of hope, generosity, openness of spirit, possibility, experience, egolessness, shared vision, autonomy – a sense that ‘we can’. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

The overall message was to be assume there were individual and collective strengths, potential and resilience in every community, “once hope is created” (D peer interview March 2011). That is, sometimes hope first needs to be catalysed through offering “resource [people who can] convene, capture, encourage and assist multiple contributions” (B journal, May 2011) where the natural capacity and skillsets of the community are not yet active.

Embedded community culture, beliefs and attitudes can work against hope. Discourses around *individualism* and *materialism* can undermine a sense of collective identity of place or purpose. An *insider/outsider mentality* can be the community equivalent of an individual self-centredness, excluding and marginalising some groups. I noticed how this attitude in one CLD situation was destroying hope around community engagement:



Repeated commentary/language around “transients don’t [want to] get involved in our town”. Blame culture. Assumption they can’t or won’t engage even for a short time. Becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy...exclusion of “outsiders/others”... yet engagement may translate into staying in the community longer ... Attitude of inclusiveness – seeing everyone in the community as important. Attitude of reflection on own practice – if something is not working, what can we do differently?” (MJM journal, August)

Beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours and language – even the use in this example of the word ‘transients’ – have a profound influence on the whole system’s leadership potential.

These cultural dimensions build a picture of creating community vision, identity, tikanga, action and sense of belonging, working with the people and resources connected to a particular place-based context. Leading in such CLD contexts typically has less of a roadmap or past precedents than organisational leadership, yet the cultural dimension themes identified still have strong parallels with the role of civil society organisational leaders identified by the Unitec graduates. They described a key leadership role in clarifying organisational vision, mission and values, through engagement with key stakeholders and understanding the wider community and cultural context.

## **Structural dimensions of leadership**

*“I don’t mind being in an emergent mess but it is great when some ‘rules’ emerge, i.e., agreed roles, common themes.”* (F journal, February)

The structural dimension of leadership refers to structures, systems, formal ‘rules’ in communities at the levels of family, organisation, government or whole society. This section discusses how structured and organic ways of working are needed for leadership in CLD spaces. The findings identify how necessary it is to learn about power structures and how to work to intentionally redistribute power towards those who are marginalised in the system. Complex work in CLD is evolutionary, aspirational, dynamic and flexible. The co-inquiry group observed that a focus on structure can at times be at the expense of relationships. Time and space is needed early on to build relationships and for groups to find their own way to appropriate structures, rather than setting up structures first. Real time *feedback loops* and *ongoing cycles of action, reflection, dialogue and sense-making* were seen as the structures most needed to keep building coherence:

Encourage organic ways of working – grow cultures of people who just get on and do and learn about what needs to come next as they’re doing things. Often we’re too pre-planned and structured – bogs us down, forces us to not think lightly or creatively ... forces us to have all our planning ducks in line before we do anything ... this control type situation can reduce people’s natural instinct ‘to do’ ... when we really want to make doing intuitive again, experiment, build their skills and thinking from experience. (B journal, May 2011)

Predetermined plans, models and structures can be too rigid for rapidly changing developmental situations. The “desire to bring different ways of working together ... to achieve consistency in language, approach and apparent outcome” (F journal, August 2011) can risk destroying the community’s self-organising natural energy and initiative that builds from a *diversity of pathways*. When support structures, agreements, plans and roles are shaped as temporary for present needs rather than fixed for the longer term, they can play a useful role in framing thinking, guiding action, working with conflict and shifting power dynamics.

The structural dimension of leadership highlights the multiple levels of the whole system that CLD is relating to – from family, whanau, household, neighbourhood, organisation, community, to city, national governance and global society. Particular issues and opportunities provide the catalyst and urgency for mobilising action at a particular time. Civil society leadership involves stepping out into those times of turbulence and change, to broker a sense of emergent possibility and to *bring new voices to the decision-making table*:

I think the process of local government change was a very big dark cloud and ... none of us were happy with it in the beginning ... but we have managed to find a silver lining and actually that silver lining has turned that cloud inside out pretty much ... That is what we can see now ... But it is interesting too even now ACDA is being asked to speak on behalf of communities and people don’t quite get it – we don’t want to speak on behalf of! ... It’s not neat and tidy ... we said we want community around the table ... and they said ok here you go, you have got a week to sort it out ... [so we are] standing on our own ground when politicians put inappropriate pressure on. Turning around imposed change to an opportunity – let’s go for it ... [There have to be] enough people beyond basic survival needs able to offer inspirational energy collectively to find common ground. (A peer interview March 2011)

However, there is a risk that common ground and shared purpose can become too prescribed with a linear, logical model of an anticipated pathway of inputs, processes, activities, and outputs. Complexity thinking reminds us of the non-linearity principle. Small things can have large impacts well beyond any logical explanation. There is a letting go of a belief that as facilitators we can ever fully know what will emerge as transformative. A strategy such as reverse engineering can be useful to explore conditions that might enable the vision to be achieved (Gottlieb, 2009), as long as the door is left open for the unknown and unknowable.

The key recurrent condition for transformation from a CLD perspective is community engagement in doing and learning: active involvement as leaders in decisions, actions and meaning-making. Diverse pathways and “multiple contributions [are needed] to achieve outcomes – *intergenerational, inter-sectoral, cross-cultural* – a place for diverse input [and] a manageable part for everyone to play” (Workshop transcript, March 2011). Engagement is both a condition and an outcome in itself.

*Structured agreements and plans can be enabling* if they provide a balance of tight/loose frameworks for living and learning in the complexity of this space:

We worked on some new principles for agenda development, developing media releases, balancing relative power in [this] 'space' – including through new ways of welcoming, [and ensuring the] host [did] not also [have to be] facilitating. Had to work through some tensions. Event went well with 75 people attending. Beautiful comments by the kaumatua in final karakia conveyed the sense of possibility and hopefulness – the level of respect and intentional listening and learning. Growing recognition and understanding about possibilities in terms of sharing each others' 'space' and relationships/strengths. Recognition that it is too big an ask to expect all parts of the community to feel comfortable in one venue. And also of the hunger by local people to be informed – and involved. Reflecting on ... the usefulness of the Learning and Outcomes agreement itself. The principle of jointly arranging and signing things off – the need for active thought about power differentials and historical context of structural relationships ... and how to redress those in a "living" way. (C journal, August 2011)

The non-linearity principle can be interpreted as thinking that complexity is all about randomness, yet CAS have coherent patterns and structures that do provide a level of order. Appropriate structures are thoughtfully designed (and redesigned) with the aim of *not destroying the self-organising properties of the system* (which may support the same intent in organic, non-linear ways that we might never fully understand). A *multi-sensory awareness* is needed to read the patterns of energy, what is working and what is getting in the way, in an ongoing process of feedback, dialogue, discernment and adaptation. This was described as an attitude of being "prepared to give something a go [with] no strong vested interest or attachment to a particular means" (D peer interview March 2011):

Leaderfulness needs focus and maybe even a kind of framework, yet still the space to be creative. Or maybe that is what is leaderfulness – the creation of the most appropriate framework for the particular situation and purpose and a readiness to completely change that framework – to see, hear, feel or even sniff out what needs to shift and what needs to stay the same. Leaderfulness is sensory! (F journal, March 2011)

Working in such *organic ways challenges our need for certainty* at every level – personally, in relationships, in structural accountabilities, in a cultural sense of knowing the tikanga of the space we are working in. "I was always wanting greater clarity and better process for planning" (D journal, March 2011). It can feel messy and out of control working in an organic way, and it is not only funders who are commonly looking for more structured accountability.

The co-inquiry group identified that communication structures and *writing things down* were important enabling structures for leading together through transition. Even if people disagree with what is written down, or agreements need to be "redrafted and re-crafted on the co-journey" (Workshop transcript, May 2011), the writing provides something to respond to, to start a conversation with, to build shared understanding and help synthesise where things are heading. Written agreements can be important in securing commitments from institutions; systematising new ways of working that go beyond dependence on the goodwill of one

person's practice. Writing things down helps others to step into new roles with some initial clarity about current knowledge. Agreed processes and timeframes for getting things done can assist commitment, short-term specific actions and a sense of achieving results. *Documented visions, values, plans, and roles* support shared intent amidst the often messy reality of implementation. However, there can be fears associated with writing things down:

A fear of being seen to criticise as well as critique (even [our]selves – this may jeopardise funding)... a fear of mentioning 'negative' experiences, even if great learning comes from these. .... the written word takes on a pervasive presence that lasts through time, [it] might come back to haunt us and may be constructed as THE truth. Scary. And rightfully so. (F journal, August 2011)

No sooner has an idea been expressed in an oral situation of meaningful dialogue, and it will keep moving, developing, reshaping into a new form. Writing things down can be helpful as long as we hold these documents lightly when new directions need to emerge.

*Negotiated, temporary structures* appear to provide some necessary boundaries and constraints to keep a system from fragmenting. For example, communication and information sharing structures seem to take on increased importance at times of greater complexity, and support increased interdependence from neighbour interactions. Shared quality information provides "a basis for efficient co-creation! ... For me, conversations feel so much easier when there is a clear shared basis for discussion. [I'm] realising that documentation is so much more important when the team is virtual" (C journal, March 2011). Such information, together with timely, responsive communication systems, provides a basis for learning from past history, building common understanding of the present, and a clear basis for renegotiating what is needed for the next steps.

While agreed structures do not take away the complexity or the need for active *ongoing construction of ways of working*, they do provide a focal point for communication in the present:

All of us have said [there] was the need for some kind of framework but creating an enabling space ... curiosity/creativity space ... I find that quite difficult ... Very loose structure can be very disarming, really uncomfortable particularly in times of change. Transition is really hard, really uncomfortable and if everything is moving around you, it's like being in a tornado ... it's really hard to get your bearings and having some sort of structure to hang on to [can help]. For me I create tasks. That's how I manage my space and I notice that around me too." (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

A gentle balance of structure, perceived worth and self-determination ... it has been an individually negotiated structure without tight timeframes to develop it within. This has fostered spaces for conversations that have been purposeful, and these conversations have thrown up almost every blockage possible, only to (eventually) have these dissolved as the conversation continues. The ... structure was simply provided with a few very brief instructions and clarifications. People have added and subtracted at will. (F journal. August 2011)

At the heart of building enabling structures is the Inspiring Communities group focus on *creating space and opportunities for leadership learning* – at a local neighbourhood level, sharing learning stories between different communities, and building learning spaces for themselves as a team. This was similar to the Unitec students' identified need for reflective learning spaces and leadership learning practice opportunities in their organisations:

Interesting to reflect on what has built leaderfulness for us – won't be the same for others necessarily – but it wasn't about 'services to fix the problem' – none of us have been to a course but a lot of this is our own internal work – we have watched, observed and learned from others. There's an interesting professionalisation of 'interventions'... [It's more about] cultivating the ability to think and learn for ourselves not to just be spoon fed. It's also about linking to practice – something has unleashed our desire to get involved, we have taken the opportunities, learned from practice, then these are augmented by the 'outside' learning. Does the 'in practice' stuff need to come first or at least alongside? And connect with the self-knowledge? If we deny/block opportunities or people can't see the practice opportunities, then this is part of what Inspiring Communities is offering – helping people see the 'can do' opportunities to practice – e.g. Neighbours Day actions are within your power plus creating the conditions that make it acceptable to be doing this – you are not doing this on your own. You're not silly, we're all scared, and there are no rules ... Let's go do it! (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

This is a conundrum/contradiction because I find myself working to establish more structure! When it was too loose the learning didn't make it to the top of the list enough. Structuring it into the year seems to be a way to make it happen, otherwise it competes with tasks and they seem to take priority ... I will have to talk about this need for structure AND for loose structure. (F journal, April 2011)

The same need for structures, yet with porous, shifting boundaries was seen at another level in the cooperation, alliances, partnerships and interdependencies between organisations in the CLD space. *Working beyond organisational boundaries* broke down organisational silos and challenged entrenched thought patterns. "Enabling governance ... let people working in the Trust hold hands with all sorts of unlikely partners ... to do stuff" (C peer interview March 2011). Constellation governance structures enabled a range of groups to come together in loose structures which may have been convened by one key anchor organisation but "wasn't owned by one ... [or just] driven by one [group]" (D peer interview March 2011):

So the motivation to do it was about civil society. It was about ... health and well-being ... and engagement ... the willingness to help others ... bring their visions into being ... as long as it's consistent with the kaupapa [of their organisation]. So, always going back to that kaupapa ... And they use their influence to ... advocate ... to coordinate others to advocate. They umbrella and hosted other organisations or networks ... in the absence of somewhere obvious to do collaborative stuff. So that ... openness to play a wider role. (C peer interview March 2011)

The underlying strength of the structural dimension was the attention to creating *appropriate 'how' processes and structures* on an ongoing basis *to support 'what' practical action was needed on the ground* to enable progress towards the vision. It was a case of creating 'it' and doing 'it' at the same time:

There is a real hunger for mechanisms to allow people to come together ...Yet if you have a structure that's fixed, you're never gonna grow leadership ... if you've made up all the answers before you've even gone and involved people in what it is that you're trying to do. So, if you're actually creating the structure to be responsive, you're doing that at the same time ... People will buy in ... seeing is believing ... if they see things happening, and it's a good thing to be involved with. So you actually have to do the doing ... to achieve your vision at the same time that you're trying to create the structure to support your vision. (Workshop transcript, March 2011)

Complexity thinking comes with a whole new lexicon, including 'clockware' and 'swarmware'. They are useful terms to sum up the movement between fixed structures and organic ways of working in this structural dimension:

"Clockware" is a term, coined by Kevin Kelly, that describes the management processes we all know that involve operating the core production processes of the organization in a manner that is rational, planned, standardized, repeatable, controlled and measured. In contrast, Kelly's term "swarmware" refers to management processes that explore new possibilities through experimentation, trials, autonomy, freedom, intuition and working at the edge of knowledge and experience. Good-enough vision, minimum specifications and metaphor are examples of swarmware ... The idea is to say just enough to paint a picture or describe the absolute boundaries, and then let the people in the CAS become active in trying whatever they think might work. (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 5)

Both swarmware and clockware have an appropriate time, place and space, as the findings illustrate. The Unitec graduates' stories were certainly not limiting civil society organizational leaders to clockware when they emphasized leaders' competencies to translate vision into effective practical action with appropriate knowledge, systems and processes. They identified swarmware competencies as also important, in emphasising their creative analytical ability to work with change, complexity and innovation.

### ***Bricolage towards a new understanding of leadership***

Bricolage work is like quilt making: working with patchwork pieces, patterns and layers of understanding to create a new whole. The data, especially from the second research cycle, highlighted an ongoing interplay between and within the four quadrants of leadership, with many interwoven threads between the personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions. The findings mirrored my own experience of initiating leaderful research: the movement between the inner and the outer focus; between leading out front and leading together; between structure and emergent, flexible mess; between scarcity and resourcefulness with the time, knowledge and energy we had. The challenge was then to find language and visual forms to express these emerging understandings.

'Quadrant' doesn't seem a very useful word for dimensions that are each so layered, interconnected, and mirrored at different scales of complex adaptive systems. Quadrant implies something more structured, linear and two-dimensional. Yet these four quadrants (or dimensions) do provide a temporary, loosely woven structure for sense-making about civil

society leadership and what supports its emergence. While there are some conceptual differences in that these quadrants of change were used to describe dimensions of community transformation, there were some strong parallels with the four themes of NFP organisational leadership that emerged from the first research cycle. The second research cycle illuminates more of the sense of movement, contradictions and polarities that keep this whole layered system learning.

A significant turning point in our co-inquiry at our September workshop, towards the end of our 'quilting' exercise, was when we had distilled enabling and blocking conditions for leaderful practice (Appendix Twelve A). We stood back and realised that many of the factors we named as blocks, could, in fact, all be part of a system in constant movement:

I guess ... I am increasingly aware of the system or the cycle within which everything fits because ... it wasn't so much the blocks and the enablers but it's the 'what am I noticing about others or what am I noticing about myself' and being aware of how these things are not separate and not categorised in that way. That helped me to understand the things that worked well or didn't as part of a system – how they feed off one other." (Workshop transcript, September 2011)

In complexity thinking terms, I came to understand that the factors that we identified as the blocks or shadow sides or power dimensions could be some of the negative feedback boundaries at the edge of chaos that provide potential tipping points for transformation (or in complexity thinking language, 'phase transition'), when the shadow side is in great tension with its 'other' side. This challenges us as leaders not to smooth over such tensions, nor to treat these shadows as problematic. Complexity thinking argues that innovation and transformation tends to emerge at that boundary at the edge of chaos, where dark and light meet (Kaplan, 2002), just when we think the system is fragmenting:

CAS thrive in an area of bounded instability on the border or edge of chaos. In this region, there is not enough stability to have repetition or prediction, but not enough instability to create anarchy or to disperse the system. Life for a CAS is a dance on the border between death by equilibrium or death by dissipation. In organizational settings, this is a region of highly creative energy. (Zimmerman et al., 2002)

I came to see that shadows are a natural part of the whole system – in a Jungian psychology sense of a 'dark side' to each enabling leadership property – and was challenged to rethink some of the equilibrium-seeking assumptions behind my leadership practice.

Any complex adaptive system is co-evolving as different agents in the system (people, organisations, ideas, communities, power structures) bump into each other, clash, stretch, flex and find new shape. In this sense, the power dimensions we had made explicit in our September co-inquiry workshop, were part of the energy and movement of the interwoven whole, not a separate dimension. It is in our noticing, in our curiosity, in our sense-making,

that we discern what might be useful qualities, competencies and practices that tip this fluid situation from dissipation towards temporary equilibrium, from anarchy to possibility. Shadow sides become blocks when stuck in equilibrium or dissipation, but can also be an enabling constraint, a tipping point that turns the system towards new possibility. With our reflective awareness, our noticing, and our response, we sow the seeds of possibility that small changes might achieve bigger outcomes in the movement of this system:

Blockers and enablers are reflections of each other – with ‘it depends’ in the middle. The paradoxes are not really contradictory but part of a bigger flow that is more like my koru design [of the research process] – with the enablers moving in one direction and the blockers appearing to move things back – but within the system lies the power and the energy to turn around the blocks to achieve an even wider circle of influence and momentum. (MJM journal, October 2011)

As I worked on the meta-analysis of the data from both research cycles, I came to see a pattern of civil society leadership that works with perceived blocking, shadow sides *and* enabling, life-giving properties of systems. ‘And-and’ thinking holds the paradox of potentially contradictory leadership responses, to discern where, how and if to intervene, to enable the life-giving energy in the system to thrive.

Complexity thinking and collaborative inquiry allowed me to move beyond essentialist ideas of leadership, beyond competencies, qualities and behaviours of individuals. My emergent understanding was about *civil society leadership as a complex, interactive, learning dynamic, moving between polarities of potentially contradictory responses, to enable adaptive actions.*

This emerging definition of civil society leadership builds on the idea of leadership as learning. Leadership can be exercised from whatever role we are in as teachers, researchers, managers, workers, residents, community activists, whanau, parents, children, seniors, neighbours, policy makers or entrepreneurs. Leadership as learning supports agile, thoughtful adaptation to the complexity of each situation and its emergent possibilities. Leadership as learning is a process of curious inquiry into the unknown, individually and collectively. Leaders bring a ‘not-knower’ mind, discerning emergent pathways and accepting what is unknowable.

A key enabling condition which supports feedback and discernment within CAS was identified as the capability to facilitate inquiry within ourselves and with others. Inquiry within and with others are strange attractors that support movement between the polarities of enabling leadership properties. Noticing and sense-making competencies are needed individually and collectively to observe, listen, sense and read patterns, discern possibilities and design practical support structures and to initiate action.



Within the limitations of a linear diagram, Table 2 summarises the emerging understanding of civil society leadership as learning. The framework grew from the particular co-inquiry findings (presented in Appendix Twelve A) as I identified patterns, paradoxes and themes around the personal, relational, cultural and structural dimensions emerging from across both action research cycles. The power dimension was woven in and through the properties and the shadow sides that tip the whole system towards disequilibrium. Yet the framework is more than a thematic analysis. It is indicative of a complexity thinking analysis of the data. The visual whole signals a learning orientation towards exploring polarities for their potential for movement, trans-level learning and counter-intuitive possibility.

Properties that enable leadership are presented in Table 2 as polarities in movement, like the ebb and flow of a tide. The diagram shows how there is warmth, energy and disturbance between the polarities (shown in red, yellow, green and blue respectively for each of the four threads). The qualities, competencies and practices in the centre (shown in grey) represent energy sources, strange attractors that provide dynamic, positive feedback keeping the system in movement rather than equilibrium. The outer, darker columns represent shadow sides of the leadership properties and the negative feedback boundaries at the edge of chaos in the system. Diversity pushes the system towards the edge of chaos, as different agents in the system (people, organisations, ideas, communities, power structures) bump into each other, clash, stretch, flex and find new shape. This energy tips at times into the shadow of darkness. Yet, innovation and transformation also tend to spark at the edge of chaos, when shadow sides collide in conflict, tension or disturbance and provide a tipping point for emergence of new learning. While these threads are presented in a static, linear form, the image is intended to be more three-dimensional with the potential for shadow sides at either extreme to connect in crashing waves, not simply a gentle ebb and flow of the tide between the polarities.

Chapter Five identifies the essential role of collaborative inquiry relationships in fostering this learning, and in fostering leadership learning more broadly. Chapter Six provides more explanation about how embracing complexity thinking enabled the emergence of this way of seeing civil society leadership. .

**Table 2: Leadership properties as polarities in movement**

	Shadow side of each leadership property if taken to an extreme	Enabling leadership properties as polarities in movement	Enabling Qualities, Competencies, Practices that support coherence and discernment in the ongoing movement between polarities	Enabling leadership properties as polarities in movement	Shadow side of each leadership property if taken to an extreme
<b>PERSONAL THREADS</b>	Ego, dominance, self-interest	Sense of self: my gifts, identity, strengths, values....	Curiosity Astute noticing Sense Making Humility Reflective practice Self assessment tools Generosity Giving and receiving Ethical standards and decision making tools Mentors and mentoring Feedback and feed-forward Experience of being trusted Taking responsibility Finding courage Sense of possibility Living with uncertainty Reframing e.g. constructive discomfort	Vulnerable self: my doubts, my questions, the 'not-knower' mindset	Fear, pessimism, paralysis, depression
	Individualism	Self awareness Self care Self leadership Self-directed learning driver		Awareness of and genuine interest in others Motivation to serve others Motivation to learn from others	Over responsibility Burnout
	Rigidity Status quo Top-down control	Fears Doubts Questioning		Letting go Risk taking Creativity	Recklessness Anything goes
<b>RELATIONAL THREADS</b>	I am right and you are wrong Underlying differences masked and not even surfaced	My voice counts Opportunities to participate 'Fierce' conversations when necessary	Empathy Engagement Valuing diversity Search for common ground/shared intent 'And-and' thinking Offering leadership opportunities & accepting invitations Alignment of self-motivation and shared intent Can do attitude Confidence to 'just do it' – in a thoughtful way Walking alongside Leaving gaps, spaces, silence Distributed intelligence Intentional peer learning and feedback mechanisms Facilitation competencies	Listening to others' voices and views Standing in others' shoes Discussing and understanding different worldviews	Overwhelmed by too many possibilities leading to inertia Too polite and not addressing real issues
	One person 'band' My vision 'follow me' Controlling Doing 'for' Professional as expert directing the show	I can make things happen...see my part in this Leading out front – stepping up, catalyst, thought leader, facilitator, convenor Personal vision and commitment		We can make things happen...agreed shared purpose Leading together - doing 'with' – stepping back, enabling group critique, decentralised control Building shared vision ownership and commitment, one conversation at a time	In group/out group Them and us thinking 'They' need to change not 'us' 'Group think' without enough diversity of perspectives

CULTURAL THREADS	Pressure to replicate one size fits all 'answers' Time pressure for tangible results Undue focus on what gets done over how Overwhelmed by enormity of the issues Disabling, disempowering, deprivation Victim mentality Entitlement mentality Not spotting where the energy is	Clear 'WHY' shared intent and ability to translate into 'WHAT' next steps 'Bite sized', do-able actions, assignments Tangible success to motivate ongoing engagement Scarcity Deficits, gaps as opportunities for others to contribute	Clarity around 'WHO' needs to be around the table New voices at the table, incl those with lived experience Time spent building trust relationships with internal and external stakeholders from the outset Understanding social, political and cultural context Facilitation And-and thinking Seeing the bigger picture Resourcefulness to work with 'what is' Skills to identify and mobilise resources Seizing and creating opportunities Responsibility New language reflecting new ways of seeing Celebrations, rituals, symbols Intrinsic rewards Framing, reframing, translating across cultures	'Doing with' culture around the 'HOW' process and values Active citizenship opportunities for leadership learning as an outcome in itself Model the leadership you want to grow in the wider context Abundance Unleashing individual, group and community strengths, assets, resources	Process bogged down in revisiting issues with no doable actions surfacing Leaderful 'how' culture not articulated or understood Reality check on readiness to mobilise and use these strengths Abdication of responsibility for creating enabling policy or learning environment for local action Discourses around individualism, materialism, professionalism
	Silos Inflexible either/or thinking One size fits all Seeing what is written down as fixed Overly focused on the 'what' Overly teacher -led learning out of tune with student needs	Formal structured plans, tasks, roles, responsibilities, agreements, timeframes, parameters Writing things down Structured teaching content, assignment tasks and deadlines Clockware	Ability to design, source, use and oversee appropriate management systems Able to set up and facilitate safe group learning environment and effective learning processes Hold structures lightly as temporary Adaptability/agility Multi- sensory awareness Reading patterns Able to use, critique and apply diverse range of analytical frameworks for sense-making Redundancy, overlap of some commonalities Real time feedback loops Collective reflective practice and dialogue Discernment of what is needed in each practice context Awareness of existing power structures Shared power 'with' intent Noticing who is excluded Inclusive facilitated processes for cross- generational, cross-cultural, cross- sector conversations Catalysts/Brokers/translators	Emergent, flexible, multiple pathways Organic ways of working with strong focus on process, dialogue, relationship Self-organising, intentional peer learning mechanisms Swarmware	Too messy Completely out of control Person dependent Tyranny of structurelessness Overly focused on the 'how' Overly student-led learning to exclusion of other expertise and frameworks
STRUCTURAL THREADS	Labels Patch protection Power 'over' Powerlessness mindset Bullying	Competition Negotiation Independence Separate identity, especially for marginalised groups Confidence to say 'no'		Cooperation Alliances, partnerships beyond organisational boundaries Interdependence Collective shared identity New voices at the table	Unsanctioned, hidden power dynamics Unresolved, destructive conflicts Fears about own organisation's branding, other organisations' positioning and power



## Chapter Five:

### Collaborative Inquiry Relationships

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The previous chapter developed an understanding of civil society leadership as an ongoing, interactive, learning dynamic. This chapter identifies research findings about how to foster such leadership learning, in particular through collaborative inquiry relationships. Researchers are typically encouraged to use tightly defined research questions and methods to foster learning; teachers are encouraged to define clear graduate competency profiles and curriculum frameworks to foster learning; and civil society capacity-building is encouraged with self-assessment tools and external audits to foster learning. These learning approaches put an emphasis on particular content to support learning. The problem is that in dynamic, diverse, complex contexts, our questions change, our methods have to adapt, and new capabilities and knowledge need to grow in response to what is rapidly emerging. Content can become quickly out-dated. This research highlights the importance of attention to process-oriented interactions to foster learning amidst complexity. These interactions need to support ongoing inquiry about what is unfolding and critique of content for its relevance. Leadership learning in both action research contexts emerged as much, if not more, from the process of *how* researchers, teachers and civil society leaders enabled collaborative inquiry relationships, as from any content focus on *what* was being researched, taught or initiated.

In analysing the process of this research and its findings, a pattern emerged of a learning dynamic around three core interactions: with peer learners, with new thinking, and with practice contexts. This dynamic was supporting my individual learning as researcher, enabling our collaborative research processes and encouraging leadership learning for others. When we understand this pattern, in whatever our role, we can be more intentional in noticing what might need adjustment, to maximize any system's capacity for learning at any point in time. This chapter presents the evidence for these three core interactions, and particular paradoxes and tensions that arise within each. Amidst these tensions, researchers, teachers and civil society leaders discern *how* they will exercise leadership to keep the system learning.

The first element of this learning dynamic is the building of collaborative relationships as peer learners. Peer learners need to clarify what kind of partnership is intended. Power dynamics can shift when peer learners inquire together, rather than acting as teachers, researchers or leaders with assumed power and expertise over others. The distributed intelligence of a whole peer learning group can be accessed and support decentralised leadership. Learning can be enhanced when collaborative relationships are mirrored across every level of a learning

system, not just with the immediately apparent 'learners'. However, facilitators of collaborative inquiry learning have to manage some paradoxes when working as both co-researchers and co-participants in peer learning relationships. Facilitators need to offer some of the critical distance of an outsider and have some of the in-depth context knowledge of an insider. They need to honour their own voice as a participant and facilitate everyone else's voices to be heard.

The second element of this learning dynamic requires stretching thinking and experience beyond the known. A culture of curiosity and openness towards the known and the unknown can be supported by collaborative inquiry relationships. There is a role for teachers, researchers and civil society leaders in creating disturbance around established assumptions, worldviews, theories, identities and habits of practice. However, as facilitators of learning, there are paradoxes to manage around creating a safe enough environment and at the same time stretching people's thinking and experience to foster higher-level learning. Fear and resistance can block higher-level learning if there is not an established culture of trust. There are also tensions around how much to challenge assumptions and expose inquiry to new outside perspectives when trying to honour and enable a group's own wisdom to emerge from reflecting on their own practice.

The third element of this learning dynamic is grounding in practice context, values and outcomes. Leadership learning is highly contextual. Different learning processes support reflection on practice experience to inform future praxis outcomes. The developmental process of inquiry throughout this research was anchored in clear shared values and intent about social change outcomes. Yet it was essential that inquiry questions and outcomes were not too narrowly defined to enable emergent learning beyond what was initially anticipated. There was a necessary paradox between loose and tight structures to support on-going cycles of intentional reflective practice. Structured processes, skills and commitment were needed, individually and collectively: for noticing, questioning, dialogue, sense-making and application of learning. Yet our processes also needed to keep adapting to context constraints and opportunities as the inquiry progressed.

The following sections elaborate on each of these three core interactions, how they have fostered leadership learning, and the paradoxes in enabling collaborative inquiry relationships.

### ***Growing collaborative peer learning relationships***

Collaborative peer relationships are essential to fostering leadership learning, in research, teaching and civil society practice contexts. Yet the formation and form of such relationships will be strongly influenced by each context. I embarked on this research with a deep

commitment to growing collaborative peer learning relationships. Yet my research intent to enable participants to be co-researchers, shaping the research at every stage, played out quite differently in each research cycle. I came to understand through the research cycles how different leadership approaches and the particular constraints of each context influenced how my values were to be expressed in practice. This next section identifies learning from contrasting expressions of collaborative peer learning relationships in the two different research contexts and the Unitec teaching and learning context. The paradoxes of fostering collaborative peer learning that both researchers and students have to grapple with as insider researchers are discussed.

I invested time and energy in growing collaborative co-research engagement from the outset of both research cycles. I already had relationships with team members in both contexts, which provided important pre-existing trust to draw on. Each team had strong shared values and a culture of collaborative leadership. However, we still needed to define new roles and relationships for these particular inquiries. In the first research cycle, I needed to establish a new role as 'insider' researcher with Unitec colleagues and graduates, to support an appropriate level of engagement and distance for the research process. In the second research cycle, I was more of an 'outsider' researcher who gradually acquired 'insider' roles within the Inspiring Communities team as the relationships strengthened.

In the first cycle, I consulted my Unitec colleagues about 'my' proposed research design and sought their cooperation and collaboration. In the second cycle, I worked in partnership from the outset with the Inspiring Communities team to co-design 'our' research focus and the process of how we would work together as co-researchers. When we invested time in developing an explicit, in-depth, co-research relationship agreement (Appendix Nine) in the second cycle, we built stronger shared ownership of the research from the outset than in the first cycle, where we gave much briefer attention to these issues. The relationship agreement provided a sound basis for co-research design, implementation and later review of whether our shared intent was working in practice.

Co-research is more than informed consent to what one researcher has designed if the full potential for co-creation is to be realised. Relationship investment and review is an on-going, dynamic, learning process, building clear understanding of the level of partnership or collaboration for every stage of the research process. Questions need to be explored, such as: Are the co-researchers users of one researcher's outputs or co-creators of the outputs themselves? What does 'co' look like at every stage of the process? How does 'co' need to

adapt to on-going context influences and constraints on all involved? How will any particular co-inquiry enhance long term learning capability as new cycles of action and reflection unfold?

The Unitec team were more end users of the research outputs which supported later co-creation of programme redesign. I was 'contracted' to provide a resource for programme redesign thinking. Collaborative inquiry relationships grew through engagement with the research outputs (emailed and then discussed at Unitec team meetings) rather than the co-creation of the outputs themselves. My research leadership style in this first research cycle was consultative, seeking to make the research useful and relevant for those involved, but not as fully participatory as in the second cycle. We were doing developmental evaluation research 'with each other' around a shared purpose for direct mutual benefit. The results were actively used by the Unitec team, so this was not extractive research 'on' a group of people, solely for my own research purposes. There is evidence that the research papers, providing exposure to new thinking from the literature and graduate interviews, supported Unitec team members to surface their own tacit knowledge, perspectives and critiques:

I think [the paper] you have prepared is an excellent start to a much needed debate [around the following points I agree and disagree with]. (Team member, email, March 2009)

I like what I read and you articulate well what are the core values of the GDIP [and here are my ideas about what are really important elements in the new programme design] ... (Team member, email, March 2009)

Thanks for this document. It is an interesting read. I particularly liked the perspective that was discussed on leadership in the sector and how leadership is defined, valued and grown ... the feedback on the tutors and techniques of teaching was also interesting ... the focus on peer mentoring is a strong theme ... [here are my reflections on this graduate's feedback and further thoughts it evoked for me]. (Team member, email, July 2009)

Collaborative engagement as peer learners was a central principle and practice throughout the second research cycle as we co-created research design and outputs. We shaped the research together at every stage, while accepting that we would not all play the same roles. We trusted each other to make decisions or take a lead in writing a first draft of any written agenda, template, meeting record or report, knowing that anyone could contribute to build on these ideas as works in progress. Different individual and collective processes (the written word, metaphors, stories, diagrams, dialogue, interviews and deliberative, thoughtful silence) catered for different forms of expression that would reduce the risk of anyone being silenced. Everyone had the confidence and the means to have a voice through different modes of data collection, critique, analysis and writing. This input through different methods also served to triangulate the data. Our shared perception of reciprocity was possibly the litmus test of our co-inquiry intent to share power as co-researchers. In our final debriefing (October 2011 workshop notes), we each acknowledged that we had worried about whether we had given



enough. To me, this is a strong indicator that this was not extractive research, but a genuinely collaborative research effort.

In terms of a continuum of engagement (D. Craig & Courtney, 2004), I consider that the Unitec research was done in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration around a shared purpose, but not in the full partnership more evident in the Inspiring Communities co-inquiry. There were a number of co-research aspects that Heron (1996) would expect in an intentionally structured cooperative inquiry that were not present in the Unitec research. Yet, such a full partnership would not have been feasible in the circumstances, which were highly constrained by tight timeframes, geographic distance, participant availability and institutional power structures. However, collaborative inquiry *did* occur in a more organic form, with a variety of formal and informal research initiatives feeding into programme redesign, concurrently and sequentially. It was as though the instinctive, values-based response of this team was to draw on our individual and collective capabilities, including research, to support our collective democratic engagement in an imposed change process that often felt chaotic, disempowering and complex to navigate. At many levels, the research process supported democratic engagement and voice, for myself, the team and graduates, through the feedback of research findings for immediate use. Yet I was left questioning how to further support the potential for leadership learning through different collaborative research approaches.

It would be easy to essentialise the second research cycle as 'best practice' collaborative inquiry as a fuller partnership, but that is not my learning. Rather, my understanding grew that collaborative peer learning values will constantly play out in a diversity of practices, structured and organic, in response to context constraints. For example, in each research site there were different power dynamics embedded in the wider organisational culture which affected the collaborative culture of the teams involved and the outcomes expected. The Unitec team is part of a large tertiary education institution. A level of decentralised leadership allowed different team members to take initiative around different aspects of the programme redesign process, but final responsibility for programme design decisions still lay with authorities further up the hierarchy to whom the team was accountable. The Inspiring Communities leadership team is accountable to a Charitable Trust Governance Board. This small, cohesive team operated with a culture of strongly decentralised leadership and collaborative peer learning amongst the team and with its Board, well before the co-inquiry began. Members could self-organise around collaborative inquiry with minimal imposed constraints from the Board, yet were just as time-poor as the Unitec team. My role as initiator of the action research cycles was to reflect on what research approaches would best facilitate collaborative

inquiry and to keep adapting research processes to what I was noticing about the wider research contexts.

## **Peer learning relationships at every level of the system**

Just as collaborative peer learning relationships supported learning in the research context, the research findings indicate similar outcomes in some leadership teaching and learning environments. While the Unitec graduates were most specific about the power of learning with their peers in the classroom, their feedback highlighted the importance of the peer learning pattern being mirrored in other layers of interaction in wider systems. Student-to-tutor, tutor-to-tutor, student-to-organisation, Unitec-to-organisation, student-to-other sector leaders interactions were seen as important to maximise the feedback needed to keep this whole system learning. The Inspiring Communities' leadership team were actively involved in fostering peer learning relationships between different community-led development contexts. With local, regional, national and international linkages, they supported peer learning relationships across traditional sector boundaries and power structures. In committing to the co-inquiry, the Inspiring Communities team recognised that they also needed their own peer learning. This section elaborates how the Unitec graduates argued for peer learning to be embedded in multiple levels of the system in order to best foster leadership learning. It was outside the scope of the research design to collect equivalent data from those involved with Inspiring Communities.

The Unitec graduates identified that they learned as much, if not more, about leadership from the programme culture of *how* they were taught as they did from the content of *what* was taught. Graduates strongly affirmed the collaborative Unitec programme culture of interaction and feedback, from peers, tutors and organisational stakeholders, as an enabling environment that supported their confidence, credibility and identity-building as leaders. They felt that the learning environment experience encouraged their leadership through the challenges of organisational change. The various layers of student, tutor and organisational collaborative learning helped build a critical mass of allies over time, to trigger significant transformation in their workplace contexts in many instances:

When I started [the programme] we had what I would describe as quite a dysfunctional governance structure ... and having the graduate diploma ... really lift[ed] me out of what was happening in the organisation and lift[ed] me up ... I think it was a combination of my drive ... to change this organisation ... and then having that NFP programme to provide me with the guidance I guess in terms of being able to lead that change ... I mean it was still hard work and it might have still happened but just having the validation ... and the support. I had the support of one or two Governance ... most of them didn't really know themselves about what should be happening ... I think probably some managers in some NFPs would find that really difficult and would probably just leave and I think that's what people do ... It was really, really hard at that time. Just knowing that I've got to keep going, it's what drives you actually but the graduate

diploma's there to test theories, test my thinking, because quite often people challenged me ... I initiated the conversations, but it wasn't until [a Board member of the organisation] was doing the course ... that it actually started to happen. So as a manager I can only do so much. (Pat, April 2009 interview)

Graduates conveyed that their leadership learning on the programme was supported by loosely, yet intentionally, structured neighbour interactions: with peers, with new ideas and within practice contexts. Early investment in building collaborative relationships shaped the learning environment, setting clear programme culture expectations. Structured inquiry processes and tasks, written resources and assessment criteria provided rich, quality feedback as students explored different concepts and skills to apply in their practice. This was more than a loose networking interaction. It had an intentional peer learning focus. It was a site of intense leadership learning within a wider complex system of leadership learning interactions that students engaged with outside the programme, in their families, organisations, communities and networks.

### **Student-student peer learning**

Graduates appreciated the rich collaborative learning not only with tutors but also with their fellow students:

The way the programme was taught was very interactive and participants working in groups with each other. I think the learning was very, very rich amongst your peers, actually you were learning off each other a lot of the time. I found that very, very valuable. The way the assignments had you working in your organisation, so it was so relevant to what you were grappling with at that moment ... Those books of readings were fantastic ... They were something you could keep referring onto after you'd finished the programme. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Graduates experienced learning on the Unitec programme as very different from the kind of interaction they had in previous university study or schooling. There was a level of "validation that comes from that whole learning from peers ... how well are we doing within this sector or not?" (Pat, April 2009 interview). "There was an excellent understanding of what helps people to learn ... and I learnt what helps learners learn" (Don, April 2009 interview). Graduates highlighted important ways in which tutors exercised leadership in creating the environment for high quality interaction, peer learning and feedback.

### **Student-tutor peer learning**

What graduates experienced was quite different from traditional teaching roles. It was neither autocratic nor teacher-centred – nor laissez-faire – nor completely decentralised, self-organising student-centred leadership. Rather, at its best, the leadership style moved between clear facilitation roles for the teacher, self-organising student learning and collaborative student – tutor peer learning.

The strong emphasis on peer interaction shifts the power dynamic from the tutor as expert towards “strongly drawing on the student expertise in the room” (Ann, April 2009 interview). Graduates felt this was a really important principle to be consistent about, “allowing the shared experiences to contribute to the learning and teaching and doing that in a really authentic way ... allowing that time for those contributions” (Pat, April 2009 interview), and supporting this with a wide variety of creative, structured peer learning processes. This creates two-way, reciprocal, tutor-student relationships more as peer learners than as teacher transmitting knowledge, as well expressed in the Māori concept of ako (Penetito, 2012). In terms of the continuum of engagement (D. Craig & Courtney, 2004), it may not be possible to call this a full partnership, given the power imbalances embedded in the tutor’s assessment role, but such peer learning intent is a significant shift from teacher-centred pedagogy. A collaborative peer learning culture requires decentralised leadership from the tutor to allow things to emerge from the flow of interaction, not just “that kind of chalk and talk and then throwing in some kind of practical exercise” (Ann, April 2009 interview) teaching approach which comes from a more top-down leadership style.

### **Tutor-tutor peer learning**

Some graduates questioned whether there were enough intentional tutor-to-tutor peer learning structures within the programme to ensure the curriculum was kept fresh, up to date and cohesive. Graduates welcomed the way the tutors had their own subject specialisation and the culture of each tutor having a clear sense of how their course fitted within the wider programme. A clearer structure was suggested of subject matter experts within the programme team sharing that knowledge with other tutors:

[Each] person who is keeping abreast of their particular topic area and bringing the others up to speed. I think that it’s unrealistic to expect that people that are...in part time work, are going to be keeping up with the latest developments in all of the areas. (Ann, April 2009 interview)

My own experience reinforces this challenge of enabling tutor-tutor interaction within a geographically spread, mostly part-time workforce, working within a culture of tight budget and time constraints. The Unitec teaching team values the rich resource of each other’s wisdom whenever there are opportunities to engage. Team teaching situations in the Pacific or Māori noho marae programmes provide opportunities for tutor-tutor learning apart from our annual team gathering. Intentionally structured face-to-face interaction is such a clearly valuable part of the students’ learning. More attention to such structures for tutors is likely a key precondition for the long-term sustainability of this programme as an effective learning system.

## **Unitec-student-organisation learning**

Interaction with the students' own practice setting was seen as a vital precondition for students' learning. The assignments and classroom conversations were primary vehicles for this, though these strategies rely on a level of self-organising on the students' part and opportunities within their organisation to follow through ideas with action. Opportunities within the practice setting for exercising leadership were seen as essential to sustain learning motivation and outcomes. Opening doors and minds for change was not always within the students' or tutors' sphere of influence:

I can see doing the graduate diploma to be one of the most frustrating experiences if you were in an organisation such as my previous employer ... [Students] will be wondering why they are bothering to actually go and do this learning and to raise things that one, they'll be afraid to say them, challenging the status quo, and two, nothing that they do is likely is to make a skerrick of difference in the positions that they sit in in the organisation. I was a senior manager in that organisation and I left because it was too hard to make a difference. (Ann, April 2009 interview)

Traditional tertiary education institutional relationships are with individual students, focused on their individual development. The graduates challenged the Unitec team to consider how tutors and/or the wider Unitec programme leadership could engage more with the students' employers, to support more organisational application and buy-in. If the programme intent is more than individual student development, then the learning relationship interactions need to be structured within a wider system perspective.

What worked well for some graduates was to explicitly negotiate the assignment focus to meet Unitec, student and organisational needs. As students, they took the assignment framework provided by the tutor into a conversation with their line manager, CEO or board to identify potential areas of focus for organisational improvement and/or personal leadership development. Support at the CEO and board level was a significant factor in all cases for graduates' ability to apply the learning:

I mean for the Trust it must have been fantastic ... here's somebody that's getting these great ideas and it's based on theory and they wanna implement it... I think it would have been a really valuable thing for them. I didn't really have too many obstacles in my way. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Where this alignment of senior organisational leadership and student learning was present, there was a supportive momentum for organisational change. This momentum was amplified when more than one person from the organisation became engaged in the programme: "It gives us a common framework, it gives us a common language" (Ann, April 2009 interview) that supports more shared leadership involvement in strategic review and direction setting.

One strategy suggested to leverage stronger organisational buy-in was to build more two-way collaborative learning interactions between the student and organisational stakeholders into

programme assignments. This could be as simple as asking students to develop a dialogue with a key stakeholder in their organisation's leadership structure and/or asking this stakeholder to actually critique their assignment:

How much richer it would be if part of the process was that before I actually put the assignment in they gave their critique to me ... and then you're peers. And it's a two-way thing, 'cause then the organisation's going to get more out of it than just this person they're paying for. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Graduates also recommended the benefits of a more direct collaborative learning relationship between Unitec and the students' organisations. For example, a regular invitation could be made to contribute to Unitec programme reviews, giving feedback on programme impact or improvements. Overall, graduate feedback highlighted an important dimension of collaborative interaction with employers that could be as rich as the tutor-student and student-student reciprocal learning, with some minor adjustments to current practice.

### **Student collaborative learning through community relationships**

Beyond students' own organisations, graduates felt more emphasis was needed on students' ability to build collaborative relationships to impact community development, social policy and innovation. This was seen as a key dimension of what made leading in the NFP context distinctive:

[What] I've found is really, really important is to connect with other organisations or other leaders...I really didn't learn enough about community development. And I am still trying to learn more ... What is it, what does it look like? How do we engage in it, how do we engage others in it, so we're not isolated in doing it, because that's not community development, when you just do your own thing. I guess some of it you'd get in a social work degree, but I think that was a gap for me, community development ... and how as leaders in organisations, we need to influence Government policy, so how is it formed, how do we take part in it? (Jan, April 2009 interview)

One graduate argued for deepening such interactions through more use of structured two-way collaborative mentoring:

Maybe there would be some way of building partnerships, between a not-for-profit, and either a businessman or a leader in the public sector, pairing those people up, so that they learn from each other. I'm not just thinking in terms of meeting a nice businessman who is going to help with funding ... [rather] that ability to mentor ... could be extremely valuable to the not-for-profit sector, and actually valuable to the enterprise as well. (Val, May 2009 interview)

Thus, the research feedback builds from the significance of collaborative peer learning in the classroom to considerations for enhancing intentional collaborative peer learning structures at other levels of this leadership learning system. It highlights some challenges for students in establishing collaborative peer learning relationships to support their leadership learning. In one sense, students are becoming insider researchers within their own organisations. They are subtly and at times more explicitly shifting roles towards being a participant observer and

inquiring researcher. In the process, they are socially constructing the leadership capacity of this whole system when the learning environment enables new connections across roles, hierarchies and boundaries that may have previously limited some of their personal leadership potential. Some of the paradoxes of being an insider researcher are explored next, from my own experiences in the research process. Collaborative peer learning requires all involved to manage the duality of being both participant and researcher.

### **The paradoxes of insider co-research**

I found there were inherent paradoxes in enabling a self-organising, collaborative culture of inquiry. Everyone, as co-researchers and co-participants, needed to continually shift between distance and immersion, between facilitation and participation. Insider co-researchers bring context expertise, yet at the same time must ensure enough critical distance and exposure to diverse perspectives to be inquiring researchers. Outsider researchers bring critical distance and new perspectives, yet need to become insider researchers to some extent, if they are going to be co-researchers and co-participants in collaborative inquiry engaged with the research context. To manage my level of closeness and distance as initiating researcher in both action research cycles, I needed to be very aware of the associated power dynamics. Further, I had to manage a particular tension between being a facilitator of others' voices and expressing my own voice. This section discusses how these paradoxes were held in tension across the two research cycles.

Research ethics approval processes were important but not sufficient to address the power dynamics of the structures, language, identities and roles in which the participants and I were already deeply embedded. In setting up this research I was very aware of managing the power dynamics of being a past teacher of the graduate interviewees, a current colleague, and former manager within the Unitec team. Current students were explicitly excluded from the research to manage obvious conflicts of interest around teacher/student power. In both research cycles, participants were clear that their involvement was voluntary, and some chose not to join in. Care was taken to not use my authority as a Unitec teacher to access information for research purposes without explicit permission. The Inspiring Communities working agreement was important to ensure collective commitment, independent of my friendship with the Inspiring Communities founder. Yet, the graduate interviews, Unitec team and Inspiring Communities group conversations reflected our distinct as well as shared identities within various roles at deeper levels.

Cameron (2001) argues that the way we use language reflects our multiple identities and relations of domination and subordination. In subtle, spoken and unspoken ways, the

graduates tended to position me as the 'expert' on the research topic, whereas my own identity was more the 'learner researcher' interviewing respected graduates for their expert advice and experience. In contrast, within the Unitec team there were many 'experts', all keen to share their perspectives within a very short time of meeting. I struggled at times to process, let alone communicate, my own reflections and learning from the research within this Unitec team environment. In the Inspiring Communities environment there was more of a culture of 'learning together' as co-researchers, and I felt more relaxed to lead in a variety of ways, with less history of particular roles and relationships with the participants. I worked to explicitly defuse the 'researcher as expert' power dynamic throughout the research to build an authentically collaborative peer learning culture.

In hindsight, I probably underestimated the complexity of being an 'insider researcher' within the Unitec work team, especially as the immediate past programme leader. With this team, I was heavily invested in past, present and future roles and relationships. I had to let go of some of this investment to be able to challenge assumptions, raise questions and lead the research process through times when it was not a priority for the group. Team members' formal and unsolicited comments affirmed the value of the analytical research input to the programme redesign work. Yet working in isolation from the team, with rare opportunities for face-to-face discussions, made it hard to maximise the benefits of team reflection, and to interpret the silences from a busy, geographically dispersed, virtual team. Finding the right mix of distance and voice was a real challenge in terms of how to communicate with appropriate authority and respect for both the research data and also those working to make sense of the emerging analyses in practice. The fact that I felt somewhat on the periphery of the team, almost an outsider at times, was perhaps an important and necessary part of being in the role of facilitating inquiry with others.

Keeping my own level of passion alive was not always easy, yet essential to manage what Coglán and Shani (2008) describe as the organisational politics of the social system and culture that one is part of, and the duality in being both a practitioner and researcher. No-one could have anticipated the complexity of the research context in which I was faced with possible redundancy during the peak pressure time when I was writing up the Unitec research results in order to provide timely feedback for programme redesign decisions. I had to be passionate about the research and drive it, as one team member wisely reflected (October 2009 meeting notes). The team could not actively engage with it while they were busy dealing with wider strategic issues and at the same time keeping the everyday teaching and administration of the programme afloat. There was a lot of learning to live in a space of uncertainty and vulnerability, for myself and other members of the team through this period, with a clear



message from team leadership that we were to make no assumptions in the current climate. A colleague observed how our shared team commitment to our vision was what kept our team together through this time:

Why am I here on this programme? Not for the money, not for Unitec as an organisation, but because I have a passion for transforming community leaders, transforming community organisations and this is a really special team of people who share a similar vision. (April 2009 team meeting notes)

Ultimately, I believe the power and role dynamics were managed as well as possible at the time, given the context constraints. The research provided a useful focus for upholding our values and vision, while adapting to challenging environmental demands.

In the second action research cycle, power dynamics were managed with more transparency, intentionally setting up co-researcher relationships, principles and working agreements, and reviewing these. Fostering this co-researcher community was both everyone's responsibility and my specific role. Clear understandings were established in the Working Together Agreement (Appendix Nine) and confirmed as our workshop agenda planning continued. I was to hold the facilitation role, with an ongoing invitation to others to contribute on both a planned and spontaneous basis. As plans changed, the group acknowledged the importance of my "no blame, guilt free" attitude, and the open sharing around issues and solution-finding to maintain the integrity of the process (October 2011 workshop notes). I was constantly mindful of challenging my embedded assumptions about what a researcher 'ought' to be doing, especially in terms of analysing data, in order to honour our co-researcher commitment at every stage of the research process.

In this co-inquiry, I was moving from outsider researcher towards insider as the working relationship grew, whereas in the Unitec team it was almost the reverse. As an outsider with Inspiring Communities, I was less immersed in the context knowledge, language and relationships than with the Unitec team. During the co-inquiry, I took various opportunities to further immerse myself in the Inspiring Communities' world, in order to transition from outsider to co-researcher. I attended events Inspiring Communities helped organise, and took on small paid tasks and other roles beyond the co-inquiry. This felt like a stronger place from which to facilitate engagement, inquiry and learning as co-researcher and supported new understanding around the research questions for me as co-participant than if I had remained more of an outsider researcher. Yet the group felt I could have used my critical distance role more at times to challenge the co-inquiry group's thinking. This highlights the important ongoing shift in roles between being a facilitator of collaboration, a co-researcher and a vehicle for stretching understanding.

Ospina et al. (2004) observe that in seeking democratic participation, the initiating researcher can lose their own voice. I did not anticipate the extent to which I would struggle at times to find my voice and authority as a legitimate contributor to these mutual inquiries, while I was being so aware of ensuring others' voices were heard. The co-inquiry group observed this at times and openly invited my contribution. I did have less airtime in the co-inquiry workshops than others, yet I had voice through my primary facilitator role in shaping questions and processes. In the Unitec research, my voice was strengthened through written papers that added confidence and credibility to my oral contributions to team discussions. Within both research cycles there was a strong facilitative leadership role needed on my part, to maintain focus and provide practical background organising, synthesising, reading and writing. The writing process since the co-inquiry has provided an appropriate medium for me to regain more of my own voice, both in the subsequent publication (Inspiring Communities, 2013) and this thesis.

I would argue that this is an ongoing paradox inherent in the leadership role of facilitating inquiry with others: to balance attention to one's own inner voice while enabling others' voices to be heard. I have named this dynamic 'facilitating inquiry within and with others'. With inner and outward inquiry, insider researchers experience another paradox: judging the level of critical distance and close engagement needed to be effective facilitators of inquiry. These paradoxes cannot be resolved with simple rules, recipes or boundaries, but require ongoing reflexivity to keep noticing what leadership response will best foster learning in a moving system.

### ***Stretching beyond the known***

Fostering leadership learning through collaborative inquiry is not, however, all decentralised, self-organising peer interaction. The research findings suggest that a robust culture of collaborative inquiry requires stretching thinking and experience well beyond what is already known. In complexivist terms, neighbour interaction, with other people *and* with new ideas and experiences, is essential for higher order learning. Researchers, teachers and civil society leaders have a role in setting up conditions to disrupt and stretch thinking, attitudes and behaviour. In the process of stretching people, the findings reflect a paradox of safety *and* risk-taking that needs to be present, especially if we are seeking transformational, rather than simply informational, learning. That is, the learning environment needed enough safety for co-researchers to explore outside their comfort zones. This section discusses processes that support this stretch factor, drawing on evidence from the research processes and findings.

A range of individual, paired and collective processes (Appendices Two, Eight, Ten and Eleven) supported reflection on practice and questioning of assumptions in this research. Yet the interactive methods (e.g., interviews, workshop exercises and dialogue) worked better than participants' thinking and reflecting alone (e.g., journaling, responding individually to draft reports). Individual reflective practice was necessary, and sometimes a vulnerable place of self-doubt, but not sufficient in this research to support the emergence of new learning. Those involved struggled to make time for individual reflective practice when other commitments always seemed more important. They were more motivated around collaborative reflective practice. Dialogue and spaces to think together were essential for sense-making of collective practice insights. Exposure to literature review and stakeholder feedback provided useful external perspectives to further stretch thinking and question assumptions.

### **Questioning assumptions and emergent findings**

Both research cycles tried to make explicit some of the underlying assumptions that guided the work of the groups and individual members. Questioning of taken-for-granted 'truth' and developing new insights and language were encouraged. Critique of emergent findings was an iterative process. Discussions about each group's 'Theory of Change', and structured interview, journal and workshop questions, aimed to make assumptions explicit. Established positions and perspectives were challenged through exposure to other perspectives from the research data, team dialogue, and literature reviews provided. For example, whereas Raelin's (2003) concept of leaderful practice emphasises leading together, the co-inquiry group acknowledged the place of other leadership styles also needed in different community-led development (CLD) situations. Debate and decisions on the Unitec programme redesign involved some major letting go of past practice, to bring a more leadership development focus into a management programme. The Inspiring Communities group discussed the need to find different language to express the nuances of shifts in their thinking about leadership, volunteering and active citizenship. This section identifies how our values and processes supported a questioning culture, and some of the risks we had to manage in our search to name and enlarge a cultural discourse about our practice.

It was important to ensure a level of critical thinking in both research cycles, to manage the real risk of unconscious collective collusion to maintain established habits, views and systems. This was a particular risk due to close collaborative team and researcher relationships.

The Unitec programme content and culture was strong on values and ethics, critical thinking and reflective practice. This shared team understanding laid the foundation for the team's agreement on the need to walk the talk of what we teach, through engaging in our own

learning organisation processes. It would have been simpler to do a 'cut and paste' job to revise the Unitec programme into a 15 credit structure, and avoid fundamental questioning of programme design assumptions. The team included founding members and other long-serving staff like myself, and the vast majority of stakeholder feedback was highly positive. Further, the programme's profile and reputation were strong across the NFP sector in NZ and the South West Pacific. As the team tended to always work at or beyond its capacity, it would have been easy to justify a simple shortcut route to programme redesign. But our clarity of values and culture signalled the need to stretch ourselves beyond such shortcuts. The team agreed to spend time surfacing assumptions to articulate a Theory of Change (Appendix One) and to engage with the research outputs of literature review and graduate feedback to inform redesign decisions (Appendix Four).

Similarly, Inspiring Communities had strong values and culture around learning from practice and wanted to walk the talk of the kind of learning they were encouraging in others. Yet with close group working relationships, there was a risk of not critiquing assumptions or considering alternative perspectives. Therefore, conscious attention was paid to articulating underlying beliefs and assumptions in the structure of the journals (e.g., asking people to comment on what perspective, beliefs, values, assumptions, and ways of seeing the world they bring to the research question), the workshop formats (e.g., unpacking our different perspectives on what civil society is), and the overall culture of inquiry. There was an important role for individual reflection which also supported independent thinking in between collective thinking spaces and active critique of any frameworks introduced. We were conscious of not limiting ourselves to the range of perspectives in the room, and in the last workshop we invited two additional participants to the core co-inquiry group: the Board Chair (who had briefly participated in an earlier workshop) and the newly appointed development manager. Both brought new perspectives and questions and added to understanding of what we had co-created.

Conversation about language, worldviews and underlying assumptions was an explicit agenda thread throughout the Inspiring Communities co-inquiry: for example, questioning whether civil society organisational and community leadership differed; commenting when the conversation got into unduly binary thinking; and robustly debating the organisational role boundaries of Inspiring Communities within the CLD space. This happened both during conversations and in later responses to the documented record. While the co-inquiry chose to work with the four quadrants of change, we explicitly welcomed other frameworks that helped us understand complexity (for example, P. Block, 2008; Cabaj, 2011; Gunderson & Holling, 2002). Therefore, while there was an unavoidable subjectivity, it was not uncritical. We were

not so much challenging dominant mores of civil society leadership as working to enlarge a cultural discourse.

Feedback at the debriefing on the research process (October 2011 workshop notes) was that the group would have welcomed more of my input on contrasting frameworks and theories. There was no in-depth literature review provided for this group at the outset of the co-inquiry as there had been in the first research cycle. Such input was in part constrained by the time available to group members and myself, and most importantly, by our agreed purpose to shape our own theory-building from our practice. I have since come to question whether my understanding of the Cooperative Inquiry's emphasis (Heron, 1996) on the dialogic inquiry process, and the grounding of all propositional knowledge in practice contexts, limited my sense of freedom to introduce contrasting ideas to disturb established patterns and stretch the group's thinking further.

Overall, there was probably more of a research culture of discussion and consensus than robust challenging of each group's dominant discourse or assumptions. Both research cycles supported the naming of some shifts in dominant cultural discourse that the co-researchers were part of creating. One of the paradoxes of having a close, trusting team relationship is how this makes possible respect for both difference and shared understanding. If I had been stronger in my own voice or clearer in my own mind about specific perceptions I wanted to challenge, I could have played a stronger role in supporting further critique. However, the inquiry did invite a useful questioning of practice that was fundamental to the research process and outcomes.

Through the research process, I was certainly stretching my own thinking and assumptions about research analysis and critique as I engaged with different collaborative peer learning approaches. It became clear that there was significant added value from the collaborative inquiry spaces for deepening learning from the research data, in comparison to the more traditional approach of the researcher interpreting data and reporting findings to participants as a courtesy or to check for accuracy. I invited critique by returning any written analysis to those who provided the data (graduate interviewees, Inspiring Communities team members) for comment. Group discussion followed (with the Unitec and Inspiring Communities teams respectively) for further interpretation, critique and application to practice. The graduate interviewees had no collaborative group conversation for this further stage of interpretation. I noticed that these graduates offered only affirmation of the analysis and no additional development of thinking in their email responses. In contrast, the Unitec and Inspiring Communities teams continued to engage with the research analysis and its application as

ongoing living data for their reflective practice well beyond the official 'completion' of each respective research cycle. The themes identified were contested, deepened, held lightly, not as any ultimate truth, yet still useful for supporting everyday practice.

The later stages of the interpretative process moved beyond particular categories or models to explore the relationship between some of the different themes emerging: paradoxes, qualities and patterns pointing towards an understanding of a larger whole, not simply the parts. The draft research findings became further data, showing the movement and development of thinking over time, as further cycles of inquiry gathered, discussed and interpreted more data. Categorising data into themes had served a useful practical and analytical purpose of naming elements of phenomena under investigation, and providing timely, practical feedback for groups that needed to translate knowledge-building into action. But for the purpose of further theorising about the research questions, it was necessary to move from the parts back to sense-making and questioning the wider patterns emerging. Thus, as researcher I kept stretching my own thinking about the research process, analysis and emergent findings, well outside my own comfort zone, within the safety of a student supervision structure that was supporting my exploration.

### **Increasing the 'stretch factor' for students**

Fostering leadership learning with students similarly requires intentional design of a 'stretch factor' to engage learners with new thinking and experiences. Unitec programme graduates welcomed the collaborative inquiry climate of engagement with different ideas, theories, models, worldviews, professions, sectors and disciplines, and encouraged even more strengthening of this 'stretch factor' in the programme redesign. They emphasised the vital contribution of tutors in stretching students' thinking and experience through being exposed to a broad range of ideas, questions and readings, including local Aotearoa, Māori and Pacific perspectives. They felt that the programme "wasn't over laden with theory ... but theory was very thoughtfully interwoven" (Don, April 2009 interview) to support practice review and innovation. Graduates saw the tutors' role as not simply presenting concepts, theories and research, but also creating the analytical space for students to pull ideas apart and critique them. Building lateral, critical and creative thinking competencies was seen as a really important part of the classroom interaction. The tutors were creating a learning environment where ideas, worldviews, theories and models could bump into each other to support the growth of students' analytical sense-making competencies. Thus, as students and tutors tailor the curriculum content to their own questions, "each course [becomes] unique" (Ann, April 2009 interview). Something akin to the tuakana/teina (older/younger sibling mentoring) relationship discussed by Penetito (2012) emerges as another form of collaborative inquiry

relationship, with the tutor as facilitator, mentor and challenger of new thinking. This section discusses some of the ways graduates felt this stretch factor could be further enabled in programme design.

Graduates did not encourage specialisation, in the sense of providing students with in-depth expertise in any one tool or approach. Rather, these graduates preferred exposure to a range of higher level analytical, lateral and creative thinking frameworks. These frameworks supported their capacity to self-manage their own critiques of any number of practice tools or approaches beyond the classroom. Specialisation of staff was supported only to the extent that this provided a diversity of people, ideas and processes within this learning system. This diversity of thinking-frameworks needs to be held in creative tension by a relentless shared commitment to critique everything for relevance for students' own values, context and identity. Learning needs to continue to cycle between theory and praxis. Theories and frameworks support students to find language to confidently name workplace practice. Classroom discussions support students to question assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours highlighted by the frameworks introduced. Assignments bring theory and practice together as students design innovative responses for their practice.

Unitec graduates were clear that the programme structure should stretch students outside their comfort zones in ways that they would not necessarily have chosen for themselves if all learning were student self-directed. This message helped build the case for a programme design shift to mainly compulsory courses. Many students were yet to engage with levels of leadership such as governance, social policy advocacy and community development. They would not necessarily choose to stretch to these levels of leadership learning without some course requirements to engage with new concepts and experiences:

Interestingly enough those papers that I dreaded the most ... governance and fundraising ... turned out to be those that really I got the most out of. I think it was about recognising for myself that the role that I was in at the time was not the be all and end all and then ... searching for those gems that ... were contributing to a bigger picture. (Bob, April 2009 interview)

I didn't really know they were gaps at the time [social policy, collaborative work, community development], but it's as I've come more into probably a senior leadership role ... rather than just my management role, that it's broadened my need to know these things ... (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Everybody was very respectful of people's presentations, and I think that getting people to do a presentation is good ... Well OK it might have been really scary for most people, but you ... acquire the skill from doing it. (Val, May 2009 interview)

While this stretch factor is deliberately designed into programme and course structure, other areas of discomfort, disturbance and tension arise simply from the everyday complexity of

human dynamics within and beyond the classroom. For example, external organisational, stakeholder and life demands on student time and energy create an inevitable challenge in meeting assignment deadlines and achieving full course attendance. Stakeholder buy-in to change strategies will rarely be achieved seamlessly. The diversity of the student and tutor learning community inside the classroom similarly creates its own tensions so there is always “the need to be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances” (Bob, April 2009 interview).

The learning environment can support an adaptive mindset towards such challenges, to see them as part of the curriculum rather than a distraction. Graduates acknowledged that their personal attitude towards everyday classroom tensions was important. “You know if you go in there with an open mind and be ready to learn and not sit and judge people ...[or] you could sit there and complain about everything if you wanted to” (Pat, April 2009 interview). They saw everyday lived experiences in the classroom (for example, a small group work session that has not gone well, personal responses to different teaching styles, their fellow students’ needs that are pushing the boundaries) as opportunities for tutors and students learning together with an adaptive mindset.

Complexity thinking frames these unanticipated classroom moments not as distractions but as a feedback resource for generating leadership learning questions: How loose or tight do we need to be on issues like assignment deadlines, programme completion, classroom groundrules? How are these enabling as well as constraining our learning? What needs to shift for now to foster learning? Facilitating learning from spontaneous moments of tension provides a clear role for tutor leadership. As complexity thinking has become more embedded as my internalised worldview, I have become more confident in bringing this attitude to my teaching practice, working with live issues as they arise in the classroom. As Ebrahim (2003) identifies, analytical and adaptive competencies are at the heart of civil society organisational capacity. These programme design features around the ‘stretch factors’ discussed, both intentional and spontaneous, support these analytical and adaptive competencies to grow. Teachers and students alike need to be open to being stretched outside their comfort zones if they are to adapt their thinking and action beyond known habits.

## **The paradox of safety and challenge**

Fostering a culture of collaborative inquiry leadership learning requires a paradoxical mix of safety and challenge. This was evident in the findings from the Unitec graduate interviews, and also from the two research cycles. An Appreciative Inquiry approach was useful in creating safety and supporting review and critique of practice. Graduates encouraged Unitec tutors to intentionally structure self-directed, challenging learning opportunities and also to establish a



safe learning environment. The co-inquiry group underlined that safety and trust were necessary to enable real growth from vulnerabilities and failures identified. This section sheds further light on how this paradox was evident in the findings and held through the research processes.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided an important strengths-based approach that supported the Unitec team's engagement with the research. AI minimised any sense of insecurity that the research was there to expose performance problems or programme deficits. In complexivist terms, AI framing and language functioned as a 'strange attractor', a positive energy source bringing some coherence to a space that felt messy and out of control. At a deeper level, AI was a positive way of exploring 'what gives life' to a system (Gamble, 2006) at a time when our team was struggling to keep our passion alive. As my mentor so wisely pointed out to me in June 2009, asking the question 'what gives life?' is quite a different yardstick than 'what am I passionate about?', especially when morale is low. In times of turbulence, we are more likely to feel passionate about what is at risk of being lost and seek safety in the known. A 'what gives life?' line of questioning sheds light on past and present patterns that may signal a pathway towards renewed passion and next steps into unknown territory.

An AI approach supported the Unitec team's openness to new possibilities. It also helped elicit graduates' reflections on programme strengths and their ideas about future potential, which were fed back to the team as an energy source to ground conversations about new programme design. The clear, positive and constructive feedback from the graduate interviewees achieved the purpose of providing a resource for facilitating learning and adaptation, without being too critical or undermining. In complexity thinking terms, AI supported some neighbour interaction for higher order thinking and learning, helping our team as learners connect with graduates as other learners in a wider system. Yet one participant felt somewhat inhibited from identifying learning from situations that did not go well when AI questions were used in the Inspiring Communities co-inquiry. This is an important risk to manage: discomfort versus rich learning in examining factors contributing towards apparent failures or challenges.

Graduates identified the importance of tutors in setting up a safe learning environment where people feel able to contribute, and the time spent investing in clear shared understandings: "While there is a voluntary principle of what we are sharing, there is still an expectation that people will contribute" (Ann, April 2009 interview). While the physical environment was seen as important, the social, emotional and cultural environment was considered even more fundamental for effective learning:

I think the learning environment needs to feel really safe ... because people ... need to be open to sharing things, so having real good processes [is essential] ... Like creating that container for learning ... making sure that there is an opportunity to open with karakia and close in the same way ... I think that people in the community expect that now, and I think if it's not there it's really noticeable. It doesn't have to be a Māori opening, just some opportunity to open and close ... I think most of the [courses] do this too, but not all. And it's just creating that learning agreement ... so that everyone [is clear and reinforces them] ... it's just really annoying when people's mobile phones go off... (Pat, April 2009 interview)

The Management Practicum course was offered as a good example of strong investment at the outset in setting up a safe learning environment, through providing in-depth skills development around a structured peer mentoring model. These structures then supported the groups to largely self-manage, with a small amount of teaching input, assessment tasks and tutor feedback. The graduates identified this course as one of the most decentralised in terms of tutor input and one of the most powerful structures for their learning and reflective practice to “really unpack the issues that you’re dealing with ... [and where] we all learnt and grew off each other so much it was incredible” (Jan, April 2009 interview). This course was described by another graduate as the turning point in her realising, three years into the programme, that she was not just getting a qualification but a whole growth in her personal leadership style and development. Another graduate felt her richest growth opportunity on the programme came when her group had to work with some complex group dynamics and apply a level of “self-direction versus being led” (Ann, April 2009 interview). Management practicum embodied the properties of a self-organising learning system, with all the challenges of learning to lead others, rather than simply observing tutors as leadership role models or listening to lectures.

Such self-directed peer mentoring is not a learning process that suits everyone, and needs a level of shared wisdom and voluntary participation to grow its potential. Deeper learning connections in these groups were observed when participants had a broader base of theory and tools to draw on later in the programme. The evidence suggested self-directed peer mentoring could be empowering but does not always support good learning outcomes. As one graduate acknowledged, “a lot of that peer mentoring is very, very good, but I find a lot of it is hot air. It sucks up a hell of a lot of time” (Don, April 2009 interview). One of the paradoxes of the research outcomes is that this particularly successful course was removed from the revised programme design after much rigorous team debate. Peer mentoring training is now provided for everyone and the operation of peer mentoring groups occurs on a voluntary basis.

There is important, challenging student learning from the complexity of actually implementing change in the real world. Most course assignments require design of an organisational improvement strategy, but the graduates felt the real challenge came in the elective self-directed learning courses where they actually had to implement that change:

I wouldn't have given away Special Project ... [that course] was hugely, hugely influential ... I did a work book around a strategy for being a community-building organisation and we're now well down that road ... it's possibly a foundation document in terms of we're looking at producing material for a publication ourselves ... I see it as having had a big impact on my own and the organisation's thinking. It had a fundamental impact in the way I looked at the sector and other things as well. The person that I based a lot of that around ... I even set him up as my mentor ... that move from just a name and a person and a particular lot of ideas to having had a relationship, it's now a huge explosion. So in a sense I suppose it was quite formative for me and it's had probably a bigger influence in the community too. (Don, April 2009 interview)

While Don spoke positively here about this experience, he also said that he would have liked more Unitec support through the process which was quite challenging for him. Therein lies the paradox from a teaching and learning perspective – the necessary safety and support for learning *and* the necessary stretch to lead one's own learning, let alone organisational and community change.

The co-inquiry group also identified the safety and challenge paradox in building a high trust, safe space for inquiry, and expressed this as the need to enable people to bring their whole selves to the conversation. The Working Together Agreement acknowledged:

... that our greatest learning and most creative transformations or innovations can come from our times of greatest vulnerability or apparent 'failure'. We want to support each other in such times, if they arise, to feel safe to move into and through that learning edge. (Appendix Nine, 3.6)

We had numerous conversations about particular vulnerabilities, without defensiveness in talking about how things really were, as we noticed our own leadership practice. We started to name this vulnerability as part of our emergent theory of key personal qualities of leaderfulness:

The inward [leadership] journey combines a strange mix of the humble, curious, nervous, self-doubting, vulnerable 'not-knower' with a strong sense of [one's] own truth, self-worth, strengths, calling, identity: 'I can'. (September 2011 workshop summary notes)

These qualities in the participants themselves, and the naming of these as positive leadership qualities, supported a non-defensive culture of questioning and articulating our own 'truth'. Thus, both sides of the paradox are held as true in our lived experience, and indeed necessary for effective leadership. From a complexivist perspective, 'and-and' thinking encourages us to consider the power of embracing both sides of the paradox in leadership learning design. Safety emerges from our sense of our own strengths, identity and trust in others around us, which encourages us to be curious, vulnerable learners willing to be stretched beyond what we already know. Our processes and structures need to support both safety and challenge.

## ***Practice context grounding and outcomes***

Leadership learning needs to be grounded in the context of practice, which provides both a resource for reflection and a focus for outcomes. Intentional co-inquiry in this study has supported theorising from practice to inform future praxis. The Unitec graduates, the Unitec team and the Inspiring Communities team involved in this research all reported that collaborative inquiry learning provided coherence amidst unstable, complex and changing contexts. Any specific co-inquiry is one contribution amidst multiple, semi-independent learning systems bumping into each other, with the potential to support the emergence of some higher order learning. Time invested in learning relationships supports deeper context knowledge for any outsider researcher, and allows all co-researchers to access the distributed intelligence of the group. This section discusses how these interactions, supported by a mix of loose and tight co-inquiry structures, enabled the surfacing and exploration of context-relevant inquiry questions and the emergence of social change outcomes in this research.

The research cycles, processes and parameters were designed to support all participants to articulate tacit knowledge from their life experience and practice to co-create emergent theory in order to inform new directions. As a newer Unitec team member commented, the research process and products gave her “a sense of the theory as a non-founding member of the team” (Team meeting notes, October 2009). For the first time she had seen the theory underpinning the programme articulated, and she could see more clearly the links with her own role. There was a sense of collective ownership of theory generated from collaborative dialogue rather than from any one individual’s wisdom alone. One of the founding Unitec team members affirmed the validity of how the documentation arising had captured their perception of the programme foundations as “90 to 110% accurate” (Team meeting notes, October 2009). Shared ownership was also evident in the way I was regarded in the Unitec team as the “guardian” (Team member comment, April 2012), but not the owner, of the programme design frameworks we co-created with the support of this research.

The Inspiring Communities co-inquiry similarly supported collaborative analysis and ownership of emergent theory which was then translated into practice outcomes. Each co-researcher reviewed core themes emerging across the data gathered in the previous six months for the September 2011 workshop ‘quilt exercise’ analysis. This helped everyone to identify the seeds of our own theory emerging over time: “Looking back at some of this stuff ... I think I am having an AHA moment today but I actually said that in February ... so tracking that stuff reinforces that it is not just an AHA but an important theme that has been there for a long time” (Workshop transcript, September 2011). The collective wisdom generated was evidenced in the co-authorship of the “Learning by Doing” publication (Inspiring Communities,

2013) and further translated into practice outcomes in training workshops now underway based on this resource.

## **Enabling constraints**

This section discusses how practice contexts both enable and impose significant constraints on collaborative inquiry as a mechanism for leadership learning. Collaborative inquiry learning can be time consuming and cyclical, and implementing change may not be straightforward, yet each condition that constrains collaborative inquiry processes or outcomes could also be understood as in some way enabling leadership learning.

The practice contexts imposed significant time constraints that impacted the theory-building space for both research cycles. Deadlines for Unitec programme redesign decisions supported research momentum and purpose and yet limited the time available for research collaboration. Inspiring Communities invested more time in collaborative co-inquiry than the Unitec team, yet still needed to limit the time they could commit. I faced my own time constraints in regard to literature review, fieldwork and writing, and the co-inquiry group would have welcomed more of my input of external knowledge or frameworks to challenge, compare and contrast with the thinking emerging (October 2011 workshop summary notes). A longer co-inquiry period would have allowed more experimentation and divergence before we needed to start converging towards emergent themes shaping our theories from our practice. Time constraints are not necessarily problematic so long as learning and theory-building continue to be an ongoing cyclical process. While collaborative inquiry may be constrained and challenged by time, these constraints are also an impetus for focus on findings and outcomes, even if these are only emergent propositions requiring further exploration.

Graduates identified some enabling constraints that gave coherence to anchor their learning in their everyday practice: structured learning cycles, feedback processes, and self-directed learning competencies. The structured cycles of block courses, and the month gap in between them, created space for ongoing action, reflection, sense-making and feedback. The assignment tasks and deadlines were not always welcome limitations on students' freedom, yet these structures helped shape the learning cycles and were important for integrating the learning into real-world practice:

I mean the process itself ... doing some learning and then you need to go away and think about how the organisation needs to be improved, that relates to the learning, starting to work out ... what you will do, and then developing a plan ... is essentially what the assignment work is. Then putting that plan in front of your peers and then implement it. I guess it gives you the confidence that you can. I guess my style is like the emergent theory ... that evolves as you go, and at least there was a process. You learn about it, think, plan it, get some feedback and then apply it, it's a really good model ... knowing that what we were doing is backed up by some

good sound research ... gave it some real credibility, not just something that [I'd] thought about. (Pat, April 2009 interview)

Some felt that more constraints on students' communication of their findings could be built into tasks throughout the programme to enhance praxis outcomes. For example, having students present their assignments to their organisation, Anne felt, would encourage students to think about whom they needed to convince. She felt students needed to understand their part in that communication and be pushed into actually having the brave conversations:

If you had to write your assignment and it was going to be read by the CEO of your organisation, one of the pluses to that I believe is that it makes you more thoughtful about how you're gonna present stuff. You know if you identify the gaps ... how are you going to support it with relevant literature and what are you going to suggest? 'Cause it's that capacity versus deficit thinking ... becoming a capacity-focused person ... it's not 'let's go throw ourselves off a bridge because our organisation sucks', it's 'okay our organisation has got some major challenges'... we might have to dig real deep to find it but there is always capacity... so then you're not preparing your assignment highlighting the deficits and supporting that with literature, but you're actually looking at capacity in a constructive positive way and that's way more achievable for people at all levels to grow stuff that's already working...

I know [fellow student] was scared to take her culture and values assignment to [her CEO, to share] what she'd said about the organisation but she did. And what that being scared about taking it there, what that did, was it made her look carefully at how she wrote it. One of the things she identified was not her strengths was how she expressed things. So one of the things I did was I critiqued it before she submitted it ... But it was a really brave thing that she did when she took that to [her boss and he] took on board things from her ... But if you required people to, you'd still get people that wouldn't but you would get a hell of a lot more people that would ... And maybe it's about naming and acknowledging that change is hard ... there are lots of challenges to us but also catalysts for change. Rather than just relying on people knowing how to do it, actually make it part of the assignment ... developing them to present this to [their] organisation. What are the things that you need to consider, who are the allies? ... (Ann, April 2009 interview )

This mirrors the graduates' message about the '*how*' being just as important as '*what*' is taught inside the classroom, and extends that same principle outside the classroom. Or in other words, it puts the emphasis on the adaptive competencies as being just as important as the analytical competencies. Written assessments included a small weighting for students' reflective practice, as evidenced in their learning journals and stakeholder buy-in strategies. However, the majority of the marks were usually allocated for the analytical content of the rationale and substance of an organisational improvement plan. That is, there was a strong focus on giving credit for the analysis justifying the '*what*' (change strategy proposal) compared to the '*how*' (putting the ideas into practice). Yet, when organisations engage with new ideas, an important adaptive leadership stretch happens. While the previous programme structure had specific self-directed learning courses that provided this stretch, the new programme structure needed to reorient all assignment tasks to put more focus on implementation. This would result in a better balance between the '*what*' and the '*how*' (that

is, the content and the process), so that both analytical and adaptive competencies could develop.

Fundamental to the effectiveness of any leadership learning and feedback mechanisms is the reflective practice capability of the individual receiving the feedback. Pat felt it was all about “a learning attitude rather than a complaining one” (Interview, April 2009). Bob felt he developed his “identity as a reflective person” from the very first course and acknowledged the vulnerability of being the ‘not-knower’ inquiring learner (Interview, April 2009). Ann felt that “if there was one thing that needs to overarch the programme, it is about that willingness to learn and to seek learning opportunities in, reflective practice” (Interview, April 2009). She welcomed the “emphasis placed on learning journals and actually taking the time to reflect ... looking at what we’re doing through a learning eye rather a critical eye” (Ann, April 2009 interview). Jan reinforced this message with the sense that learning “gives the edge to successful leadership” (Interview, May 2009). Structures therefore need to support the capability of the individual and their organisation, to facilitate reflective inquiry, individually and collectively. Maintaining the ability to customise learning for every student’s own leadership learning and their own organisation context was seen as essential:

It’s almost certainly not a one size fits all approach, it’s almost individualised ... for a particular person and a particular organisation, and that’s very unusual, especially in the tertiary sector ... Learning how it works for your organisation is actually a very important part of that learning, it reinforces what you already know, and it also makes you think about what you are doing, and where you are doing it, and how you are doing it, and who with, and why (Val, May 2009 interview).

Collaborative inquiry design therefore needs structures that support ongoing learning cycles, with built in feedback mechanisms. The people involved need reflective inquiry competencies, attitudes and behaviours. Practice context constraints such as time, deadlines and resistance to change can be reframed for their potential for enabling shared leadership learning and social change outcomes.

## **Social change outcomes from the research**

Heron (1996) and the wider field of praxis-related researchers (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007) would argue that the ultimate validity of collaborative inquiry lies in evidence of-changes in people’s thinking, focus, energy or actions. This thesis argues that collaborative inquiry is one means of fostering leadership learning, which is a clear social change outcome. Yet there is a significant difference between the social change outcomes I anticipated from this research and those realised. Hence, an important insight to arise from collaborative inquiry has been to have shared intent to achieve positive social outcomes without fixed ideas about what, or how tangible, these would be.

This section discusses evidence that this collaborative inquiry contributed to social change outcomes at personal, team, and programme levels, and was a catalyst for change. There are not only tangible outcomes but also less tangible ones that may be even more significant in the longer term. I argue that a lasting, significant impact of the research is its contribution towards individual and collective cultures of reflective practice and collaborative inquiry that enable continuing leadership learning in complex contexts.

At a personal level, I can certainly say that the research has changed my way of seeing the world, and strengthened reflective practice, my skills in facilitating inquiry, and my confidence in articulating tacit and research knowledge. This learning impacts my capability to be a more effective agent of social change, especially with my deeper understanding of complexity thinking as a way of seeing, thinking and acting. For example, I see students reframing their way of thinking about complexities and paradoxes and where to put their energy. One student has established a business arm to their organisation, building on concepts of facilitated inquiry for organisational learning and innovation, which she explored in a self-directed learning course with me. My interactions now bring different framing, different questions and a different kind of leadership to everyday conversations, whether as a teacher, volunteer, mentor, facilitator, family member or friend. What I am noticing is how often people comment on the new insights, perspectives or questions they are taking away from these interactions. I will never fully know what arises from the momentum this creates in their lives, yet I am left with the satisfaction of having planted a seed of possibility and a little more confidence for others to step into the unknown.

At a programme level, the research has directly influenced the Unitec programme redesign, which will in turn influence hundreds of community organisation managers' and leaders' education in civil society leadership in the years to come. The research evidence indicates that a programme culture of collaborative inquiry learning has supported graduates' leadership formation, contributed to their perceived legitimacy as managers and leaders, and the social construction of their identity as leaders. Boards trusted their advice in a different way when it was based on a course assignment requiring analytical thinking. The qualification provided external validation and accreditation. Boards and managers became more confident in these students' competencies and offered new leadership opportunities and roles. This research added to past evidence (Malcolm, 2006; Unitec, 2008) of a wide range of practical proposals for organisational development that graduates have implemented. At a more transformative level, graduates commented on how the programme helped them make sense of and engage with the NFP sector, and develop a shared language to articulate their values and identity within this environment:



A lot of things that I'd never thought about before suddenly become very obvious why those things were important. Just as an example, when I first went to the Culture and Values [course], I thought, oh yeah I know what culture is, I know what values are, and [yet] I'd never even thought about it in *that* way. And from there on I was very open to all of the learning, and I love the way that the programme was actually specifically aimed at the NFP sector ... a lot of things suddenly started to make sense. (Val, May 2009 interview)

The inquiry contributed towards Inspiring Communities articulating their knowledge more clearly to wider audiences in their '*Learning by Doing*' publication (Inspiring Communities, 2013). Training workshops underway from 2013, and inquiry tools under development, will continue to draw on and disseminate this learning more widely.

This research has stimulated both Unitec and Inspiring Communities to embed more reflective practice into team culture. While still fragile in the face of many pressures, this could be one of the most important outcomes. The Unitec team affirmed the usefulness of the research in providing some wider context analysis that supported the collective development of the new programme framework (Team meeting notes, October 2009). They identified the stimulating impact on their own engagement with this strategic work: "It [the action research input] makes the important urgent, forces us to reflect and more likely to evaluate..." (Team meeting notes, October 2009). By late 2010, another action research project was underway (Penetito, 2012), and other review work continues in response to internal and external stakeholder initiatives and requirements.

Inspiring Communities team members identified ongoing reflective practice as a "luxurious necessity" (October 2011 workshop summary notes). While it felt counter-intuitive to increase investment in reflection at a time when immediate work pressures were most intense, collaborative inquiry was experienced as an effective structure through a significant leadership transition. In articulating their shared understandings of leadership, they were naming team culture at a time when new people were about to join and potentially renegotiate norms. The inquiry was also important in terms of doing what they expected of others (e.g. reflective learning calls, writing learning stories, sharing learning in forums). This experience challenged some rethinking of past practice and added some new strategies around how they facilitate learning with others (October 2011 workshop summary notes).

In both the Unitec and Inspiring Communities contexts, the research also played a role in validating and valuing their work by studying it through the lens of the PhD process. This academic association may offer a different kind of traction with their various stakeholders (October 2011 workshop notes). For example, these groups are now better placed to articulate not only their outcome-focused, Theory of Change, but also their process-focused Theory of Action, expressing key principles about *how* they work. Enhancing capability for ongoing

leadership learning amidst the complexity of these social contexts is a more significant social change outcome than I could have ever anticipated, let alone designed into the original research design.

### **The paradox of loose and tight structures**

In this study, loosely structured spaces for noticing, listening, dialogue, and engaging with new ideas as well as more tightly structured inquiry processes have fostered leadership learning: surfacing meaningful research questions, tacit practice knowledge and emergent theory. Both broad and narrow research questions have served different purposes. Narrow research questions risk reducing complex phenomena to component parts without exploring patterns of inter-relationships or movement over time. Broad research questions require deep context knowledge and a capacity for multi-sensory noticing and sense-making to understand patterns, tensions and qualities of complex systems in movement. The research questions themselves change, as ongoing feedback from the co-inquiry processes keeps surfacing new learning from practice and emergent theory. This section explores how a mix of loose and tight structures have supported collaborative inquiry learning in research, teaching and learning contexts associated with this study.

Through the research cycles, I learned that narrowly defined research questions were not always useful for inquiry into complex contexts. Research questions evolved over time, through interaction within and beyond the research context. There was a time for narrowing focus and a place for broadening the framing of questions at different stages in the research. Both action research cycles required a lengthy period of incubation before meaningful questions surfaced. In both studies, I engaged with learning and exposure to new ideas beyond the immediate contexts, through courses, workshops and literature review, which supported my capability to frame practice-relevant questions, as outlined in Chapter Three.

In the first research cycle, the early focus was on narrowing the research questions to a manageable scope to support clearly defined programme redesign outcomes. Narrow definition of the questions was useful for tight timeframes and specified outcomes. In the second research cycle, broad research questions were needed to support the co-creation of emergent theory without unduly narrowing scope. New research questions arose as the co-inquiry progressed, enabling shared ownership of when, how and if it was useful to narrow or shift focus. The co-inquiry group were conscious of heading off on tangents at times, but then raised an important question: Who says they are tangents? These ‘tangents’ were recognised as important, unplanned pathways to address significant emerging questions (October 2011 workshop notes). Therein lies an important dynamic of co-researcher power-sharing: to

remain open to what might have seemed tangential to 'my' research questions to ensure that the inquiry honoured 'our' research questions. The facilitated processes needed to adapt accordingly, because amidst this more fluid, less controlled interaction, lay the potential for emergent theory.

Both inquiries required a flow between loose and tight structures to support the emergence of theory and practice-relevant knowledge. In consultation with my co-researchers, I had to manage the research process with a balance of acceptance of a level of chaos and ambiguity (that is essential for the emergence of new knowledge), alongside implementing enabling constraints and structures to support convergence and common ground. The co-inquiry group acknowledged that our plans and structures helped us manage this loose/tight flow – and also our willingness to let these plans and structures go at times (October 2011 workshop summary notes).

Early phases of both research cycles established a tight sense of shared values and intent, agreed research methods and shared understandings of core concepts and language. There was a combination of tighter, individual reflection tools (AI interviews and journal writing – see Appendices Two, Ten and Eleven) with looser interactive spaces (paired and mainly group conversation – see Appendices Eight and Eleven). Together these processes provided a multi-sensory mix of noticing and sense-making processes to support the integrity of the emergent theory from and for participants' practice. In debriefing our co-inquiry, we wondered if we could have made use of different structures to explore particular questions more deeply – through more use of one-on-one paired telephone calls, or each focusing on different aspects of the questions (October 2011 workshop summary notes). We identified success factors that helped the flow between loose and tight structures (October 2011 workshop summary notes) as: "the mix of clear and permeable boundaries, the power sharing, humour, the high trust and respect for each other and the expertise in the room." That is, an underlying clarity and commonality of shared intent, values and culture held the flexibility of structures and methods that we co-created across the inquiry to achieve our shared purposes.

### ***Emerging understandings***

This chapter has elaborated some of the findings from this study about how leadership as learning can be fostered. Three core interactions have been identified that fostered leadership as learning through collaborative inquiry relationships. Firstly, authentic peer learning relationships had to be established to enable high trust interaction at multiple levels of the learning system. Peer learning required an intentional power dynamic shift to shape mutual understanding and collaborative learning that disturbed previously assumed roles, boundaries

and hierarchies. Secondly, peer learners needed to be exposed to new thinking, stretching them into perhaps uncomfortable yet potentially rich learning experiences. Thirdly, leadership as learning needed solid grounding in practice context, values and outcomes. Collaborative inquiry relationships with those immersed in participants' practice context and beyond, supported ongoing cycles of reflective practice.

These three core interactions (with peer learners, new thinking, and practice contexts) represent an unstable triangle of factors that needed attention and adjustment to foster learning within a complex, moving system. At different times in this study, peer learning relationships were more collaborative than at others. Insider/outsider researcher roles shifted between distance and closeness in order to facilitate the research process and enable all co-researchers' voices to be heard. There were times when new thinking was intentionally stretched through literature review. At other times, the focus was on co-creating new thinking from members' own practice. Reflection-on-practice through journaling and collaborative dialogue moved towards reflection-in-practice as theories and decisions emerged to be tested back in professional settings.

The facilitating researcher, teacher or civil society leader has a central role to play in discerning what needs attention and adjustment around these three core interactions, to maximise the potential for learning in the whole system. Co-researchers learn together about what is working, what is not, and what needs to change, based on shared understanding of context, values and intent. A teacher can play a similar facilitation role, in fostering a culture of collaborative inquiry in and beyond the classroom. Collaborative leadership may similarly be enabled in CLD or NFP organisations, although the roles may be less explicitly mandated. Discernment requires awareness of paradoxes and tensions when clarifying appropriate action: Do I need to immerse myself more as an insider in this context to understand it better, or step back for a more distant view? Does the system need more safety and trust, or more stretch and disturbance, of established patterns? How loosely or tightly do I need to hold to the agreed processes and structures at this moment? These are leadership questions to work with. Appropriate responses will be discerned by facilitating inquiry within and with others to discern how, if and where anyone might intervene. Working with these paradoxes calls on the same leadership approach identified in Table 2 in the previous chapter: discernment around how to work with both sides of these paradoxes to explore the best learning outcomes, at any particular point in time.

One key message from my perspective is that in any research, teaching or civil society leadership situation there needs to be integrity of process in terms of upholding core values. Some central values have underpinned my everyday discernment around the paradoxes

identified and guided my research leadership, as first outlined at the end of Chapter Two. Values express what is most deeply important to us (Henderson et al., 2006). If action research is to be living practice, espoused values must be visible in all decisions, actions and communications. University ethics procedures systematise important checks on research behaviour yet attention to values and ethics was deeply embedded in this research long before formal ethics applications and throughout the study. A clear understanding of my own values was central, and importantly reinforced by the evolving collaborative inquiry leadership relationships in the research process. The respective values of co-researchers needed to be established through the early relationship-building phases as a basis for holding each other accountable for ethical practice. These shared understandings created a strong foundation for learning through the research process, as the meaning of these values in action emerged:

- Democratic engagement – expressed in strong investment in co-research relationships
- Theory and praxis learning – expressed in intentional inquiry cycles, spaces, structures and agreements
- Transparency of process – through ongoing attention to power dynamics
- Questioning practice – through commitment to challenge assumptions, language and actions
- Social change outcomes – expressed in clear praxis intent and results

From a complexivist perspective, collaborative inquiry can be understood as a ‘strange attractor’, an energy source that has enabled leadership as learning amidst the uncertainty of the Unitec programme and Inspiring Communities leadership change processes. Collaborative inquiry was a significant factor that allowed the energy of a system to be drawn towards order rather than chaos. It can seem counter-intuitive to invest time and energy away from the intense action demands of challenging contexts, yet this research highlights how an effective leadership response to complexity can develop through individual and collective time for reflection, learning and inquiry. A culture of collaborative inquiry has been strengthened to support leadership learning as collective work in two challenging, developmental contexts.

Fostering leadership as learning through collaborative inquiry requires at least three core interactions identified in this chapter to discern what needs attention and adaptation in the whole, moving system. The five underlying values offer guiding principles that underpinned this research, whereas these three interactions identified how the values were expressed in practice. As such, I find the three interactions are of immediate practical relevance to how I think and act as a researcher, teacher or facilitator of community leadership. I think of these three interactions as an unstable triangle that is constantly being adjusted to each specific

learning context, providing a process guide for any particular content focus. The three interactions support the potential for leadership learning as an outcome, alongside any other outcomes achieved.

Yet, as Schein (1984) identified, beneath the visible practices and values that shape *how* people think and act, cultures have underlying paradigms that further explain *why* people think and act in certain ways. In the following chapter, I identify how complexity thinking as a paradigm has supported my understanding of why a culture of collaborative inquiry is so important in supporting the emergence of civil society leadership as learning. The following chapter explores the contribution of complexity thinking in fostering, analysing and understanding both collaborative action research and leadership as a learning system in ongoing movement.

## **Chapter Six:**

### **Complexity thinking as a paradigm for leadership learning**

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Complexity thinking introduces powerful ways of fostering, analysing and understanding collaborative action research, leadership and learning. In this research, complexity thinking constructs have provided a paradigm for thinking, acting and learning. In particular, the idea of nested complex adaptive systems (CAS) has been a useful heuristic device for understanding the co-inquiry process and analysis of findings. This analysis has enabled rethinking of leadership from a CAS perspective (Chapter Four) and identified particular conditions that can foster ongoing leadership learning (Chapter Five). This chapter discusses how particular complexity thinking constructs (first introduced in Chapter Two) have supported the emergence of new understanding in this study.

The understanding of CAS as systems that learn (S. Johnson, 2001) has supported the emergence of the idea of leadership as an ongoing, interactive learning movement between various polarities. The idea of ‘polarities always in movement’ (Chapter Four) provided a way for co-inquiry participants to explore and evaluate emergent understanding, including similarities, differences and contradictions. Complexity thinking meant that any tensions could be reframed as potential energy sources rather than as problems to be resolved with a forced consensus. The leadership properties framework that emerged from this study (Table 2) provides some examples of common polarities that civil society leaders, teachers and researchers can intentionally work with in discerning how, if, where and when to intervene to support learning in any CAS. To make sense of this framework in practice requires some understanding of CAS and complexity thinking constructs.

Key characteristics of CAS include: sensitivity to initial conditions, far-from-equilibrium states, non-linear interactions, and emergent self-organising properties (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). Small changes in one part of any system can produce unexpected interactions that disturb equilibrium. Far-from-equilibrium states provide the adaptive tensions that push CAS towards new forms. New forms emerge through the information, energy and assets exchanged in local interactions as CAS self-organise. These characteristics challenge many traditional assumptions about leadership – for example, about intentionality, influence and equilibrium-seeking (Plowman & Duchon, 2008). Complexity thinking offers a rationale for holding different perspectives in dialogue, without any one perspective having to be ‘right’. ‘And-and’ thinking is

embraced, exploring multiple possibilities, rather than being locked into 'either-or' binaries. 'And-and' thinking enables understanding of leadership within CAS as partly intentional and partly self-organising – and shifts the leadership focus towards influencing conditions for self-organisation and learning to flourish.

This chapter identifies three particularly relevant conditions that civil society leaders, teachers and researchers may be able to influence to support higher-level learning: diversity and redundancy; neighbour interactions; uncertainty and coherence. Repeating patterns, propositions and strategies for leadership to influence these conditions are identified from the research evidence. Co-construction of knowledge and action through collaborative inquiry emerges as central to working with the unknown and often unknowable complexities of civil society, teaching and research contexts.

### ***Conditions supporting learning in CAS***

Different fields of complexity science put different emphases on particular conditions that support the self-organising properties of CAS for learning. For example, Johnson (2001) emphasises the importance of attention to pattern detection, negative feedback, ordered randomness and distributed intelligence. Stacey argues that CAS "are driven by three control parameters: the rate of information flow through the system, the richness of connectivity between agents in the system, and the level of diversity within and between the schemas of the agents" (1996, p.9, as cited in Horn, 2008, p. 140). Schreiber and Carley (2008) identify four organisational context characteristics that support learning and adaptation from complexity science research: a moderate level of relational coupling, requisite diversity of knowledge, appropriate network forms, and a level of status differentiation and stress. Davis and Sumara (2006) suggest that three complementary pairs of variables are particularly relevant as ones that an independent agent (e.g. a teacher, learner, leader or researcher) may be able to affect. They frame these as three complementary pairs (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 136):

- specialization—living the tension of diversity and redundancy,
- trans-level learning—enabling neighbor interactions through decentralized control, and
- enabling constraints—balancing randomness and coherence.

For the purposes of this research, Davis and Sumara's framework usefully synthesised many complexity thinking constructs for analysing and understanding enabling conditions for collaborative inquiry, for leadership and for leadership learning. The following three sections elaborate each of these themes and how they inform the research findings.



## ***Diversity and Redundancy***

CAS require a dynamic combination of internal diversity and redundancy (Davis & Sumara, 2006). CAS need diversity as a rich source of information for adaptation and sustainability (Zimmerman et al., 2002) but not so much that it tips them into complete fragmentation (Kaplan, 2002). Coherence is supported by a level of internal redundancy, used here to mean duplications or excess of aspects needed for complex co-activity (Davis & Sumara, 2006): for example, common language, shared responsibilities, agreed norms. In complicated systems, where cause and effect linkages are knowable, a high degree of specialisation with minimal redundancy is commonly appropriate, efficient and associated with rule focused, hierarchical structures. Yet in complex systems, where cause and effect linkages are unknowable or only apparent in retrospect, specialisation puts adaptability more at risk (Davis & Sumara, 2006). In complex systems there needs to be more internal redundancy, as a resource for managing volatile situations and supporting the best use of the diverse, distributed intelligence of the system for adaptation. For example, shared leadership may seem cumbersome and time-consuming but it provides a rich resource for peer learning, succession planning, values and culture transmission, innovation and adaptation in complex environments. This section explores insights from the research about how CAS learn and adapt, and how leadership as learning is supported through understanding which particular aspects of the system need to be diverse and which need a high level of redundancy.

CAS are systems that learn. They do not just survive in their current state (S. Johnson, 2001), but how do they learn and adapt? Complexity thinking identifies the subjects of learning to be interconnected CAS who as independent agents have acquired some established patterns of behaviour. Their neighbour relationships expose them to diversity across boundaries through feedback and communication mechanisms. Over time, this diversity places contradictory demands on the different agents and presents a learning challenge within these relationships (Engestrom, 2009). Learning events have to reach some kind of critical mass of disequilibrium to interrupt entrenched patterns and present viable alternatives (Davis et al., 2008). This disturbance triggers conflict and tension but also opens the possibility for change and development. In a similar way, psychological theories identify life transitions as key triggers for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009). The paradoxes, contradictions and tension points inherent within CAS – and that emerge as these systems connect with other CAS – become an energy source for learning, questioning and movement away from established norms and patterns to some new form.

The research findings identify some common patterns about aspects of internal diversity and redundancy that support leadership as learning amidst the complexity of civil society. Diversity was apparent in the range of people involved, the ideas explored and the processes used. Redundancy was apparent in shared vision, values and culture associated with a shared identity with a particular place (for community-led development) or sector (non-profit).

Analysis of the Unitec graduates' feedback highlighted the need for a diversity of people, ideas and processes within this academic leadership learning system. The diversity of student and tutor learning styles, experience, abilities, cultural identities, organisational backgrounds and geographic locations was acknowledged by graduates as challenging at times (for example, diverse academic abilities and teaching styles), but mostly was seen as an asset. Small class numbers or a high proportion of students from the same organisation could reduce the diversity of expertise, ideas, worldviews and experience. The graduates appreciated the wide variety of teaching methods and processes used to cater to a diverse range of learning styles. Specialisation was not encouraged in the sense of providing students with in-depth expertise in any one tool or approach. Rather, there was a preference for exposure to a range of analytical, lateral and creative thinking frameworks that supported students' capacity to self-manage their own critiques of any number of practice approaches beyond the classroom. Specialisation of staff was supported only to the extent it enabled a diversity of people, ideas and processes within this learning system.

The Unitec research findings suggest that a key commonality holding this diversity is the Unitec students' and tutors' NFP sector context experience which helps build shared identity, intent and culture in the learning environment. The programme entry requirements created a sector-specific learning environment, which in turn created a high level of redundancy around shared values of students and tutors alike wanting to make a difference in the world for some social, cultural, spiritual or environmental purpose. This intent underpinned motivations for being involved in the programme and students' reasons for being managers and leaders. Teaching team recruitment criteria reinforced this commonality of NFP sector experience. The quality of the tutors and their shared values were acknowledged by graduates as key factors in the programme's success. Graduates emphasised consistency around clearly articulated shared teaching philosophy, values and culture as the other key commonality holding the diversity of the programme. They highlighted important ways in which tutors exercised leadership in creating the classroom culture and assessment requirements as enabling constraints for high quality interaction, learning and feedback. An excess or redundancy of the commonalities of vision, values, culture and context was identified as the foundation for working with a diversity of people, ideas and processes, to support the graduates' leadership learning.

The findings from the Inspiring Communities research cycle mirrored a similar pattern of the important commonalities of context, intent and culture (*'where, why and how'*) holding a diversity of people, ideas and processes (*'who, what and when'*) in creative tension in community-led development (CLD). The co-inquiry conversations highlighted the essential place-based context for CLD (the *'where'*) and the important collective sense of shared purpose, vision or intent (the *'why'*). Agreed common values and culture define how people will work and learn together as active citizens (the *'how'*). Diversity of experience, worldviews and resources influence what action strategies and outcomes emerge as multiple pathways towards the vision (the *'what'*). A diversity of sectors, players and perspectives come together to make decisions or engage in local action (the *'who'*). Different players often have quite diverse assumptions about timing (the *'when'*). A sense of readiness is critical and this often needs to be adapted to the pace and terms possible for the community.

Community engagement was identified in the final Inspiring Communities co-inquiry workshop as the key intersection between these *'where, why, how, who, what and when'* factors – a kind of *'strange attractor'* running through everything as the common energy source. Neighbour interactions – of people, of new thinking, of new processes of leading together – are at the core of community engagement:

... as an input, process, outcome, indicator, impact that travels, ... [that is at the core of] active citizenship and civil society ... The *'how'* and *'what'* are not *'either-or'*, but *'both-and'*. [There is a] powerful potential when we head for the *'what'* in a different *'how'* way. (Workshop notes, October 2011)

There is potential for more transformative outcome/impact around ... *'what'* [results communities are seeking] with clarity around the process intelligence [of how they are going to work together]. This brings a broader focus on the change that is being sought [in community engagement] and shifts consumers and clients into colleagues and co-designers. (Workshop notes, October 2011)

Who needs to be around the table? Where there is little relative power around the table there is slower progress or it's harder to get traction (e.g. if there are only residents involved). It may not be someone with a lot of power [that is needed] but someone with a real understanding of different kinds of power in different settings who needs to be around the table. A key part of Inspiring Communities' core purpose is around lots of people engaged, multiple sectors, multiple contributions, shifting power dynamics of the power of the few to greater participation, greater citizen engagement to achieve the *'good society'*, doing *'with'* not *'to'*. (Workshop notes, October 2011)

This different approach to *'how'* is expressed for the co-inquiry group in the concept and practice of leaderfulness: strategic brokers building engagement, joining up a diversity of players, perspectives and pathways around a strong shared intent within a culture of optimism, that anything is possible if people work together:

[There is an] assumption that we are on the same page at least at some level. This may be a very high level but we will have some congruence somewhere and different approaches to achieving these congruent goals/aspirations are fine. (F journal, August 2011)

Many approaches are needed to weave a tapestry. Some see this as duplication. I see it as variation and that variation enables resilience, back up and even change. When given space, variations in leaderful behaviour emerge. (F journal, August 2011)

Variation and overlap of approaches and roles were seen as important to building resilience for managing uncertainty and complexity. There was a conscious choice to involve diverse perspectives and “more than one key person at every level and [have] more than one organisation involved so the mantle and vision [is] shared” (D peer interview, March 2011). That is, redundancy was intentionally increased through overlapping roles and strongly shared understandings as a necessary resource for innovation, adaptation and coherence:

In the old days if we lived off the land, every season was uncertain. You sowed crops and there were so many variables that you couldn't control, but you had a number of back-up plans ... You had a mixed farm ... different people did different things. But you also had skills that overlapped, so if someone was sick or didn't do something, the chicken still got fed or whatever. And it's kind of like we're trying to build a mixed farm again and overlap our skills ... maybe in our state of prosperity and industrialisation we are too much attached to certainty. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

Underlying these variations and diversities of people, ideas and processes are the commonalities of context, intent and culture that provide the level of redundancy needed in a system for complex co-activity. An excess of personal qualities such as humility, curiosity, generosity, hope, patience, perseverance, responsibility and goodwill, were identified in the co-inquiry as providing some of the positive feedback energy needed to hold the diversity. So, too, was an excess of strong interpersonal relational competencies to facilitate reflective inquiry and agreement around next steps – and an excess of hope, optimism and belief in people's capacity to impact change in their lives and the wider world as active citizens.

If leaders understand these patterns of internal diversity and redundancy, they can discern whether to try to influence CAS' capacity for learning and adaptation, and when to trust in its self-organisation. S. Johnson (2001) reminds us that what emerges in any CAS can go well beyond, outside of, and even be oblivious to, any notion of shared intentionality of purpose or culture. There is self-organising energy within CAS that takes on a life of its own, apart from our leadership interventions to influence outcomes or processes, diversity or redundancy.

### ***Neighbour interactions***

The nature and quality of neighbour interactions are central to what happens in any CAS. Self-organisation relies on strong circles of peer neighbour interactions, loosely connected around shared principles and properties, rather than tightly prescribed rules from above. These interactions occur across different levels of CAS – for example, across diverse individuals, social

groups and systems of knowledge – to support trans-level learning. From a complexivist perspective, learners are not only individual people or social groupings, but also “ideas, hunches, queries and other manners of representation” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 142) interacting as neighbours. At their best, neighbour interactions enable “ideas to bump into each other” (Davis et al., 2008, p. 199), with exchanges of energy, information and resources across the porous boundaries of systems. Collective knowing emerges from shared understanding between agents and different levels of the system, such that it is impossible to attribute authorship (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Emergence of collective knowing cannot be controlled by centrally prescribed processes or outcomes. Rather, the neighbour interactions within CAS rely on decentralised control to build a powerful source of distributed intelligence for survival and adaptation (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; S. Johnson, 2001). Decentralised control enables agents in CAS to interact as peer learners through an intermingling of ideas that cultivate shared intentions, interpretations and applications.

A pattern of three core properties of quality neighbour interactions emerged from the research, as discussed in Chapter Five: authentic peer learning relationships at multiple levels of the learning system; exposure to new thinking and experience beyond what was already known; and solid grounding in practice context, values and outcomes. This section identifies how conceptualising collaborative inquiry as nested CAS can illustrate how teachers, researchers and civil society leaders can influence conditions for quality neighbour interactions and self-organisation, without expecting emergent action to be orderly or predictable.

CAS are sensitive to initial conditions, and so early investment in building high trust peer learning relationships lays a foundation in shared understandings about how quality neighbour interactions can be fostered. Trans-disciplinary perspectives bring a rich resource for new thinking, without the need to fix on one truth or consensus. CAS thrive in far-from-equilibrium states, so collaborative inquiry can move beyond the need to unduly control the learning process: putting the emphasis on noticing the practice context, sense-making and review of what is needed next. CAS tend towards non-linear interactions and therefore shared intent needs to be open to unexpected outcomes and an acceptance of disruptions as potentially transformative rather than destructive.

### **Neighbour interactions for teaching and learning**

A repeating pattern of loosely, yet intentionally structured neighbour interactions – with peers, new ideas and practice contexts – in the Unitec research findings supported quality learning interactions inside and beyond the classroom. Structured activities, tasks, readings, questions and assessment criteria provided rich, quality feedback as students explored a wide

range of different concepts and opportunities for their practice. Early attention to relationships, values, behavioural norms, communication skills and processes, established a culture for quality neighbour interaction. A complexity thinking perspective considers how to amplify peer learning interactions and feedback across every level to keep CAS in movement, not stuck in equilibrium.

One contribution of complexity thinking was towards analysing the Unitec programme as nested CAS, comprising different layers of learners: for example, individuals (students, tutors, graduates), collectives (teaching team, course groups), organisations (Unitec, funders, students' current and future employers), sectors (non-profit, government, business), various stakeholder cultures, and diverse bodies of knowledge (management, leadership, community development, non-profit sector, specialist disciplines). This way of thinking highlighted the potential to strengthen the social construction of leadership, by amplifying trans-level peer learning interactions beyond the classroom. For example, the Unitec graduates signalled the learning benefits from stronger investment student-organisation interaction on assignment work, student-other sector leader peer mentoring relationships, and exposure to diverse bodies of knowledge. They also affirmed the value of intentional peer learning within each layer: for example, student-student and tutor-tutor peer learning; learning between organisations – students' and Unitec – about programme impacts and improvements. Graduates' confidence, credibility and identity-building as leaders were constructed through intentional peer learning within and across these layers of nested CAS when there was quality exchange of energy, information and ideas.

### **Neighbour interactions in community-led development**

The Inspiring Communities research findings further illustrated the interconnected and interdependent layers of nested neighbour interactions that support leadership learning in civil society. Stories shared identified how leadership learning often started from neighbour interactions within one system, such as family, whanau or neighbourhood: observing role models, trying new behaviours, stepping out into new opportunities. Small changes at one level could then have bigger outcomes at other levels, when agents connected across generational, cultural and sectoral porous boundaries (for example of whanau/hapu/iwi, community, school, business, local and central government) to support decentralised 'power with' communities. CLD leaders were intentionally structuring spaces for decentralised leadership, supporting the self-organising power of agents to interact within and across porous boundaries of CAS.

From a complexity thinking perspective, CLD leaders are creating nodes that enhance the quality, intensity and diversity of neighbour interactions between agents that can support trans-level or transformative learning. Nested layers of interactions were not only created between individual people but also with new concepts, between various communities of practice, organisations, government and market sectors. The idea of porous boundaries and particular nodes that connect these agents, signals the space for civil society action and actors. The Inspiring Communities co-inquiry group talked about a sense of “holding the space and welcoming other people to come in” (Workshop, May 2011). They reported a particular multi-dimensional awareness of people, ideas and place-based practice that they brought to brokering connections:

And being aware of ... others around you ... and the planet as well ... that sense of interconnectedness ... holding the big picture with every action that you take ... My head kind of feels like an octopus arm all the time. I feel like I’m holding lots of ... different bits of things to join things ... [as a] strategic broker ... And that belief, too ... I think that anything’s possible. (B peer interview, March 2011)

These practitioners are responding to people’s hunger for mechanisms to engage in civil society (Workshop, March 2011) by creating opportunities to engage, act and construct their own self-organising leadership.

### **Neighbour interaction processes in research**

The research processes themselves provide evidence of fostering quality neighbour interactions within what could be thought of as nested CAS (individuals, pairs, groups, organisations, ideas) engaged in collaborative inquiry. Neighbour interactions within the collaborative inquiry groups were intuitively fostered in the first research cycle and more intentionally fostered in the second research cycle. For example, the semi-structured graduate interviews (Appendix Two) and the feeding back to the Unitec team of new external ideas from the literature review and interview findings (Malcolm, 2009a, 2009c) fostered collaborative inquiry about programme redesign. Use of learning journals (Appendix Ten), peer paired interviews, the ‘quilting’ exercise and other structured discussion questions (Appendix Eleven) supported the Inspiring Communities group to identify tacit knowledge from their practice.

This complexity thinking way of understanding collaborative inquiry as CAS nested within and interacting with wider CAS highlights some areas of divergence with cooperative inquiry as proposed by Heron and Reason (2008). Heron (1996) emphasises the search for congruence established through the dialogic inquiry process, and the grounding of all propositional knowledge in practice. The findings from this study are consistent with Heron and Reason’s strong emphasis on peer learning relationships. However, the idea of collaborative inquiry as

nested CAS highlights the need for neighbour interactions with a trans-disciplinary diversity of knowledge, not limited to that drawn from co-researchers' experiential knowing. Further, CAS stay in movement rather than equilibrium, thereby disturbing cooperative inquiry's assumptions about consensus in knowledge and theory-building. Leadership interventions may create or accept disturbance of established patterns, and at other times facilitate consensus and common ground. Thus, complexity thinking helps legitimise the range of adaptive research processes that emerge to respond to the complex dynamics of this study.

Understanding the importance of neighbour interactions can be useful in fostering relationships within collaborative inquiry. By focussing, quite deliberately, on the quality of neighbour interactions, a leader can facilitate a group towards understanding fresh ways of working together. In this research, neighbour interactions were fostered by my/our ongoing focus on quality relationships where we were able to offer and receive feedback from diverse perspectives, to engage in reflective practice, to address the dissonance and congruence between our intent and current reality, to inquire together to frame and reframe perceptions of past, present and future reality. This research drew on a variety of sources to build collaborative inquiry skills and competencies for noticing and pattern-reading (Heron, 1996; Kaplan, 2002; Raelin, 2010; Torbert & Associates, 2004) through the research process, without being limited to any one approach. Torbert's developmental approach identifies a hierarchy of learnable 'action inquiry leadership' competencies and frameworks for noticing, feedback and inquiry. Kaplan's approach is influenced by the phenomenological approach of Goethe, his understanding of the natural world and our role as social practitioners. Kaplan's approach supports reading patterns of the invisible fields that give the whole coherence, working with polarities within oneself, in engagement with others and with the wider context. Raelin's concept of 'leaderful', non-hierarchical leadership offered further tools for supporting the leader in everyone and aligned with the concept of decentralised, self-organising systems. Heron's emphasis on the quality of collaborative engagement throughout all phases of the research provided another important contribution. It was important to access a diversity of approaches to keep responding to the particular needs of each research phase.

Yet none of these approaches provided a recipe for the research issues that emerged. There was an ongoing need for my own reflexivity, analysis and adaptability to work with the co-researchers to co-create each step in response to what was emerging and to honour our shared values and intent. Complexity thinking provided a sense-making lens to view the study as a living system for its history, its present nuances and its future potential. Complexity thinking supported the search for the connections, flow and dynamics between various parts – and the spaces and silences in between. Complexity thinking invited us as co-researchers to



develop imaginative, intuitive qualities to participate as citizens and as meaning-makers trying to see the invisible threads, forces, and relationships which inform our world (Kaplan, 2002), not only the visible, more tangible parts. This was not an exercise in narcissism (Regan & Revels, 2007) around our own stories, but an intentional, multi-layered, multi-sensory, collaborative and individual sense-making process. This thesis aims to make enough of this sense-making process transparent for others to learn about the possibilities of complexity thinking as a paradigm for analysis, action and learning.

### **Positive and negative feedback**

Complexity thinking offers a way of thinking about positive feedback, as energy pulling CAS away from equilibrium, and negative feedback as pulling CAS towards stability (Stacey, 1995). Positive feedback in this sense is not about positive psychological reinforcement, but an energy source that stirs new learning. Positive feedback enhances dynamic aspects of CAS that keep systems far from equilibrium, and may therefore include uncomfortable, challenging experiences that support learning. The Unitec graduate responses suggested that the iterative cycles of peer, tutor and organisational feedback raised questions, disturbed equilibrium and contributed momentum for personal and organisational change. The interaction with different ideas, worldviews, theories and models of practice added further feedback that kept systems from being stuck in a static state. The assignment focus on leadership and organisational development, and the feedback on the assignment in particular, appear to have provided significant support for self-organising leadership and organisational development ripple effects, despite the fact that the assignment was often not a welcomed task. Unlike many assessed learning situations, this programme provided multiple opportunities for peer, tutor and organisational feedback before the final assessment was submitted, to provide maximum use of different perspectives that could build a robust proposal:

Even ... the marks that you get back ... gives you a sense of, okay I'm on the right track and the comments that the tutors make ... gives you that ... confidence in terms of implementing them. I guess that's what I like about the course. I'm quite a practical person ... and maybe that's a self-drive thing too ... It didn't just sit on a bit of paper, it actually happened. And from the Boards perspective, it helped them trust me that this wasn't just some far-fetched thinking ... it actually had some accreditation to it ... this was a good assignment ... with some good ideas ... good practice so we should actually implement this. (Jan, April 2009 interview)

Such feedback amplified energy around one part of the system (the student) who could see potential to shift wider CAS away from equilibrium. The feedback created a space for legitimising, constructing and enacting students' leadership: challenging their thinking, challenging their ability to get stakeholder buy-in, and growing their identity as leaders who could work with the discomfort and complexities of emergent change. Impact was further

amplified where there was more than one person in the organisation engaged with programme learning, adding to the critical mass of collaborative inquiry happening within the system.

In complexity thinking terms, negative feedback loops hold extreme variations within an acceptable range, making sure that disequilibrium does not entirely fragment CAS. In the Unitec situation, tutors co-created a safe learning environment with parameters around acceptable behaviour negotiated in clear agreements on classroom culture. Assignment deadlines and marking rubrics set standards that graduates affirmed were important for clarity, learning momentum and qualification credibility. Live leadership learning lessons happened at the edge of chaos when these boundaries were tested – typically when individual students' needs were in tension with the group's agreed culture. While it could stretch tutors and students alike outside their comfort zones to use these live issues for collective reflection, it could also be valuable learning about leadership discernment needed in any system: how loose or tight do these positive and negative feedback loops need to be to maximise learning motivation and momentum at any given time?

### ***Uncertainty and Coherence***

Positive and negative feedback constructs express the sense of polarities always in movement within CAS between far-from-equilibrium states and relative stability. Positive feedback enables movement and change, while negative feedback constrains chaos towards equilibrium. The idea of 'enabling constraints' (Davis & Sumara, 2006) expresses the paradox of conditions needed for CAS to balance sources of coherence with sources of disruption. Enabling constraints represent simple 'rules' that govern CAS, which are neither so narrowly prescriptive to be 'one size fits all' nor so open-ended to be totally permissive of 'everyone doing their own thing'. That is, there need to be enough commonalities to provide coherence while allowing as yet unknown possibilities to emerge. This section discusses enabling constraints in the research contexts and processes that appeared to provide coherence amidst uncertainty.

The self-organising properties of multiple agents interacting in CAS can produce highly unpredictable behaviour, as agents are capable of both independent and interdependent behaviour. Chaos theory has identified the non-linearity principle, which acknowledges how small actions can produce large, uncertain reactions out of all proportion to the initial triggering event – known as "the butterfly effect" (Gleick, 1987). Such transformational learning moments are never predictable, though the learning environment may provide some enabling constraints that supported their emergence.

A paradox of CAS is that underlying their apparent unpredictability there is also some order. Chaos theory suggests that order and chaos are partners in the creative process of change (Wheatley, 2006). The dance between chaos and order happens in a phase of turbulence where lots of possibilities are explored in different directions. The 'strange attractor' emerges as a pattern of natural energy within the system amidst the apparent chaos that supports the power of change and innovation, restoring a level of order and coherence.

Two recurrent patterns emerged from both research cycles and from the research process itself, in relation to this dance between order and chaos. Leadership amidst complexity requires a level of discomfort, disturbance, and stretch outside comfort zones – for learners, teachers, leaders, or researchers to be able to work with the known, the knowable, the unknown and the unknowable. Stretching people outside their comfort zones has been recognised in the leadership development literature as a necessary part of the learning process (for example, Leslie & Wei, 2010). A strongly shared practice culture, including a commitment to individual and collective reflective practice, emerged through this study as central 'strange attractors' that brought coherence to this uncomfortable, uncertain space. Complexity thinking understands everything in CAS as being in ongoing movement, including polarities and paradoxes, ideas and knowledge. Our reflexivity as researchers, teachers or leaders is therefore essential, to see and make sense of the movements in systems as they unfold.

The Unitec graduates highlighted examples of uncertainty, turbulence and stretch that they experienced as part of their leadership learning both within and beyond the programme: exposure to courses, concepts and activities beyond their current experience; challenges of implementing assignment tasks in their organisations; personal development questions around values, identity and behaviours. At the individual level, graduates acknowledged their personal reflective practice as a core energy source which supported their leadership development and their engagement with collective processes of organisational change. Cycles of action, noticing, reflection, writing, thinking, sense-making and feedback – from their peers, tutors and organisations – gave coherence amidst this turbulence. This in turn required a consistent, supportive culture at the programme level, with coherence around the '*how*' – the philosophy, values and culture of the learning environment. Aspects of this philosophy identified in the programme culture included using a diverse range of teaching methods catering to different learning styles; facilitating the expertise in the room; supporting students' self-directed learning competencies to customise learning to their own context; and encouraging an adaptive, learner mindset. Cycles of ongoing individual reflective practice, within a coherent programme culture of collaborative inquiry, thus emerge as 'strange attractors' providing core energy sources for leadership learning.

Yet intentional cycles, processes and responsibilities for course updating, programme review, embedding culture, or classroom preparation by teachers and students, cannot ensure particular learning outcomes. There will always be a level of uncertainty about what unexpected learning will evolve from the interactions within each unique course on a daily basis. From a teaching and learning perspective, the leadership role of the agents within these CAS was to set up enabling constraints to provide enough structure, safety and support for learning *and* the necessary stretch, disturbance and discomfort for those involved to lead their own personal, organisational and/or community learning and development. All the agents in these learning systems were understood to need the capability to learn from continual cycles of facilitating inquiry within themselves and with others.

Findings from the Inspiring Communities co-inquiry further illustrate the uncertainty, vulnerability and ambiguity of leadership learning, community change pathways and outcomes. There is discomfort for funders and politicians, let alone those directly involved, wanting a roadmap that could provide more certainty. Learning through individual and collective reflective practice was the 'strange attractor' providing coherence, underpinned by an emerging shared worldview that was "being liberated by" the notion of paradoxes and "not having to resolve them or be paralysed by them" (Workshop transcript, May 2011). The co-inquiry group was open to counter-intuitive, creative possibilities emerging out of the messiness, paradoxes and disturbances in the system, with a level of acceptance of uncertainty:

I notice [how leadership amidst the unknown emerged] around writing proposals for funding ... because we didn't have the mandate ... [and yet noticing how] so much of what we wrote has happened. And it was written in a way that suited not knowing what we were trying to do, but having a big picture vision ... and our intuition 3 ½ years ago when we wrote that proposal ... was right. (Workshop transcript, May 2011)

Lots of things started today won't be here in a month or a year – I don't think this matters particularly, because they pave the way for whatever is next – become part of the context. But there is a real fear of failing, fear of 'bad' use of 'scarce' resources, fear that if we don't get this right we will lose power and it will all be in vain. Complexity can spawn a powerlessness even amongst those who have a lot of power! (F journal, August 2011)

The capability to facilitate inquiry within ourselves and with others emerged as a key enabling constraint from the research findings. This ability involves feedback, discernment and movement between the polarities of enabling leadership properties, such as those identified in Table 2. The table provides some examples of common tensions that civil society leaders, teachers and researchers work with. Noticing and sense-making competencies are needed individually and collectively to facilitate inquiry: to observe, listen, sense and read patterns, discern possibilities and design practical support structures and action steps towards the vision.

The research process itself mirrored this same 'fractal' repeating pattern of facilitating inquiry within and with others. My own leadership learning through a time of uncertainty, turbulence and stretch, was anchored by the 'strange attractors' of facilitating reflective inquiry within myself and with others. Both the Unitec and Inspiring Communities teams acknowledged the place of research inquiry and learning together as a useful anchor through organisational turbulence. At their best, both of these 'strange attractors' – inquiry within and with others - challenged all agents in the system to be in ongoing movement far from equilibrium. Learning cycled from practical experience, to exposure to new ideas, to reflection and sense-making, which in turn informed praxis.

### **Language and discourse as enabling constraints**

Language is a deeply embedded enabling constraint that gives coherence to a particular discourse, a particular way of seeing the world. Reframing language is one example of small changes leading to big outcomes. The language I use to reflect working with complexity has been one way of challenging worldviews that unconsciously assume order, certainty and simplistic answers. In the course of this study, my awareness of the dominant positivist discourse of research and its associated language was heightened. The assumptions that my research ought to draw conclusions on some fixed characteristics, model or knowledge of civil society leadership learning has been a deeply embedded way of thinking, speaking and writing that my supervisors and I have had to constantly disrupt. My intent instead has been to identify emergent concepts for others to engage with from their worldview, within an ongoing process of social construction of knowledge. Language that expresses ambiguity and paradoxes and invokes questions has been a useful tool for communicating my findings from a complexity thinking perspective.

The imaginative language of metaphor has also been a useful means of expressing understanding of complex patterns. Metaphor works when it provides a parallel, a link for the listener or reader to bridge from something that is already known, to illustrate the unknown. A metaphor can help disrupt established patterns of thought and reframe a different perspective. For example, Kaplan uses Goethe's concept that colour emerges at the point where light and dark meet, in explaining the necessary role of difference, tension and shadow in the process of transformation and change (Kaplan, 2002). I find colour a very positive energy source. Therefore this metaphor provides a clear image, better than words could communicate, that supports my deeper understanding of the necessary juxtaposition of what appear to be opposites. In one sense, metaphor builds on the idea of self-similarity, showing

how underlying patterns transfer between and within the natural and social worlds – and tap into some underlying archetypes that repeat across time and contexts.

The Inspiring Communities group understood the power of new language as an enabling constraint to convey new ways of thinking and to build coherence amidst change. The group searched for new language that would better express their worldview and change the conversation around leadership. Capturing paradoxes in phrases like “luxurious necessity” was one way (Workshop notes, October 2011). We discussed how we liked the sense of abundance, co-creation and multiple contributions from the ‘ful’ part of ‘leaderful’. But we were aware of how new terms like ‘leaderful’ could also be perceived as jargon and create barriers. There is a danger in using new language in that we may talk past one another, yet shared language helps bring about joint movement, sometimes across previously disparate parties. ‘Leading’ as a verb appealed to us; It did not feel as loaded as the noun ‘leader’. ‘I or we are leading’ but I don’t have to be ‘a leader’: leading together, leading out front, leading alongside. Communities leading: leading in communities. Or we wondered about abandoning the word ‘lead’ altogether, for example: “active citizens strengthening communities together” (Workshop notes, October 2011). We preferred the word ‘engagement’ to volunteer language; for example, ‘community engagement’, or ‘being of service’, ‘participation’, ‘reciprocity’, ‘giving and receiving as part of a way of life as active citizens’. This language is more akin to Pacific and Māori cultural traditions of ‘mahi aroha’ (Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, 2007), which is literally, ‘work done for love’. The power of Appreciative Inquiry language was also evident in both research cycles, providing a particular orientation towards noticing and amplifying success factors supporting leadership and learning.

Commonalities of context, intent, values, culture and language identified, support the coherence of professional practice in both the research sites and for myself as teacher, researcher and civil society leader. Yet these commonalities are not static, but living, moving properties. They require ongoing cycles of noticing, feedback, reflection and sense-making to inform action. Self-organising CAS derive energy from diversity and the interaction between polarities. Complexity thinking reinforces a belief in the possibility for change at every level of CAS by bringing an understanding of everything being in movement. This provides a way to keep seeing and sense-making within this complex, adaptive space.

Individuals, families, groups and communities have the capacity to self-organise around their needs and aspirations. There is power in others believing in you and your potential, and walking alongside you, especially through the tough times when you can lose sight of your own resourcefulness. And in the good times, neighbour interactions are useful for learning and building alliances with others who share your vision. Collaborative styles of leadership that

share power, work to everyone's strengths, build high trust and shared responsibility, ensure no-one is carrying the vision alone. Leaderfulness provides the basis for collective learning, framing and reframing to see what matters, in order to live and do what matters.

### ***Analysing leadership from a complexity thinking perspective***

From a complexity leadership perspective, leadership is an emergent, dynamic interactive process through which adaptive outcomes evolve (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Leadership is analysed and understood as nested complex adaptive systems (CAS), always in movement. Individual leaders' personal qualities, competencies, attitudes and behaviours can influence the dynamics of these systems *and* CAS can self-organise through their own inherent capacities. Individuals do not need to hold particular designated leadership roles or authority to have influence because control is decentralised and intelligence distributed in CAS. Small actions from any layer of CAS can have significant outcomes, beyond any linear, logical expectation. The adaptive capacity of CAS over time is influenced by interactions between individual agents (for example, people, groups, organisations, bodies of knowledge) and, importantly, enabled or constrained by wider context, culture and conditions. This section sums up my analysis and understanding of leadership from a complexivist perspective, based on the research findings.

### **Four interwoven layers of civil society leadership**

The analysis presented in Chapter Four uncovered four interwoven layers (personal, relational, cultural and structural) that influence the dynamics of civil society leadership as CAS. Fractals are repeating self-similarity patterns evident at many levels of scale within CAS, shaped by ongoing feedback loops of information and energy moving within and between CAS. Table 2 (Chapter Four) represents my emerging understanding of leadership as a learning dynamic, built from repeating patterns of 'polarities always in movement' evident across the research cycles and processes.

The Unitec graduates identified some qualities and competencies of civil society leadership, and how these qualities were enhanced when they were modelled in teaching and learning environments. Leadership becomes part of an ongoing enactment of facilitating inquiry within and with others, by repeating a pattern of attitudes, facilitation skills and analytical abilities evident in tutors, students and their civil society organisations. The Inspiring Communities group unpacked more of the nuances, paradoxes and contradictions around these leadership qualities in CLD contexts. Complexity thinking offered a way of understanding the paradoxes, tensions and movement between different leadership responses appropriate for different

situations: for example, when to exercise a facilitative style to enable decentralised, self-organising learning; when a more catalytic style of leadership is needed to create a safe, values-based culture to support challenging learning; when a more transactional style is needed to develop and reinforce contractual commitments; when a more relational style is needed to mentor people towards owning their own strengths and potential. The collaborative inquiry research processes provided another context, where similar leadership patterns, paradoxes and movement were noticed:

Noticing my over-responsibility driver trying to work out how to balance leading/leaderfulness in this ... [There's] definitely a role for me to shape/hold the space for this inquiry but also to share facilitation/scribing on the day. Will be interesting to see if the quilting process enables this with everyone scribing, grouping ideas together. So many parallels with what is being said by the group ... structure compared with emergence; my mix of vulnerability and sense of self; my leading and at other times being leaderful as a group; even the culture of scarcity paradoxes ... not enough time or funding but even that is also making the amount of data more manageable for me! ... using all the senses ... get flowers 4 tomorrow, smelly ones ... more sensory inputs [for the workshop] (MJM journal, September 2011)

Civil society leadership properties identified in Table 2 within these personal, relational, cultural and structural layers present a pattern of paradoxes. Potentially contradictory leadership responses find their place in a sense of movement between polarities. Discernment of appropriate leadership response is supported by the systems' capacity for multi-sensory noticing, reflecting, pattern-reading and sense-making. Random, self-organising movement also happens within these systems without intentional design, arising out of tensions, disturbances and divergence between these leadership properties.

The personal layer of leadership is supported by a strong sense of knowing one's values, identity, strengths and gifts – and one's vulnerabilities, shadow sides and unanswered questions. A learner, 'not-knower' mind accepts the uncertainty of the unknown and unknowable, and brings an attitude of curiosity to notice creative potential and possibilities. An excess (or redundancy) of personal qualities (such as self-awareness, humility, generosity, responsibility, courage and ethical standards) supports the systems' capacity to work with the rich diversity of perspectives, skills and resources. Embedded habits of reflective practice are a 'luxurious necessity' for all agents in CAS to keep the system learning.

A strong relational layer of leadership is fundamental to the quality and nature of neighbour interactions between agents within CAS. A collaborative attitude, together with facilitation and emotional intelligence competencies, supports empathy, trust, and engagement. Multi-sensory noticing skills help discern powerful questions that open up effective dialogue or frame the encouraging statement that gives others the courage to step outside their comfort zone. Peer learning interaction and feedback at every level of CAS enables voice, agency and



participation from diverse agents. However, a particular tension to be aware of is to allow one's own voice to be heard while ensuring others' participation. Leading out front, leading alongside and together, leaving gaps, silence and space are all part of this dynamic building of relational trust for a 'power with', dynamic, active citizenship culture.

The cultural layer of leadership draws on this relational foundation to understand context and build a shared vision, one conversation at a time. In both research contexts, initial conditions of commonality of context (civil society) and intent (shared vision and values) were set up to provide a level of coherence and to hold the uncertainty of the teaching, learning, CLD and research dynamics. Over time, a level of commonality of organisational culture emerged in each context, with more explicit beliefs, practices, language and rituals expressing a culture of practice about why and how things were to be done. These commonalities held a rich diversity of people, perspectives and pathways needed for adaptation in CAS. Diversity, tension, paradox and disturbance of comfort zones provided the necessary energy source for resourcefulness that kept these CAS alive, moving away from the risk of stagnation in equilibrium. A learning culture of inquiry and reflective practice supported 'power with' and 'doing with' rather than 'power over' and 'doing for'.

The structural layer of leadership translates vision, relationships and context understanding into action. A practical, analytical and adaptive mind works to create temporary support structures, systems, processes, agreements, tasks, and roles that keep adapting to emergent pathways. Broad, creative and analytical thinking frameworks and capabilities are needed to make sense of power dynamics and complex interdependencies. Leaders design agile, adaptive responses to what they and others are noticing. Ongoing discernment is needed to shape particular enabling constraints that provide the necessary negative feedback to hold the extreme variations of CAS within acceptable range, while making the most of positive feedback momentum towards flexible, organic ways of working. Traditional 'command and control' power dynamics are replaced with a mix of 'bottom up' self-organising leadership *and* catalytic leadership with ideas 'out front' *and* intentionally facilitated convening of the middle 'space between' for reflective action learning.

These four leadership layers are interwoven threads of a highly textured, moving whole, feeding off each other and the wider CAS to which they belong. The personal and relational threads anchor leadership in knowing *who* we ourselves and other agents in the system are, and *how* we will work together. The cultural and structural levels shape a strong sense of *why* people are choosing to engage together in this particular context and *what* structures and actions will support the journey towards the vision. The timing dimension is also critical, calling

on our ability to notice where the energy is in the system, at any point in time. A simple rule emerges from this inquiry: there **needs to be some level of shared common understanding around the context (*where*), the intent (*why*) and the culture of practice (*how*) to hold the diversity of *who* will engage and the multiple pathways (*what*) that will be enabling, *when*.**

From both research cycles there was a strong message about the importance of '*how*' we lead in communities, organisations, learning and research contexts, if we are to build civil society leadership as active citizenship. Leadership modelling and practice opportunities are opened to all when students and tutors engage in learning together; when residents engage with community action; when co-researching relationships are established. Active citizenship is both a means and an end of civil society. Active citizenship is a central '*how*' process of civil society leadership, a key '*what*' outcome, an ultimate '*why*' intent, and a specific signpost about '*who*' needs to be involved. Under pressure for quick, measurable results and decisive action, embedded patterns of 'power over' and 'doing for' can overtake a culture of 'power with' and 'doing together'. One challenge is to find ways to notice progress around the '*how*' leadership process and active citizenship outcomes, alongside other, more tangible results.

## **Leadership as learning through active citizenship**

The central propositions emerging from this research are about leadership as learning through active citizenship from whatever our roles in civil society. We can exercise and enable leadership as learning as teachers, researchers, managers, workers, residents, community activists, whanau, parents, children, seniors, neighbours, policy-makers or entrepreneurs. Leadership as learning is a process of curious inquiry, individually and collectively, into the unknown. Everyone can participate in leadership as learning from wherever they are, when we let go of assumptions about leadership being a small number of wise, powerful heroes who control outcomes. When we let go of the idea that leaders need to have all the thinking and action under control themselves, we can be less afraid of failure and stepping into opportunities. When we shift the focus from individual leaders to everyone leading as part of dynamic, interactive, learning systems, then we open up the self-organising potential for people to see their part alongside others as active citizens in civil society.

*Civil society leadership as learning* opens up opportunities for active citizenship from small steps in our own whanau, neighbourhood and community, to participatory engagement at every level of organisational leadership, CLD, policy advocacy and systems change. We grow our capability to lead from wherever we are, as we move between our independent sense of agency and our interdependence with others, on the 'I can/we can' journey of civic action. Civil society as a contested, textured concept provides a way of seeing active citizenship as a driving

force of neighbour interaction within CAS. Active citizens cross perceived boundaries of role, status, power and sector positioning, in dialogue, questioning, disturbance and action to co-create future possibilities.

Those wanting to support leadership can encourage decentralised neighbour interactions with peers, with new ideas and with practice opportunities. Fostering strong peer learning cultures across every layer of CAS supports power with, learning with, doing with each other to intentionally redistribute power. Loosely, yet intentionally, structured peer learning can cross established levels of student/tutor, manager/worker, resident/policy maker, researcher/researched roles and hierarchies. When information, knowledge and wisdom are widely and openly shared, distributed intelligence grows. A broad range of different ideas, theories, worldviews, sectors and disciplines need to bump into each other, be challenged, debated and critiqued, to support new learning responses for complex situations. When practice opportunities within daily life, organisations and communities are offered and accepted, interactions are broadened beyond the known. Formal and informal learning across porous boundaries builds competence, confidence and legitimacy across a decentralised network of active citizen leaders.

There is a situational leadership role for civil society practitioners, teachers, learners, researchers, leaders, in discerning how much initiative they need to take to catalyse these enabling conditions and when the self-organising capacity of the system is sufficient to sustain these properties. There needs to be enough diversity of people, perspectives and practices within the system to stretch agents beyond their comfort zones and create tensions and momentum for varied and often counter-intuitive pathways. The leadership role will at times involve intentionally increasing this diversity and tension, rather than seeking homogeneity and consensus. Coherence comes from some strong investment in relationships, building trust and collective identity around commonalities of context, shared values, language, ‘*why*’ intent, and ‘*how*’ process intelligence. Leadership that embodies a strong culture of reflective practice maximises the system’s self-organising potential to keep engaging with the questions arising from an inevitably uncertain journey.

## **Ripple effects between different levels of CAS**

Complexity thinking offers a way of explaining the power of local action – not simply in *what* important social change outcomes might be achieved, but through multi-level ripple effects when people experience *how* they can exercise leadership in their own lives and communities. Independent agents are capable of influencing the interplay of many interacting forces that form patterns of behaviour within multi-layered, interdependent CAS. Patterns of behaviour at

one level of a system can influence a culture shift of patterns at other levels, well beyond logical expectations of impact. Edwards (2011) challenges civil society organisations to address the inequalities and power relations that are often embedded in their own practices: “If [civil society] cannot fix itself then it is unlikely to be able to fix society as a whole” (Edwards, 2011, p. 486). That is, it is not just ‘they’ that need to change: what about ‘us’? Leaderful practice expresses the co-inquiry group’s understanding of the leadership patterns of behaviour which, if mirrored at every level of the system, would create a very different civil society – alongside a belief that we can start from wherever we are, to co-create that civil society.

However, this understanding of the need to start from wherever we are is not naïve about the need for structural change at other levels. P. Block (2008) argues, though, that structural system change is never enough. Advocacy for structural change can breed a consumer mentality of an entitlement culture that takes away personal, neighbourhood and community ownership, accountability and power for what can be achieved by residents’ own actions. CLD encourages a sense of seeing these wider systems for what they are *and* then seeing possibilities for what can be created locally through a fundamental shift in relationships.

Loomis (2012) highlights the risks of CLD language and concepts being co-opted by government and used for its own neo-liberal agenda of reducing state expenditure. He challenges Block and others promoting CLD for their tendency to give limited attention to the global structural processes and embedded conflicting power interests that create poverty and maintain disadvantage. His argument reflects a wider debate about the relative place of the state and local citizens in civil society, evidenced in perspectives such as:

Thirty years of conservative hegemony have been built on a rhetorical hostility to the state and a celebration of the local. Now civil society is supposed to revive communities, train citizens, build habits of cooperation, provide an alternative to bureaucratic meddling, and reinvigorate public life – all this in an era of small government and parochial politics. This simplistic view has hidden the state-led redistribution of wealth through regressive fiscal and monetary policies, deregulation and privatization. It also obscures the presence of a different and no less authentic American tradition of broad state action to address inequalities of civil society – a view that fed important periods of democratic reform from the Progressive Era through the New Deal, the Civil Rights movement and the Great Society ... [however important local activity is, it] cannot protect equality and advance democracy in conditions of historic inequality and gigantic centers of private power ... there is no substitute for broad, sustained and democratic political action” (Ehrenberg, 2011).

The contribution of complexity thinking is that it invites ‘and-and’ thinking in these debates which could otherwise become locked into binary ‘either-or’ thinking. From a CLD perspective, the co-inquiry emphasized that those with the lived experience of inequality and disadvantage must be engaged as active citizens in ways within their reach, to influence wider systems. The group identified small actions at a local level that were having big impacts at other levels of wider social, cultural, political and economic systems. Leaderful practice at its best is about

redistribution and sharing of power at every level. This is not being naïve about global and national structural power imbalances but is working from where each agent perceives the energy is within their immediate neighbour interactions to influence systems. The group redefined power as something that could come as much from local community-led action as from 'being at the table' with those in traditional power roles or changing government policy or market behaviour. CLD is about constructing the experience of the power of the leader in everyone, from wherever they are. There is an intrinsic reward from one's voice being heard, from engagement with possibilities beyond oneself, from the shared passion to shift established power, from building a sense of agency and keeping self-organising energy and momentum going within CAS.

## **Complexivist Strategies for Civil Society Leadership as Learning**

Complexity thinking provides a paradigm for sense-making, weaving a multi-layered picture of different disciplinary perspectives on leadership that inform action amidst complexity. Personal qualities, competencies, behaviours and attitudes are identified below that support wider systems of relational processes, structures and a culture of collaborative inquiry for civil society leadership. The strategies bring together complexity thinking's principles with the research findings to identify an emergent complexivist perspective about 'how' we might lead effectively within the complexity of the civil society space.

### **PERSONAL**

1. Bring **curiosity**, a learner, 'not-knower' mind to everything. Be aware of your own strengths, shadow sides, values and identity. Do not think you need to know the answer, but keep engaging with the questions to find a way forward.
2. **Let go** of the need for power and control and the fear of the unknown and unknowable. Be intentional about redistributing power in how you lead and engage people. Remember the non-linearity principle – the power of small actions to produce big outcomes. Bring multi-sensory noticing to help see what is unfolding.

### **RELATIONAL**

3. **Facilitate inquiry within and with others** with intentional individual and collective reflective processes that support stillness, personal awareness, respectful relationships and collective wisdom. Ongoing cycles of noticing, reflecting, pattern-reading, sense-making, exploring possibilities, designing temporary support structures and learning-informed action steps, need to be resourced with time, space and competency-building.
4. **Make the most of uncertainty**, messiness, diversity, tensions, discomfort, disturbance and paradoxes as the driving energy for learning, movement, change, innovation and

counter-intuitive, creative possibilities. Movement away from equilibrium is essential and life-giving for complex systems. Shape insightful questions to support sense-making through the unknown. Offer encouragement for others to step into the unknown and recognise their potential.

## STRUCTURAL

5. **Maximize connectivity** by amplifying peer learning interactions horizontally and vertically across and between every level of the system. Think beyond the system's immediate agents and usual allies to keep it learning and moving.
6. **Avoid over-specialisation** of roles (of people, organisations, neighbourhoods, sectors) and enable porous, overlapping boundaries, exchanging information, energy and assets. Apparent duplication may not be inefficient but a vital resource for turbulent times.
7. **Create temporary support structures**, agreements and roles. Hold them lightly and discern together when and how these need to evolve organically into new forms.

## CULTURAL

8. **Build a strong collaborative inquiry culture of 'doing with'** in preference to 'doing for'. 'Step up, alongside and back', to redistribute power, to support resourcefulness, to enable the growth of the leader in everyone, at every level of the system.
9. **Welcome diversity** of people, perspectives and practices as a rich resource for learning and adaptation. Diversity pushes the system to the edge of chaos, and increases the range of possible pathways. Even the shadow sides of leadership polarities can be enabling constraints that provide tipping points for emergence of new learning.
10. **Co-create commonalities** of context, identity and shared intent around vision, values and culture for working together – and then shape practical, achievable action steps as you go. An abundance of personal qualities such as humility, curiosity, generosity, hope, patience, perseverance, responsibility and goodwill and strong interpersonal relationships are some of the enabling conditions that support the search for these commonalities.

These strategies sum up one contribution of this research, as a way of seeing leadership as a living, learning process within a world of nested, complex adaptive systems. These strategies resonate strongly with complexity thinking leadership principles identified out of a health care, organizational context (Zimmerman, 2011), yet bring a particular grounding in empirical research in Aotearoa NZ civil society contexts.

Complexity thinking has offered a paradigm, a way of seeing the world, that has supported trans-disciplinary, inter-discursive, lateral thinking about challenging, complex, paradoxical phenomena in this study. The research findings are not working towards a general theory of leadership (Sorenson et al., 2011). Rather, patterns, properties, propositions and strategies have been developed as a resource to think with, act with, live our everyday reflective practice with, in whatever our role. I hope these findings will fuel ongoing curiosity, engagement, debate and critique of our underlying, embedded assumptions and discourse about leadership – to support informed, committed action and engagement in civil society. Further discussion of the findings and contribution of this research follows in Chapter Seven.





## **Chapter Seven:**

### **Discussion of key findings**

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I set out to make a contribution to knowledge about how to support the emergence of civil society leadership. As researcher, I have been a 'curious inquirer', bringing a reflexive approach that has influenced both myself as inquirer and what has surfaced as new knowledge. Co-construction of knowledge and action through collaborative inquiry have supported the emergence of new ideas, frameworks and ways of working. Complexity thinking has been integrated into collaborative forms of action research. Ways of fostering the emergence of leadership within the complexity of communities have been identified, weaving personal, relational, cultural and structural dimensions. The idea of leadership as learning within complex adaptive systems (CAS) has provided a way of working with paradoxes, and underlined the importance of keeping learning in movement. Learning has been supported as peer learners, different perspectives and practice opportunities keep bumping into each other. Discomfort at the edge of chaos has been a necessary energy source for leadership, learning, adaptation and innovation.

The findings contribute towards understanding leadership as learning in civil society and in other complex contexts, drawing on empirical evidence from two Aotearoa New Zealand civil society leadership learning settings. The research contributes towards the emerging field of complexity leadership theory, with a particular focus on the learning interactions that foster leadership at many levels of CAS. The collaborative inquiry approaches employed identify the value of developmental research processes in supporting leadership learning. The study identifies the power of complexity thinking constructs and trans-disciplinary, 'and-and' thinking to support the emergence of new knowing.

The scope of this study has been trans-disciplinary, working at the intersection of civil society, leadership, education and complexity thinking disciplines. This chapter discusses the interaction of the emergent knowledge from this research with the wider knowledge base of these diverse fields, and identifies its significance as an original contribution towards new knowledge. The chapter is structured around my intended purpose about civil society leadership as learning, identified in Chapter One: to name it, grow it, do it and question it.

#### ***Name it: the complexity of civil society leadership***

More active citizenship engagement is possible when people can identify their part in leading, learning and contributing to civil society from whatever their role. By furthering understanding

of leadership amidst complexity, this research contributes towards a complexivist discourse about leadership in civil society, which has potentially wider relevance for teaching, research and other complex contexts. The findings contribute empirical evidence to the fields of complexity leadership theory and civil society capacity building. The research challenges dominant discourse about civil society needing to become more 'business-like', by naming some of the complexity of civil society leadership, without essentialising this understanding in fixed positions or models.

There is much less research on leadership in civil society contexts than in business, political or military settings. Leadership theories over many decades have acknowledged the importance of culture and context (for example, Fielder, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1996; Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2002) in influencing appropriate leadership styles and responses for different situations. While civil society leadership research is growing (for example, Bird & Westley, 2011; Dym & Hutson, 2005; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Plowman et al., 2007; Yorks et al., 2008) there is relatively little outside of the North American context (Hailey, 2006). In the civil society context, there has been more focus on the broader concept of capacity building (see for example, Baser & Morgan, 2008; Light, 2004). Some of this research has highlighted how the issue of leadership has received relatively little attention (Hailey & James, 2004; Hubbard, 2005).

This study contributes empirical research to an emerging field of complexity leadership theory. Within the broader field of leadership research, there has been more focus on the individual leader than on leadership as a collective, relational process (Ospina & Sorenson, 2006; Storey, 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Within complexity leadership theory development, there has been more attention given to business and organisational leadership (for example, Hazy et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) than to civil society contexts. However, some key writers (for example, Westley et al., 2006; Wheatley, 2006) have applied this thinking to civil society action. Academic work developing understanding of complexity leadership has been more theoretical than empirical (Marion, 2008). Published academic empirical work has been more in the 'hard' complexity science computational modelling field (Hazy et al., 2007) than from a 'soft' science action research interpretative analysis (Andrews & Knowles, 2011) or from a complexity thinking philosophical paradigm as a way of seeing, thinking and acting. This thesis does not claim to survey all the literature potentially relevant to this study. Rather, the focus is on how ideas from diverse disciplines have interacted to support new knowledge.

The particular contribution of this study to complexity leadership theory arises from its focus on CAS learning dynamics and the movement between various polarities of leadership response (Table 2): for example, between the strong and the vulnerable self; between leading

out front, from behind, in the middle and alongside; between putting intentional structures in place and working in more organic, adaptive forms; between tangible practical outcomes ‘for’ organisations or communities and process outcomes arising from how we work ‘with’ people to enable active citizenship leadership. The ten complexivist leadership strategies (pp 217,218) sum up some practical ways of working with this emergent understanding of leadership.

The different research methods, purposes and civil society leadership learning contexts of the two research cycles supported the emergence of this complexivist understanding of civil society leadership. The first cycle used short semi-structured graduate interviews with graduates working in civil society organisational contexts and teaching team discussions to develop a new graduate profile and revised curriculum structure. The findings identified four core civil society leadership competencies: self awareness; strong interpersonal relationship skills; clarity of vision, mission and values rooted in sound understanding of community and cultural context; creative analytical ability to put relevant processes and systems in place – and highlighted the social construction process of leadership formation for each graduate. In the second research cycle, the personal, relational, cultural and structural dimensions of leadership were explored through more in-depth collaborative inquiry workshops. With a complexity thinking focus on leadership as a whole, living system, not just individual competencies, and a more open-ended purpose of harvesting tacit knowledge, many more variations in leadership dynamics were uncovered. Conversations about paradoxes, pendulum swings, contradictions and tensions, were embraced with ‘and-and thinking’ rather than a search for consensus or essentialising one competency profile. Community-led development also presented a more fluid, developmental context for exercising civil society leadership, even though the established civil society organisations the Unitec graduates worked for were highly innovative and adaptive.

In naming particular patterns, properties, propositions and strategies for civil society leadership as learning, the thesis deepens focus on CAS learning dynamics, to extend understanding of complexity leadership as learning. The understanding emerging from this study is that *civil society leadership is a complex, interactive, learning dynamic, moving between polarities of potentially contradictory responses, to enable adaptive actions*. This is similar to the way Uhl-Bien et al. (2007, p.314) conceptualise leadership “as a complex interactive dynamic through which adaptive outcomes emerge”, yet puts more emphasis on the learning dynamics. Uhl-Bien et al’s complexity leadership theory identifies three entangled leadership dynamics: a mix of ‘top-down’ *administrative* leadership, ‘bottom-up’ *adaptive* leadership, with *enabling* catalytic leadership in between, fostering the conditions for innovation and learning. Yet there is more evidence of the adaptive and enabling functions of

leadership than the bureaucratic, administrative roles in the findings from this Aotearoa NZ, civil society research. Apparent similarities in top-down functions – such as planning, coordinating, strategising and seeding ideas – seem less associated with formal positional authority in the civil society situations in this NZ study. These functions were achieved through a degree of ‘top-down’ leadership initiative, yet rarely progressed without either enabling leadership from the middle to frame thinking, plans and action *with* others (rather than *for* others), or ‘bottom-up’ adaptive, self-organising initiative.

Co-construction of knowledge and action through collaborative inquiry emerges as a core enabling condition of civil society leadership capacity to work with the unknown and often unknowable aspects of complex social change contexts. The mix of scholars and practitioners engaged in the inquiry provided the opportunity to explore different understandings of leadership and different ways of fostering leadership through collaborative inquiry processes. The study has involved stepping out into the unknown, to experiment with how complexity thinking can support the fostering, analysing and understanding of leadership. The intersection of ideas about civil society, leadership and learning has been explored to surface a trans-disciplinary understanding of dynamic, interactive learning processes within complex adaptive systems (CAS). Ways of fostering the emergence of leadership within the complexity of communities have been identified, weaving personal, relational, cultural and structural dimensions, with an understanding of paradoxes always in movement. Discomfort at the edge of chaos has been acknowledged as a necessary energy source for leadership, learning, adaptation and innovation in CAS.

At a time when there is strong pressure on NGOs to bureaucratise into larger, more efficient, more centralised, ‘business-like’ entities, the paradox is that the vital contribution of civil society leadership in its diversity of scale, focus and agile adaptability in local communities is simultaneously strengthening. This research contributes to a more respectful peer learning, cross-sectoral dialogue about leadership, than the dominant, simplistic discourse about civil society organisations needing to be more ‘business-like.’ By unpacking and naming some of the strengths and complexities of civil society leadership, the study challenges efforts to “bureaucratise the self-organising principles of civil society or reduce citizen action to a subset of the market” (Edwards, 2011, p. 6). The study highlights, as Collins (2005) foreshadowed, what business, government, teachers and researchers can learn from the enabling and adaptive leadership strengths drawn from civil society’s depth of experience of working with uncertainty and complexity.

## ***Grow it: leadership as learning***

The thesis contributes towards a complexivist understanding of leadership as learning, with a particular focus on conditions that support the learning dynamics of CAS. When we let go of ideas of leadership being taught or learned, and frame leadership itself as learning (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004), we open up the possibility for the leadership of everyone as active citizens. Further, an understanding that leadership learning must evolve from lived experience within specific leadership contexts (Foster, 2000; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006; Hubbard, 2005) shifts the focus towards maximising the potential for leadership learning in everyday situations. Some simple rules emerged from the study that teachers, researchers and civil society leaders can apply to their role of enabling leadership as learning, as propositions inviting further research.

From a complexivist perspective, teachers, researchers and civil society leaders can support leadership learning through enabling collaborative inquiry. Chapter Five provides evidence from the study about how the structuring of collaborative inquiry needs to pay attention to the mix of three core conditions for quality neighbour interactions and self-organisation: authentic peer learning relationships at multiple levels of the learning system; exposure to new thinking and experience beyond what is already known; and solid grounding in practice context, values and outcomes. For the Unitec graduates this was evidenced in the power of peer learning with their fellow students, tutors and organisations; their exposure to new theories and experiences that stretched them outside their comfort zones; and the vital opportunities to translate classroom learning into workplace strategies and action. In the Inspiring Communities context these three core conditions were seen at a micro-level in the co-inquiry peer learning relationships that were engaging with new experiences and thinking emerging from and for their macro-level practice contexts. At the macro-level, the Inspiring Communities team have been creating new cross-sectoral, peer learning opportunities; enabling new connections between local, national and international players and thought leaders about CLD; and creating space for new participation in local community leadership.

Complexity thinking analysis (Chapter Six) of diversity and commonalities within the leadership learning interventions studied, identified a pattern as a simple rule: Leadership needs to facilitate a level of shared common understanding around the context (*where*), the intent (*why*) and the culture of practice (*how*) to hold the diversity of *who* will engage and the multiple pathways (*what*) that will be enabling, *when*. Leadership amidst complexity requires learners, teachers, leaders, or researchers to be able to work with not only the known and the knowable, but also the unknown and the unknowable. The research findings showed how a

strongly shared practice culture, including a commitment to individual and collective reflective practice, can provide coherence to this uncomfortable, uncertain space, disrupting established power relationships and supporting ongoing learning and innovation. Complexity thinking understands everything in CAS as being in ongoing movement, including polarities and paradoxes, ideas and knowledge. Our competencies and reflexivity as researchers, teachers or leaders, to see and make sense of the movements in systems as they unfold, are therefore essential.

Complexity thinking offers a trans-disciplinary way of working with the interplay of different discourses to locate leadership learning within interactive CAS dynamics of continuous learning and knowing. The findings draw on and contest different education discourses about leadership development (for example, functionalist, constructivist, dialogic, critical, and pragmatist), without trying to locate this understanding within any one of these perspectives.

The emerging knowledge supports understanding of leadership development as:

... an interplay of multiple discourses, seeking dialogue between them but without any search for ultimate synthesis or consensus. This will create tensions and contradictory data, but it is only as such complexities are confronted (without necessarily being resolved) that some of the more hidden meanings and significance of management [or leadership] development activities will become apparent. (Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008, p. 27)

The following discussion identifies how this interplay of different discourses furthers understanding and dialogue about leadership learning as an ongoing dynamic interaction within CAS.

From a functionalist discourse perspective, this study has identified a curriculum framework within which specific leadership qualities, competencies and knowledge can be taught and learned to some extent through instrumental learning. Functionalist discourse on leadership development argues that knowledge, skills and abilities can be transmitted as intellectual capital to influence particular behaviours, satisfaction and performance (Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008). This thesis challenges this discourse by arguing that knowledge is not fixed or separate from the knower. The findings highlight, as Mezirow (2009) argues, that transformative learning requires a combination of instrumental learning and communicative learning to critique, inquire into and understand our own and others' frames of reference. Instrumental learning might change what we know, but this research has also explored understanding of how learning might create change in how we know.

Constructivist discourse supports this study's understanding of the importance of individual leaders' intentional learning and sense-making from life experience. The findings emphasise the potential for growing leadership in everyday contexts (for example, families,

neighbourhoods, classrooms, workplaces, communities) through reflective practice, exposure to different ideas, and offering and accepting opportunities for leadership practice. This constructivist discourse in the findings is consistent with adult education understanding of reflective practice (Schon, 1983), experiential learning cycles (Kolb, 1984) and Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis et al., 2010). Yet, the findings challenge a constructivist perspective to the extent that individual intentionality is necessary, but not sufficient, for civil society leadership learning.

Dialogic discourse reflects and supports this study's findings about the social construction of individual and collective leadership identity, legitimacy and competence through relational processes. The findings emphasise collaborative processes of dialogue and interaction (Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999) within structured and informal peer learning interactions, through multiple layers of nested CAS, to keep constructing meaning and knowing. The findings support a social learning discourse of "learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world" of communities and organisations (Wenger, 2009, p. 209). The idea of learning as social participation in practice represents a strong intersection with current community-led development literature on active citizenship (P. Block, 2008; Born, 2008; Raelin, 2010) and interactive, practice-linked pedagogy for management and leadership education (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006). Yet the intentionality of individual agents and these important social learning interactions are still not sufficient to explain the complexity of civil society leadership learning. Engagement with a diversity of ideas, theories and worldviews are needed to frame and name our experience and the world around us.

The thesis engages with critical discourse in accepting the need to analyse and address structural issues of power, control and inequality associated with learning interventions. Deeply embedded, culturally conditioned discourses around leadership (House et al., 2002) influence the knower's identity, worldview, language and sense of possibility about even engaging in leadership learning. The research findings identify the potential for challenging power relationships, especially through the lived experience of *how* people engage in learning and leadership opportunities. Yet the findings align more with a post-modern or transformative learning discourse than critical pedagogy, in supporting the idea that people can explore different discourses through their practical involvement in the world (Mezirow, 2009; Mark Tennant, 2009) and free themselves to some extent from their wider cultural conditioning. The findings support the proposition that when traditional power dynamics are shifted at the micro level in a personal frame of reference – for example, in how teacher-student relationships are constructed or through who is around the decision-making table in communities – the possibility is opened for a shift in structural power dynamics at the macro-

level. The findings suggest that in shifting power dynamics in the culture of *how* we teach, learn, research and lead, an almost hidden curriculum can disturb culturally conditioned discourses about leadership and encourage everyone's leadership potential.

Complexity thinking enables us to understand transformative shifts in macro-level power dynamics in terms of non-linear dynamics, i.e., small micro-level local action can produce big outcomes, and the mirroring of fractal patterns in different layers of CAS. The emergence of trans-level or transformative learning within CAS arises from, and draws on, more than gradual mastery of skills and knowledge, individual intent and participatory social learning interactions. There is a key function of contradiction, tension and conflict, which activity theory acknowledges as providing a driving force for transformative shifts in frames of reference and new forms of activity which are "learned as they are being created" (Engestrom, 2009, p. 58). Learning is being continually created in an interactive relationship between learners and their worlds, between action and thinking as the foundation of being (Elkjaer, 2009). The multi-sensory nature of leadership learning identified through the research further reflects pragmatist learning theory's understanding of the role of communication, cognition and feeling (Elkjaer, 2009). Developmental action inquiry (Torbert & Associates, 2004) extends understanding of these action-thinking interactions with the potential for shifts in frames of reference (action logics) as leaders engage in inquiry processes. Complexity thinking brings an understanding to these learning discourses that entities that learn are not only individuals, or communities or organisations, but also ideas or bodies of knowledge which continue to grow, change and transform.

In the civil society context, the thesis contributes to 'capacity building' discourse, adding to understanding of leadership development as a capacity enhancing process. This challenges the dominant capacity building discourse which can unduly focus on linear logic models and fixed outcomes, towards strategies that support civil society capacity as living, learning and adapting systems (Baser & Morgan, 2008). Further, developmental evaluation research strategies (Patton, 2011) used in this research, have much to contribute towards that capacity for learning.

### ***Do it: leadership learning through collaborative inquiry research***

This study identifies how developmental research approaches can shift power dynamics and enable leadership as learning through supporting a culture of collaborative inquiry. These research approaches supported the leadership of those engaged with the research through some challenging times of transition. The wider significance of collaborative inquiry research



lies in its ability to strengthen lasting organisational capacity for working with complexity, through supporting skills, tools and spaces for reflective practice and generative thinking.

Team cultures of collaborative reflective practice and learning have been supported in this inquiry as we experimented with different ways of working, drawing on appreciative inquiry, cooperative inquiry, developmental evaluation and other action research methodologies. The thesis and its appendices provide practical examples of working agreements, workshop agendas, reflective journal templates, appreciative inquiry interview questions that supported developmental research approaches. We were enacting leadership at the same time as inquiring into this phenomenon. The more traditional research method of individual, semi-structured interviews in the first research cycle had less 'co-research' leadership properties. However, this method still facilitated graduates' 'inquiry within' that fed the teaching team's collaborative 'inquiry with others' that translated into programme redesign. The second research cycle embedded collaborative 'co-research' relationships from the outset, co-creating approaches to research design, data analysis and writing. The co-inquiry embodied each of the leadership properties, polarities and strategies identified in the findings as we designed, questioned and adapted our pathway together. Mirroring of the self-similarity patterns at this level of the system adds further validity to the findings and offers an important message for researchers about their leadership roles.

Developmental research approaches are relevant for civil society leaders in managing accountabilities to multiple stakeholders with 'power over' organisational mandate, resourcing and direction, and contribute towards strengthening capacity and strategies for 'power with' stakeholders in learning and adaptation. Feminist, Māori and community researchers have for a long time challenged the power relationships involved in research (see for example, Chambers, 1997; Reid & Frisby, 2008; Smith, 1999). Research can easily colonise with top-down, 'power over' relationships. Even when researchers bring 'power with' intent, co-research often stops short of full engagement of participants in the analysis, writing and use of the data. Much civil society research focuses on collecting data for stakeholder accountability purposes and often does not build the analytical and adaptive capacity of organisations to translate learning from such research into improved organisational effectiveness or community impact (Ebrahim, 2003). Data-driven methodologies set out to 'prove' in a summative evaluation sense but do not necessarily 'improve' in a developmental sense (Patton, 2011). By engaging teaching colleagues, programme graduates and CLD practitioners in collaborative inquiry, analysis and meaning-making, the generative thinking learning cultures in both action research sites have been supported.

### ***Question it: complexity thinking as a paradigm***

One significant contribution of this study is in providing an example of how complexity thinking can inform the shaping of collaborative research process, analysis, findings and emergent action. Complexity thinking has provided a way of disturbing equilibrium and questioning assumptions, beliefs and discourses that underpin our practice. It provided a way of respecting the old, while exploring new possibilities for future practice, with trans-disciplinary, '*and-and*' thinking. Complexity thinking constructs, such as complex adaptive systems, have supported the sense-making process of the research and the emergence of new knowing, which in turn informs action.

When co-researchers disturbed and explored their assumptions, the creative possibilities for different ways of seeing and sense-making opened up. For example, the co-inquiry group started with Raelin's (2003) concept of 'leaderfulness' and then later questioned whether collaborative, collective ways of leading were always possible or even useful. One group member was almost apologising for her skills in leading out front (being able to frame the conversation and 'chunk' possible action steps) as not very 'leaderful'. We then reflected as a group on how important this 'out front' leadership approach is for some situations. What mattered more was this person's core competency of reflective practice – facilitating inquiry within herself and with others – which was enabling her to see how best to help people play their potential part in leading in this particular CLD context.

This thesis brings together a trans-disciplinary understanding of civil society, leadership, learning and complexity thinking to unpack some patterns, propositions and strategies that support the emergence of civil society leadership as learning. Many of the specific ideas about leadership and learning reflected here are not new. Rather, a complexity thinking paradigm enabled multiple ideas to interact to support deeper understanding of CAS dynamics and why leadership and learning are so intimately inter-related. The multi-layered, multi-sensory movement between polarities of potentially contradictory leadership responses depicted in Table 2 is not trying to create a theory of everything. Rather, it provides a way of seeing, thinking and acting which is already becoming embedded as my way of leading amidst complexity.

Complexity thinking has moved from being a theory that I thought might be useful for investigating civil society leadership learning, to being a catalyst for a transformative shift in my own frame of reference and actions. It is not easy to convey the reflexive, nuanced quality of this research and the slow, subtle, yet significant shifts that happened for me as complexity thinking became more embedded as a new paradigm across the period of this study: for

example, the changes in my use of language (away from more fixed truth words, like *models* and *conclusions*, towards phrases such as *emergent findings*); the insights emerging from moments of silent deep reflection; the changes in what I paid attention to (for example, paradoxes rather than a forced consensus), my increasing confidence to disturb equilibrium in support of learning. A complexity thinking paradigm now shapes how I understand knowledge, how I interpret the world through multiple theoretical lenses that are not always commensurate, and how I act.

A trans-disciplinary worldview has supported my capacity to stay far from any safe equilibrium without fixed answers, always (re)framing new questions for inquiry. My research questions have moved over time: from assessing the impact of the Unitec programme to exploring how to improve its design; from evaluating a programme's development potential to surfacing generative practice knowledge; from studying complexity of context and leadership within it, to sense-making with complexity thinking as a paradigm. Questions are central for facilitating inquiry, and for supporting the emergence of higher order learning. A genuine curiosity is central, which is more than the mastery of a skill to frame powerful questions (P. Block, 2008). There is a challenging behavioural shift needed to intentionally carve out time for reflective practice as a 'luxurious necessity'. The rigour of this reflexivity is an important counter balance to manage any risk of narcissism (Regan & Revels, 2007). My reflective practice is now working with a more strengths-focused attitude of gratitude for what is life-giving; curiosity to notice what is happening with less criticism; which is supporting my ability to respond with less unconscious reaction.

I have recently been taking opportunities to engage others in conversation about the word 'leadership'. Typical responses evoke ideas about leadership as a noun: individual leaders, who take decisive action, know what to do, have a vision, attract followers, achieve measurable results. I have invited conversation around 'leading' as a verb: leading as collective work, asking powerful questions, exploring together what to do, co-creating vision and action, adapting and learning as complex situations unfold. I am drawn to the idea of creating different language that embodies the paradoxes of civil society leadership, as another 'strange attractor' providing 'the jam' that will stick to fingers and impart a distinctive flavour and texture (M. Wetherell, 1999). I am experimenting with language that creates disturbance, raises new questions, arouses curiosity and conversation, such as: 'the strength of our vulnerability'; 'facilitating inquiry within and with others'; 'creating safe enough containers to step outside comfort zones'; 'reflective practice as luxurious necessity'; 'leadership as learning'; 'leaders as not-knowers'.

## ***Key learning for practitioners***

As a pracademic, it is important to me that these action research cycles have already contributed towards praxis outcomes, the most tangible being the revised Unitec programme design and the Inspiring Communities' publication. Less tangible, yet potentially just as significant, is the personal shift in my way of seeing the world and the strengthening of team cultures of reflective practice. I am inspired by the further potential practical use that civil society leaders in particular can make of the thesis. . I enjoy the sense that teachers, researchers and others working in complex contexts could also learn lessons about working with complexity from civil society. The key tools for practitioners from this thesis are found in:

- a framework for understanding civil society leadership as an ongoing learning dynamic. Through facilitating inquiry within and with others, Table 2 (pp. 158, 159) offers a resource for working with paradoxes and for surfacing questions about what needs to shift that is currently stuck in equilibrium and how that might be enabled
- a framework of three key interactions that we need to pay close attention to in order to facilitate leadership learning in any complex systems (Chapter Five). Through honing our seeing, sense-making and facilitation skills we can notice the mix of interaction with peers, new ideas and practice opportunities needed in the system to support leadership learning.
- ten complexivist strategies (pp. 217, 218) for leading effectively in civil society space to work with the personal, relational, cultural and structural layers of complexity. The strategies offer a resource for individual and collective reflective practice around how we think, act and learn to foster civil society leadership at multiple levels of systems
- ways of working together as insider co-researchers to keep developing our practice, supported by: co-designing clear working agreements (Appendices Eight and Nine); experimenting with processes for collaborative inquiry learning (such as the quilt exercise in Appendix Eleven and Appreciative Inquiry questions in Appendix Two); and supporting personal reflective practice (such as the journal templates in Appendix Ten).

I will continue to experiment with different ways to communicate these tools and other findings in accessible forms for practitioners.

## ***Academic contribution***

The academic contribution of the thesis is threefold:

- weaving together praxis outcomes and theory-building
- working across diverse fields (civil society, education, leadership, complexity science) to enable new learning to emerge through different knowledge systems colliding, diverging and connecting

- disturbing dominant discourse about civil society capacity and capability.

This study is located in more than one discipline. This has been both a challenge and a strength - engaging with often incommensurable frames of reference to see what emerges from the tensions between different disciplines' ways of seeing and sense-making. Out of those trans-disciplinary tensions, complexity thinking has brought some new insights to extend understanding of civil society leadership in a field which has had relatively research to date.

This research about leadership within Aotearoa NZ civil society contexts, has in turn extended the range of empirical work available for the development of complexity leadership theory, beyond its current primary focus on business and organisational leadership. This in turn helps disturb the dominant discourse about civil society leadership needing to be more business-like, and highlights the potential for what the wider field of leadership, including complexity leadership theory, can learn from civil society's vast experience of working with complexity. Further, at a methodological level, the thesis demonstrates how complexity thinking can be operationalized in research design in ways that support the ongoing co-construction of knowledge and action in complex contexts.

### ***Catalysing more learning in theory and practice***

Complexity thinking changes the way we understand education, learning and knowing (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Davis et al., 2008) as a whole complex, living, learning system, not simply the lifelong learning of an individual, group or organisation. New learning and knowing will continue to emerge through further interaction arising from publication of the thesis. There is a paradox in writing things down, that knowledge may become fixed rather than seen as always temporary. In conversation it is easier to engage relationally with ideas that can stay in movement. This thesis invites rich interaction to continue catalysing more learning in theory and practice.

The thesis has explored learning at the intersection of civil society, leadership, learning and complexity thinking discourses. Those with specialist expertise in any of these fields might further compare, contrast and interpret the findings from their own frames of reference. For example, other complexity leadership research using different methodological approaches and/or a different mix of complexity science concepts may raise different questions about the network dynamics involved in these leadership interactions. Educationalists with a complexity thinking or Foucauldian perspective may shed more light on why and how learning happens in CAS interactions and the associated power dynamics. Those with a focus on learning organisations may identify synergies or contrasting patterns with this complexivist

understanding of leadership learning. Those with an interest in polarity management in organisational leadership (Collins & Porras, 1994; B. Johnson, 1993) and in executive coaching (Glunk & Follini, 2011) may shed more light on the discernment process around movement between the different leadership properties. Leadership researchers might explore the resonance and dissonance of the findings with other cultural contexts of civil society leadership (e.g. Māori and Pacific) and other sectors of society (e.g. business, government, spiritual traditions).

My immersion in this context as an insider has been essential for the emergence of this new knowing and also catalyses my research commitment to support praxis: informed, committed action arising from this new knowing. The study has already supported the redesign of the Unitec leadership programme, and the publication of emergent learning from the Inspiring Communities for wider audiences. The study encourages nodes for civil society leadership learning to focus attention on quality neighbour interaction, by keeping peer learners, different perspectives and practice opportunities bumping into each other. Integrating complexity thinking with collaborative inquiry can further shift people's confidence and competence to think and act as active citizens leading from wherever they stand. The study points civil society leaders, teachers and researchers towards facilitating a level of shared common understanding around the context (*where*), the intent (*why*) and the culture of practice (*how*) to hold the diversity of *who* will engage and the multiple pathways (*what*) that will be enabling, *when*. Our competencies and reflexivity as practitioners, to see and make sense of the movements in systems as they unfold, are essential. Each observation, each question, each article read or written, each conversation, keeps the system in learning movement, facilitating inquiry within and with others, towards temporary knowing and co-creating multiple pathways through complexity. I trust the fractal patterns depicted in my research design will continue indefinitely as curious inquirers keep leading, learning, and changing the world one moment at a time.

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## Glossary

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Throughout the thesis, Māori language is used, much of which has become part of the everyday lexicon in Aotearoa New Zealand. Definitions have been provided below, using the Māori online dictionary at [www.maoridictionary.co.nz](http://www.maoridictionary.co.nz) as the primary source, with some additional commentary where necessary to explain my particular usage of these Māori language terms. Other less common English language terms and abbreviations used in the thesis, are also included in this glossary, to support understanding of the thesis.

ako	to learn and to teach
Aotearoa	used as the Māori name for New Zealand
awhi	to support and cherish
complexivist	those who work from a complexity science, complexity theory or complexity thinking paradigm
CAS	complex adaptive systems
CLD	community-led development
fractals	repeating self-similarity patterns evident at many levels of scale within CAS
hapu	subtribe - section of a large kinship group
iwi	tribe
karakia	prayer, grace, blessing, reflection
kaumatua	elder
kaitiakitanga	guardianship, stewardship
kaupapa	agenda or purpose
koru	fold, loop, curled shoot.
mana	spiritual force in a person, place or object; giving power, influence, respect and authority to lead'
manaakitanga	hospitality, kindness
MJM	Margy-Jean Malcolm
NFP	not-for-profit
NME	non-profit management education
noho marae	literally means living in together – in this instance at tertiary education marae, Māori meeting houses which embody Māori knowledge in its architecture, the host people, and the tikanga that set the relational climate for learning.
Pakeha	New Zealander of European descent
pracademic	Someone who is a practitioner and academic
strange attractor	a pattern of natural energy within CAS that supports change and innovation out of chaos
tangata whenua	the indigenous people of the land
tikanga	correct custom, practice, convention.
whakapapa	genealogy, knowing where one comes from. Whakapapa has been conceptualised within a Māori research paradigm as a methodology, seeking to understand the relationship between phenomena, the parents that give birth to the next generation (Royal, 1998)
whakawhanaungatanga	the process of establishing relationships
whanau	extended family

