Online Learning and the Oral Tradition:

An Examination of the Strengths and Challenges of an

Online Native American Leadership Preparation Program

Dr. Linda R. Vogel, Associate Professor,
University of Northern Colorado
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Greeley CO 80639
970-351-2119
Linda.vogel@unco.edu

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The Office of Indian Education (OIE) in the U.S. Department of Education funds competitive grants for Native American school leadership preparation programs in order to improve the education of disadvantaged students identified under the 2001 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) reauthorization of *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965 by increasing the number of Native American who lead Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and higher Indian enrollment (HIE) schools across American. Funded programs emphasize culturally responsive curriculum and instruction that address the needs of BIE and HIE schools and the challenges that the leaders of these schools face. This study examines one program funded by the OIE in 2005 that was offered in an online format in order to make the program accessible for participants who lived in remote geographic locations where travel served as a barrier to higher education and licensure opportunities and allowed participants to continue to serve their schools and communities while completing their coursework. The emphasis on written communication in an online format, however, is very different than the oral tradition of learning that has anchored and preserved Native culture. This paper examines the role of oral tradition in Indian culture and education, the values and structure of the OIE-funded preparation program, accommodations and enhancements of the program to provide culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and the successes and challenges of those accommodations and enhancements in supporting the oral tradition of program participants.

THE ORAL TRADITION

"The oral tradition is a system of knowledge that has been used by Native peoples for millennia. It instructs and preserves cultural life ways for Native people throughout the world. It is the key to the past, present, and future. Traditional stories have been told to teach morals, the rewards and unwanted consequences of actions, and the importance of self-discipline and integrity, all through example."(Bauerle, 2003, p. xviii)

Storytelling has been the primary means of education throughout Indian history. Unlike Western stories that are intended to entertain, Indian stories have a moral purpose. The first duty of Indian stories is to promote personal growth and, secondly, the development of expertise. While personal growth and professional expertise are viewed as separate goals in Western education, they are viewed as being integrally necessary for learning and achievement in Indian cultures (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Values conveyed in Indian stories commonly include "generosity and cooperation, independence and freedom, respect for elders and wisdom, connectedness and love, courage and responsibility, indirect communication and noninterference, and silence, reflection, and spirit" (Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999, p. 122). The thread running through Indian stories is of the interrelationships among all things, and from those relationships emerge a responsibility to others because "the survival and well-being of the individual is synonymous with that of the community" (Garrett & Garrett, 1996, p. 165).

Traditional Indian stories express a holistic view of the universe while placing great significance in details. This idea is succinctly conveyed by Garrett and Garrett (2002) in the following story:

One day, many years ago, when I (J. T.) was still a little one, I was sitting with my

grandfather by the edge of the Oconaluftee River. He was sitting on a rock enjoying the

afternoon sun while I was playing in the water. "What do you see?" he asked me.

"I see the water," I said.

"What else do you see?" he asked.

"Well, I see the fish," I answered, because there were little minnows swimming around in

the water.

"What else do you see?" he asked.

"I see the rock," I said.

"What else do you see?" he asked again.

"Well, I don't see anything else," I answered.

"No," he said, "What you see is a reflection of the whole world before you." (p. 20)

As in this story, the emphasis in the Indian oral tradition is on the particulars experienced by the

participants but symbolic of the entirety of experience. "Indians as a rule do not try to bring

existing bits of knowledge into categories and rubrics" (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. 22) because

"it is hard to understand something if one is always controlling and taking it apart" (p. 14). With

all things being connected, no observation or experience can be separated from all life

experiences and must reflect the greater pattern or experience of life.

In the telling of stories, the details are important to share accurately so that each person's

experiences are honored, as are the storytellers who have told the story in the past. This

underscores the experiential nature of Indian learning. As Deloria and Wildcat (2001) point out,

"it is experience that shapes indigenous education and necessitates the awareness of self as

crucial in order for knowledge to be attained" (p. 13). In Cleary and Peacock's (1998)

discussions with Indian and non-Indian teachers in BIE and HIE schools, the combination of listening followed by doing emerges as a theme for Indian student success, allowing time for learners to reflect on and internalize the meaning of the oral communication before engaging in a learning experience.

Cajete (1999) explains that, while no distinctly Indian learning style has been identified, research has identified general tendencies that include "a predominantly nonverbal orientation; tendency toward visual, spatial, and kinesthetic modes of learning, heavy reliance on visual perception and memory; preference for movement and activity while learning; and preference for process learning that moves from concrete examples to abstractions" (Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999, p. 153). The nonverbal orientation identified through research underscores an essential component of the oral tradition which is listening. Listening displays respect for the speaker and for the speaker's message. A school administrator interviewed by Cleary and Peacock (1998) observed that "how well we listen is almost more important than what we say" (p. 161). Reflective listening in Indian culture also allows the time and opportunity for learning that is attributed to natural spiritual forces (Garrett & Garrett, 1996).

The oral tradition that has served as the predominant mean of moral and practical education throughout Indian history, therefore, has several essential components. In addition to the obvious use of the spoken word to convey information, the content or purpose of the communication is of a moral nature that promotes Indian cultural values, including the interrelationship of all things and individual responsibility to others and the community. Listening is required to understand, reflect upon, and internalize the content of the communication. Just as listening is an experience, stories convey individual's experiences from their unique perspective and also as a representation of the larger whole of group and human

experiences. Listening and accurate retelling of a story is an act of respect for those who have told the story in the past and those whose experiences the story tells.

PROGRAM VALUES AND STRUCTURE

The Native American Innovative Leadership (NAIL) program funded by the OIE to prepare Native American school leaders is based on the concepts of moral or servant leadership and ethical behavior that closely align with Indian cultural values. In the 1980's, literature on school leadership began identifying the moral basis of successful leadership as distinctly different from school management (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). At the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, moral or servant leadership was widely discussed as an imperative for school improvement (Sergiovanni, 1992, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Smith & Piele, 2006) and ethical behavior became a non-negotiable essential for educational leaders, included in the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) which serves as the foundation for principal and administrator standards in most states in America. Reflective practice and experiential learning (Kolb, 1983; Kolb, Ruben, & Turner, 2006, Schon, 1995) are also foundational values upon which the NAIL program was designed.

The mission and beliefs of the Educational Leadership department where the NAIL program is based reflect these values and are as follows:

The Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program seeks to develop educators' vision and skills to successfully lead educational organizations by providing services to learners in educational settings, creating effective learning environments, effecting policies that govern educational organizations, and modeling continuous learning with and for the citizens of the community. To fulfill this mission, the degree and licensure programs are exemplified by the following beliefs:

- Human growth and development are lifelong pursuits.

- Leadership encompasses a learned set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices.

- Organizations are artifacts of a larger society.

- Learning, teaching, and collegiality are fundamental activities of organizations.

- Validated knowledge and active inquiry form the basis of practice.

- Moral and ethical imperatives drive leadership behavior.

- Effective leadership in organizations depends on individual and team efforts.

- Leaders' behaviors and actions model their beliefs and values.

- Leaders effect positive change in individuals and organizations.

- Effective leaders develop positive interpersonal relationships.

- Diversity strengthens organizations.

- Organizations and leaders are accountable.

   (http://www.unco.edu/cebs/elps/mission.htm)

Each of these program beliefs correspond to Indian values. The life-long pursuit of knowledge can be viewed as the "coming-to-know, coming-to-understand, [which] metaphorically entails a journey, a process, a quest for knowledge and understanding" (Cajete, 2000, p. 80) because life is an experiential process with a moral purpose (Garrett & Garrett, 1996). Leadership must be nurtured "by focusing on self-mastery, inner strength, and the development of individual abilities" for the benefit of others and used in a moral manner that is respectful and responsible to others (Garrett & Garrett, 2000, p. 23). Individuals and the groups they are a member of are part of a larger network of interrelationships which provides each person with an identity and connectedness within a community. Groups and networks exist for the purpose of learning, teaching, and growth of each individual for the collective good.

Experience forms the basis of understanding and wise practices and every person's opinion is of value because "the leaders is only as strong as the cooperation among his or her people" (Garrett & Garrett, 2000, p. 25).

While the program beliefs imply that leaders must be "helpers" or guides to benefit others and the larger community, humility and non-interference are two fundamental Native values not represented. Whereas in Western society ambition and the aspiration to become a leader are viewed as legitimate and worthwhile traits, Native cultures value modestly and shun attempts to attract attention to oneself (Garrett & Garrett, 2000). Leadership is demonstrated by usefulness to the group or community by a demonstration of expertise or service (Edmonds, 1980). Leaders do not control or deprive anyone of their individual right of choice in Indian culture, however, in adherence to the principle of non-interference. The natural right for self-determination should not be interfered with as a demonstration of respectful care (Garrett & Garrett, 2000). The omitted beliefs of humility and non-interference, while not explicitly stated, are manifested in the emphasis on the role of a leader as a servant to his or her followers in the program.

Interdisciplinary Masters with Principal and Special Education Director Licensure

The program examined in this study is a 39 credit hour pre-service administrator preparation program in which participants earn an Interdisciplinary Master of Arts (IDMA) degree in Educational Leadership and Special Education and licensure as a principal and special education director. Participation in the program was open to any member of a tribe or band, including members of tribes terminated since 1940 and state recognized tribes or bands; descendents of a parent or grandparent who was a tribal or band member; anyone recognized by the Secretary of the Interior "to be Indian for any purpose;" an Alaskan Native; or a member of an Indian organization that received funds under the Indian Education Act of 1988.

The need for programs such as NAIL to prepare Indian school administrators was identified earlier as an effort to increase achievement of at-risk students identified under NCLB. Federal Indian policy since the 1970's has grown to support self-determination in many areas which means, in the area of education, that Indian schools and school systems are to be led by Native people (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). The Indian Nations at Risk (INAR) report issued in 1991 cited "a lack of Native educators as role models" (p. 8) and set the goal of doubling the number of Native educators. Although the number of Native teachers and administrators has increased, barely half of all Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools in 2004 were led by Native principals (NCES, 2004) and a study by the University of Oklahoma concluded that 307 more Native school administrators were needed to adequately reflect and serve the state's Indian student population (University of Oklahoma, 2009). The 30 participants in the NAIL program is a small but necessary step in addressing this shortage of Native school leaders for BIE and HIE schools.

The special education director licensure component of the NAIL program was designed to help address the higher than expected representation of Indian students identified as having special education needs (NCES, 2002; Tippeconnic & Faircloth, 2002). Based on the pattern reflected by one-third of BIE schools having significant numbers of special education students and 80% of those schools failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2008 (BIE 2007-2008 Report Card), the program was designed to include administrative preparation in providing and evaluating special education services and to mitigate misidentification of students due to cultural factors such as limited English language skills.

The principles underpinning the design of courses in NAIL program were two-fold. First, a multicultural perspective must actively acknowledge that Native American student cultural

knowledge is worthwhile and then reinforce and expand that cultural knowledge (Hale, 2002). Central to this acknowledgement and expansion is the promotion of an appreciation and respect for one's own culture, as well as others' cultures (Hale, 2002). Second, Native American students process information in a distinct and unique manner that is not effectively engaged in the traditional sequential and analytical learning model set forth by most schools and curriculum providers (Cazden, 1982; Dumont, 1972; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Philips, 1983). A global and relational instructional style more effectively engages Native American students with a variety of choices in individual learning, use of examples from contemporary Native American life and real world application of ideas and skills (Hale, 2002). Furthermore, Native American cultural norms regarding the value of cooperation over competition and the public display of one's own knowledge must inform the development of instructional environments to encourage Native American student learning without creating a schism between family and community behavioral expectations and successful interaction and school expectations and interactions (Hale, 2002). This knowledge directly impacts the guidance of instruction, as well as the evaluation of teaching, by administrators in schools with high concentrations of Native American students. The NAIL program faculty based the curriculum of courses on these principles and attempted to model them in instructional delivery.

ACCOMODATIONS AND ENHANCEMENTS

Curriculum Texts and Materials

Cleary and Peacock's (1998) *Collected Wisdom: American Indian Education* was purchased for each participant and faculty and used throughout courses in the program to provide a common grounding and discourse on the needs of Indian students and the challenges faced by HIE schools. Journal articles and book chapters on Indian education and leadership were

included as required readings in several classes. In several courses, the texts used reflected

classic mainstream educational and leadership theory, but were broad enough to be applicable to

minority education experiences and organizations. Equivalent texts that addressed specifically

Native education and leadership were not able to be identified by program staff and faculty

reflecting a deficit in research and scholarly discourse.

Course Content

The following is an overview of the courses required in the NAIL program with

explanations of accommodations and enhancements related to cultural responsiveness.

<u>Leadership Inquiry</u>—The initial course in the program covered theories of leadership

development and style with an emphasis on transformational leadership. Participants were asked

to complete a number of surveys and to reflect on the results as a means of beginning to

articulate their leadership style. Weekly online discussions were led by small groups of students

relating to challenges that Native American educational leaders currently face. Each group

shared a journal article and posed a series of questions to the other participants and each person

was expected to make two substantive comments in response to the article and the guiding

questions. The group discussions and readings culminated in each student writing and sharing an

educational platform outlining their values and beliefs as a leader, as well as how they want a

school under their leadership to develop in areas such as parent and family relationships,

curriculum, climate, and vision. Participants were asked to apply Kolb's Reflective Cycle to a

situation that they have encountered and how Kolb's cycle is or is not appropriate across

situations that leaders encounter. Finally, participants were asked to identify a Native American

leader (not necessarily in education) and to analyze the leader's dominant enacted epistemology.

The participants were also asked to identify their own dominant epistemology and may develop their own individual epistemology.

Organizational Development—Participants were asked to analyze their school using the four frames described by Bolman and Deal (2008). Program staff and faculty felt that the frames were appropriately neutral lenses through which to examine any cultural context so no additional enhancements were required.

Human Resource Development—In addition to online discussions of adult learning and the characteristics of good professional development to build human resource capacity, participants responded to "in-basket" scenarios that addressed the major aspects of human resource management and development. The scenarios were taken from a text that described the district context of the situations and the district was a "typical" predominantly white public school. To make these exercises more pertinent to Native American educators, participants were asked to respond to the scenarios in the context described by the text and then to explain how the response to the same situations in their school or a BIE school would or would not differ and why. This enhancement gave participants a full knowledge of the legal and social implications and consequences of leadership actions in human resource management in both a Native American and non-Native school situation. Each week, pairs of students posted their responses to a cluster of scenarios around a theme and other participants are required to comment on the scenarios and responses. This often became a very rich online discussion as each person shared personal experiences relating to the scenarios.

Supervision and Evaluation of Staff—Participants were exposed to a variety of developmental supervisory techniques and asked to practice these techniques on peers in their current school setting. Discussions of what characterizes effective teaching were based on identified best

practices from educational research and Native American student learning styles as discussed by Cleary and Peacock (1998).

The Principalship—In this course, participants were asked to develop a vision for a BIA or HIE school and a strategic plan that involved and empowered stakeholders in order to address the various challenges that they would face as school leaders in realizing their vision, including accountability and the use of data to inform decisions.

Special Education Core—In a series of three courses addressing planning, administration, and program evaluation of special education programs, participants were exposed to methods of special education student identification with consideration of cultural factors and explored options for programmatic responses, evaluation of those programs, and identification of pedagogical and resource options to effectively meet student needs.

School Finance and Law—These two courses exposed participants to standard public school funding processes and legal requirements. To enhance the application of learning in this course for Native American educators, participants were asked to identify and comparatively analyze the funding system and legal authority (and associated regulations) of their schools.

Internship—Participants were asked to complete 360 clock hours engaging in activities that demonstrate their competency on their state principal standards. An individual plan was constructed for these activities at the beginning of the internship and included separate reporting of special education leadership experiences.

Introduction to Graduate Research—This course covered basic methods used in quantitative and qualitative research. Participants spent a substantial portion of their time in this course in finding and evaluating published research pertaining to Native American education.

Instructional Methodology

The instructional method used predominantly in this program was discursive and based on Socratic questioning. With the exception of YouTube "mini-lectures" in the law and finance classes, program faculty structured online discussions to promote participant sharing of applications of concepts and ideas presented in readings supplied by the instructor or other participants in their past or current school contexts. Small group and pair responses provided further depth of dialogue among participants while also holding participants accountable for full participation in coursework.

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING THE ORAL TRADITION

Student and Faculty Feedback

At the end of each semester, participants were asked to evaluate the courses they had taken. The first part of the evaluation included characteristics that all students at the university where the program is located are asked in course evaluations, followed by a series of questions that asked students to the usefulness of specific elements of course delivery in the online format and the quality of learning experience in the particular course and in the program thus far. Responses were on a Likert scale. Several open ended questions were also asked regarding the integration of material and learning experiences focusing on Native American schools and student learning. The following is a summary of responses to the questions that specifically addressed the online format and integration of culturally relevant materials and learning experience across the 13 courses included in the program for the 30 participants:

- On a 4 point scale with 4 being "very useful," 3 being "somewhat useful," 2 being "did not use," and 1 being "not useful, participants gave course readings an average rating of 3.73, assignments an average rating of 3.81, course materials (such as PowerPoint presentations) an average of 3.65, discussion postings an average of 3.3, feedback from instructors an

average of 3.83, email communications an average of 3.8, and overall use of technology in course delivery as an average of 3.76. The chat sessions were rated the lowest at 2.9 with several instructors abandoning their use after the first few classes and the low rate of student use.

- Overall satisfaction with course learning experiences was rate an average of 3.8 and overall satisfaction with the program was rated an average of 3.9 on a 4 point scale with 4 being "a great learning experience/very satisfied" to 1 being "did not learn much/not satisfied."

Despite slightly lower ratings given to the research methods and principalship courses, overall satisfaction with coursework and the program was very positive. Comments made by participants in the open-ended questions addressing the application of course content to situations that they had or were experiencing were positive (with the exception of the research methods course) with the following being a representative response: "I like the fact that we used real problems that we were experiencing, and throughout the course we came up with ways to solve the problem" (Student Evaluation Response 03-1-7). Feedback on the human resource, special education, finance, and law courses reflected a somewhat surprised sentiment of applicability of the course content and assignments to Native American schools, particularly the human resource grant writing assignment to which one participant responded, "It helped me dream and see that there are ways to make things possible" (Student Evaluation Response 04-8-07). In evaluating the organizational development course, one participant observed that, "Working in a Native American grant school (under BIE) is not only challenging but it does not necessarily follow the ideal school setting, so the understanding [in this course] really enlightened me and gave me strategies on how to deal with difficulties" (Student Evaluation Response 03-10-7).

In evaluating how well the courses addressed Native American schools and student learning overall, responses were dichotomous. One category of responses stressed the commonality of student learning needs, leadership, and development of a high quality instructional system and school climate regardless of cultural context, reflected in one participants observation that "Native American students deserve the same type of education as all other students" (Student Evaluation Response 03-2-7). The other category of responses expressed the opinion that more course readings regarding change and leadership in Native American schools should have been included in the courses. While both of these opinions were voiced in evaluations of every course, more participants noted the lack of readings directly related to Native American school contexts in the research, law, and finance courses.

Instructors of NAIL program courses were surveyed at the end of the program to gain insight into their perceptions of student performance. All of the program instructors expressed the sentiment that half of the program participants performed at or above the level of students that they have taught in on-campus or other programs at the university where the program is based. The other 50% of participants were described by instructors as substantially below the performance of other students they have had and identified the lack of adherence to deadlines as a significant weakness in student performance, as well as the number of personal crises that prevented timely submission of assignments and posting. An analysis of participant grades revealed seven or 23% of the participants to have substantially lower grade point averages (GPAs) in the program than student in the principal licensure program at the university where the Native American program was based. Nine additional students also received a grade lower than a B in one or more courses which rarely occurs among students in the non-Native university program. The student performance data thus supported the instructors' perceptions.

Analysis of Program Content and Delivery

The essential elements of the oral tradition of Native people that promote learning discussed earlier include the following:

- Each story has a moral purpose and is intended to promote personal growth.

- Morals depicted include collaboration, respect for elders, responsibility for others, generosity, connectedness, courage, noninterference, and reflection.

- While stories describe the particular, because of the interrelationship of all things, the morals reflect larger truths.

- The perspective is holistic.

- Attention to detail is important to respect the story and the storytellers.

- Experience is emphasized as the manner of attaining knowledge.

- Reflective listening is necessary to understand and integrate the knowledge of a story into one's personal framework of experience.

Using the above concepts as criteria to assess the accommodations and enhancements of the NAIL program, the results are mixed.

Many of the courses included readings and assignments that focused on Indian education and schools and explicitly promoted reflection, as in the Leadership Development and Internship courses. Almost all assignments required participants to reflect, explicitly or implicitly. The reflections were, however, expressed in writing and not orally.

Several key assignments, such as the evaluation of special education programs, development of a strategic plan to enact change, and observing and evaluating teachers, were experiential, as was the internship. Products to document those experiences were, again, written. Discussions built on participants' experiences and gave voice to their lived learning but in a

written format. Other assignments addressed the context of Indian education but were not experiential, such as the analysis of funding systems, identification of school organization structures and behaviors, and examination of legal rules and regulations.

The style of instruction was discursive and Socratic in the majority of courses, relying on written rather than oral communication. Webcams were used in a few courses with limited success by participants and instructors and eventually abandoned out of frustration. The webcam sessions were also attempts to communicate synchronously which limited participation and ran counter to the convenience of asynchronous instruction that participants desired in an online program. The YouTube postings provided the most closely aligned instruction with the oral tradition by providing a lecture, allowing participants to listen, reflect, and revisit the content or "story" of the lectures at their leisure. While research on adult learning stresses the active engagement of students in dialogue with the instructor or among peers rather than the passive learning that can occur during lectures, the active and passive learning may need to be balanced in order to duplicate the oral tradition pattern of communication in Native learning environments online.

Initial online discussions replicated formal Indian public speaking patterns where one person speaks without interruptions from others then the next person would speak while the others listened. In the first course of the NAIL program, online discussions replicated this pattern with each participant posting an essay, rather than shorter and more informal messages and responding to others' messages. It was only after a group face-to-face meeting where it was stressed that the discussions were to be dialogues and not monologues that the online discussion interactions started to be actual discussions. The establishment of personal bonds among the

participants and instructors in a face-to-face environment also helped lessen the constraints of formality that some participants may have felt in beginning a graduate degree program.

Suggestions for Strengthening the Oral Communication in Online Courses

The newly developed NAIL program focused on culturally responsive content perhaps to the neglect of the means of communication and instruction, incorrectly assuming that the tools that instructors and participants were familiar with were the most efficacious. Suggested methods for increasing oral communication and building on the oral tradition in online courses include the following:

- Provide YouTube mini-lectures to initiate online discussions.

- The use of digital recorders would allow participants and instructors to post oral messages and responses in discussions rather than in a written format.

- Webcam video postings can provide another format for discussion participation and responses in an asynchronous environment.

- Continually increase the opportunity for participants to tell the stories of their experiences, either orally or in writing, in all classes.

- Provide an opportunity for reflection after each learning activity.

- Explicitly allow for discussions of the moral consequences of one's actions.

- Encourage students to support each other for the good of the group.

- Provide some opportunity for participants to meet face-to-face to build relational bonds.

The final suggestion involves the preparation of instructors. Explicit orientation sessions for instructors delivering online instruction to Native people would increase their understanding of the communication and participation implications of the oral tradition and prepare them to offer alternative communication venues and opportunities such as those described above.

Technology is a tool and asynchronous online instruction allows programs such as NAIL to increase accessibility to graduate preparation for Native educators to assume leadership positions and provide self-determination for schools serving Indian students while continuing to serve their schools and communities. In order to provide the highest quality of learning experiences and to support Indian participant success in an online format, program designers and ..instructors must be mindful of the oral tradition of education among Native people. This mindfulness includes pertinence of content and assignments to Native cultures and contexts; opportunities for oral communication, reflection, and experiential learning; and the explicit emphasis of Native values in curriculum and instruction. Deloria and Wildcat (2001) warn that "our technologies increasingly insulate us from direct experience and the acquisition of experiential knowledge from natural environments" (p. 76) and it is only such mindfulness in the design and delivery of online courses that can counteract such potential insulation from experience and knowledge and lead to the acquisition of wisdom and the development of leaders.

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